Poia atu / mai (?) taku poi – The Polynesian Origins of Poi

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Introduction

Po is recognised around the world as a performance item unique to Māori. The word po refers to a Māori dance or game performed with a ball-like object, to which a cord of varying length is attached. Po refers to both the ball and the dance, which normally includes hitting and swinging the ball on its string, usually accompanied by music or a chant of some kind. One of New Zealand’s most renowned anthropologists, Sir Peter Buck, who was an authoritative figure spearheading the research into the material culture of the Māori, states that “the women’s poi dance … used an accessory in the form of the poi ball which is unique for Polynesia.” This is a common view of poi. However, this paper questions the uniqueness of poi to the Māori people by showing that the origins of poi can be found in other regions of Polynesia. Specifically, it will trace the movement of poi from Western to Eastern Polynesia; the same path taken by Māori during their migration to New Zealand. It will look at ball games from islands throughout Polynesia with forms and functions similar to those of poi to demonstrate the evolution of poi towards its use in Māori society. Poia atu taku poi, wania atu taku poi (swing far my poi, skim onward my poi) are the age-old words used figuratively in poi compositions to send the poi on a journey over the land and its people; visiting mountains, rivers, forests, villages, whānau (families), hapū (sub-tribes), and īwi (tribes). The words demonstrate the importance of the connections a composer of poi compositions has with each of the above entities. Using this saying I pose the question: Poia atu taku poi? Poia mai taku poi? Did Māori send the poi to the world or was the poi sent to them?

Polynesian origins of poi

In almost all of Eastern Polynesia, poi is a term for a type of dish where food such as taro and breadfruit are mixed with water and mashed into a pulp. In New Zealand the food dish poi was not a part of the staple diet of the Māori people hence this meaning became obsolete. The term remained, however, and became associated with the poi ball and dance. Various meanings of the term poi, as given in the Williams’ Dictionary of Maori Language, include “Ball, lump, swing, twirl, toss up and down, make into a ball.” This part of the paper will aim to show how these definitions came to be applied to poi by looking at its Polynesian origins.

One of the games found almost everywhere in Polynesia, which involves tossing ball-like objects up and down, is juggling. In Tonga this game is known as hiko. Hiko involves...
throwing up five balls “… discharging them from the left hand, catching them in the right, and transferring them to the left again, and so on… keeping always four balls in the air at once.” It is usually played by women and a recitation of verses occurs at the same time, the purpose of which is to help keep time. An interesting feature of this is that one of the Māori meanings of hiko, in its repeated form hikohiko, is to “recite genealogy, indicating principal names on line and omitting others.” In some cases, traditional poi compositions incorporated recitations of genealogy or hikohiko.

In Uvea or Wallis Island, situated slightly north-west of Tonga: “Juggling (hapo) is an amusement for young girls. It is done nowadays with oranges … The motions are made in time to a little song. Juggling contests are sometimes held among the girls, some of whom are said to be able to keep 4, 5, or 6 oranges in the air at a time.”

The Samoan juggling game, fuaga, consisted of “throwing up a number of oranges into the air, six, seven, eight, and the object was to keep the whole number in motion at once.” The first player sometimes takes as many as eight oranges, throwing them successively into the air, and endeavours to keep the whole in motion at once. Fuaga is principally a girl’s game played in groups whilst sitting or standing. The aim of the game is to see who can juggle the objects the longest.

In the northern Cook Islands, is the Pukapukan version of juggling called tilitili koua. Tilitili koua is a game played by both children and adults in which immature coconuts (koua) are juggled in time to a chant. In competition the aim of the game is to juggle continuously until the end of the chant. Unlike in Tonga and Samoa three koua are usually used with experts being able to juggle four. This dramatic difference in number is probably due to the size and shape of the objects being used.

In the southern Cook Islands, ball tossing or juggling is known by a different name, pe’i and pe’ipe’i. Here the objects used in the juggling used are either the fruit of the candlenut tree (Aleurites moluccana), the seeds of the tamanu tree (Calophyllum mophyllum), or more commonly oranges; quite different from the koua used in the northern Cook Islands. These balls were tossed vertically and transferred from one hand to another in an anti-clockwise direction, accompanied with chanted verses. To use seven or eight balls was to be an expert, while juggling four balls was considered easy. The aim of the game was to see who could keep a number of balls going for a good length of time.

In Tuamotu, the term pei is also used to describe juggling. Here four, five, or six balls are used. “One ball is held in the left hand the others, up to four, are held in the right. With five or six, those that cannot be held in the hand are placed in the lap. The right hand tosses all the balls in it, then the left hand passes its ball to the right, catches the first ball tossed up by right hand and passes it quickly to the right hand, then being ready to catch the next ball, establishing a counterclockwise rotation. Some experts can reverse and make the difficult clock wise rotation. With each tossing of a ball from the left to the right hand, a word of a chant is pronounced”
Pei in Tuamotu uses balls made of either pandanus leaf (permanent) or strips of plaited coconut leaf, which form the popo (ball). This is significant in that this is the first mention of balls being made of plants, similar to the poi balls of New Zealand. The game of pei is often also classified as a dance; Edwin Burrows provides an example of a chant used that he calls either a haka (dance) or a pei.12 This is extremely interesting, as early observers of New Zealand poi have provided the term haka poi for a poi dance.13

A ball tossing game called pei or kita’irama is also recorded in Mangareva. The term kita’irama derives from two words kita’i (to keep a number of balls in the air at once, to throw high) and rama (green fruit of the candlenut that formed the balls). Pei, however, is consistent with the name of the game found in other Eastern Polynesian islands.14 Two terms provided, pe’i and pei, have often been confused with each other because various early dictionaries failed to recognise the glottal difference between the two words. Pe’i is the dance accompaniment of songs and pei is the action, of throwing balls in the air.15 This is not too dissimilar to the term poi, which is often given the definition of being either the dance or the ball accompaniment.

Pei in Mangareva was very popular among the women only and often played at festivals and competitions, where the winner would receive a reward or prize. The winner was the person who could keep the same number of balls going the longest with an accompanying chanted song. As soon as a player dropped a ball, that player would retire until only one was left.16 It appeared that pei was a favourite of chiefs who would command exhibitions and reward the winners. Pei was associated with the prenatal ceremonies of an expectant princess,17 and as part of the entertainment for visitors at ceremonies associated with death;18 all of which shows the importance of the game within Mangareva.

Juggling in the Marquesas Islands was also a prominent game that included the recitation of genealogy. Pei “was a mother’s game invented to teach children their genealogies and give the mothers a chance to boast of the number of their offspring.”19 It appears the game in this context was not as competitive as in other islands, but more good-humoured. The mothers would use either two candlenuts or two balls made of fau leaves (Hibiscus tiliaceus) bound with pandanus (Pandanus odorus/latifolius) strips. This chant consisted of reciting the children’s genealogy and mentioning important names of that child’s whakapapa,20 which is again similar to traditional poi compositions.

In Tahiti, the term pei is “the name of an amusement in which stones or limes are thrown and caught.”21 While little is written on the Tahitian game of pei it can be assumed from the description given, that it is similar to pei in other Polynesian islands.

The idea of round objects being tossed up in the air making a circular pattern, similar to the pattern created when a poi is swung in a simple circle, obviously has its genesis in Polynesia. The distinguishing characteristic between poi and juggling is the attachment of a chord. This part of the paper will show that the addition of a chord being used to swing a ball-like object around also has its beginnings in Polynesia.
A Tongan game that involves the use of a ball being tossed up and down, is called *hapo*. *Hapo* has been described as being similar to the ‘cup and ball’ game. *Hapo* consists of “a wooden rod some four feet long, at one end of which was fastened a strip of tortoiseshell whose ends had been bent to form a semicircular opening. At the opposite end of the stick a string was extended and attached to a small, round gourd. The length of the cord was just sufficient to allow the gourd to be tossed into the air and dropped through the tortoiseshell opening at the opposite end of the rod.”

A game of a similar description, *pala’ie*, is also found in Hawai‘i, where an oval ball of white tapa, rather than a small gourd was used. The aim of the game “… was to toss the ball upward within the limits of the length of string and catch it in the loop as it descended.” The objective of this game was to see who could manipulate the ball to go through the hoop the longest without missing.

In Samoa, the game *tuimuri* or *tuimuli*, also involves the suspension and swinging of a ball-like object. Players are divided into two groups, seated in a circle and supplied with a small, sharp stick. In the middle of the circle an orange is suspended from a string. “The orange is swung round, and as it passes each one [player] endeavours to pierce it … The party wins who first succeeds in fairly hitting the oranges fifty times.” In Fiji, the game is known as *veivasa ni moli*.

In the Marquesas Islands, *pohutu*, another ball game that employs the balls used in *pei* with a chord attached is played. “The game was played by a single child who held the pandanus strip in one hand and battered the ball with the other, or by two children, one of whom held the strip while the other struck the ball … The *pei* game … suggests a close resemblance between the *pohutu* and the well known *poi* balls used by the Maori.” This observation is significant in that a connection between *pohutu*, *pei* and *poi* has, for the first time, been made. From the author’s perspective, there is an obvious relationship between Māori *poi* and juggling in the wider Polynesian area.

**Aotearoa/New Zealand**

The Māori culture that early explorers encountered on their first visits to New Zealand originated from the tropical Pacific. Māori culture had adjusted and evolved to the New Zealand environment. In terms of *poi*, what early explorers observed was a game that had been transported from Polynesia and, thus, one that they had most likely encountered in other forms elsewhere in the Pacific. They failed, however, to recognise it as a developed form of the pan-Polynesian forms described above because of the changes to *poi*. A change of resources and an increased complexity in production is likely to have caused *poi* to have become a more valued and treasured item than the early explorers, who viewed it as a puerile amusement, had possibly thought.

Various writers on New Zealand history and, in particular, Māori social life and customs have recorded their own observations of *poi*. Many of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century studies were based on mere observation and misperception; very rarely was there any in-depth analysis of *poi*. New Zealand’s early written accounts of juggling are limited to a report from Ernst Dieffenbach who wrote: “they have a game
with four balls, exactly like that of the Indian jugglers, and they accompany it with a song.” Although this description is very brief and the name of the game is not recorded, it falls into line with the other records of Polynesian juggling discussed thus far. Other notable researchers who worked extensively in recording Māori ethnographies did not record Dieffenbach’s observations of juggling, but this does not mean juggling did not exist.

It was not until 1920 that Herries Beattie’s ethnological project on the Māori of the South Island validated Dieffenbach’s observations. The project revealed that in various areas, namely Murihiku, Canterbury, Nelson and Westland, poi was remarkably similar to the juggling style of Polynesia yet quite distinctive from North Island poi. In Canterbury, an informant from the Tuahiw region (north of Christchurch) told Beattie that “poi was throwing up and catching pebbles in various orders.” In Murihiku, two balls without strings were sometimes tossed up and caught. In fact, according to one Murihiku informant poi, in its juggling form, started at Opunake in Taranaki. Another alternative form of poi recorded in Murihiku involved the players kneeling, sitting or standing facing each other with the balls being thrown back and forth to each other. A similar account was recorded in Nelson where poi was likened to boxing.

The fact that juggling was only known to have occurred in the South Island provides another connection between South Island poi and its origins in Eastern Polynesia. Contemporary linguists have discovered that dialects from the East Coast of the North Island and the South Island are extremely close to the languages of the southern Cook Islands. This is probably due to the migration of Māori from the East Coast to the South Island prior to European arrival. Linguists have also recognised that the South Island dialect has features which suggest close contact with the Marquesas Islands. Both these links are supported by the similarity of the South Island version of poi to games played in both these places, such as with Murihiku poi and Marquesas pei.

In Eastern Polynesia the term pei and various forms of the word (peipei, pe’i) are often associated with throwing or juggling ball-like objects in the air. An alternative meaning of poi also means to throw or toss something. Pei is also used as the name of the ball and likewise poi is also used for the term ‘ball’. The term pei suggests a strong linguistic link between Eastern Polynesia and New Zealand. There is well-documented research of movement from ‘ei’ to ‘ai’ evidenced in dialectal variations, for example kei and kai, hei and hai. It is also possible, therefore, that there was a further movement from ‘ai’ to ‘oi’ given the movement from ‘a’ to ‘o’ documented in Tregear. In Western Polynesia, the same type of juggling occurred with the names hiko, hapo and fuaga being the terms used in Tonga, Uvea and Samoa respectively. The word hiko is used as an aspect of pātere and oriori in Māori; the recitation of principal names in order to dispel certain derogatory rumours, and lullabies informing high-born children of their genealogy, respectively. Both are traditional accompaniments to poi.

**Conclusion**

The assumption that the poi ball is unique to New Zealand is incorrect. The poi ball originates from Polynesia in a simpler form than what we know it to be today. In New
Zealand the food dish *poi*, found widely in Eastern Polynesia, was not a part of the staple diet of the Māori people therefore this meaning became obsolete. However, the term remained and came to take on new definitions. The pan-Polynesian game of juggling can be seen as the predecessor of *poi*. The fact that the two terms *peī* and *poi*, and their various similar meanings in New Zealand and Eastern Polynesia have undergone such little linguistic change strongly suggests that the *poi* ball is not unique to New Zealand as has been commonly thought.

The game where a ball attached to a string is swung around is not unique to New Zealand. The ‘cup and ball’ game popular in Tonga (*hapo*) and Hawai‘i (*pala’ie*) is similar to the motions of *poi*. While the object of this game may be different to *poi* the manual dexterity required of the wrist in order to manipulate the flight path of the ball attached to a string is similar to the actions needed to execute the *poi*. *Veivasa ni moli* in Fiji and *tuimuli* in Samoa may be quite different from *poi* in terms of the aim of the game, but again the fact that a ball like object is swung on a string connects the two. The Marquesan game of *pohutu*, a ball attached to a handle batted about, was compared with *poi* in 1923, but this intriguing comparison was never elaborated on or followed up by subsequent writers.

*Peī* in Eastern Polynesia did not develop into a dance accompaniment. It remained a game or amusement, which the early explorers and subsequent missionaries categorised it as being. It is possible that once put into this category, it was never allowed to evolve into a performing arts utility. *Poi* in New Zealand was also seen as merely a game by early explorers, but the development of *poi* away from being a game and its inclusion in the area of performing arts began prior to European arrival. This paper has examined the origins of *poi* in relation to claims that the *poi* ball is unique to Māori. *Peī, hiko, hapo, fuaga*, *tuimuli, veivasa ni moli* and *pohutu* can be seen as the progenitors of *poi* and a progression of these related games can be traced from Western to Eastern Polynesia, with a similar form being found in the South Island of New Zealand.

4  Williams, *Dictionary of the Maori Language*, 50.
5  Traditional *poi* compositions include *pātere*, derisive songs used to dispel derogatory rumours, and *oriori*, lullabies composed for the children of chiefs educating them in matters appropriate to their descent.
12 E Best, *Games and Pastimes of the Maori: An Account of Various Exercises, Games and Pastimes of the Natives of New Zealand, as practised in former times; including some information containing their Vocal and Instrumental Music* (Wellington: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1925), 54.
14 Ibid., 185.
15 Ibid., 185.
16 Ibid., 107.
17 Ibid., 186.
19 Ibid., 302.
27 Murihiku encompasses the southern regions of the South Island until the Waitaki River, Canterbury (East Coast of the South Island), Nelson (Northern part of the South Island) and Westland (West Coast of the South Island).
29 Ibid., 484.