

“IT’S ONLY THE WATER AND THE ROCKS THAT OWN THE LAND” SOUND KNOWLEDGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE IN PALAU, WESTERN MICRONESIA

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In December 2017, the Pacific Island nation of Palau changed its immigration policy in a globally unprecedented way.¹ As of that month, tourist visas are only issued to visitors who upon entry sign the Palau Pledge, an eco-statement stamped into their passports. The pledge addresses the “children of Palau,” whose islands the inbound visitors personally commit to protecting as they take the pledge.

Entry is granted only if the visitors promise Palau’s current and future generations to preserve their island nation’s natural and social environment:

The Palau Pledge

Children of Palau,
I take this pledge,
As your guest,
To preserve and protect
your beautiful and unique
island home.

I vow to tread lightly,
act kindly and
explore mindfully.

I shall not take
what is not given.

I shall not harm
what does not harm me.

The only footprints
I shall leave are those
that will wash away.

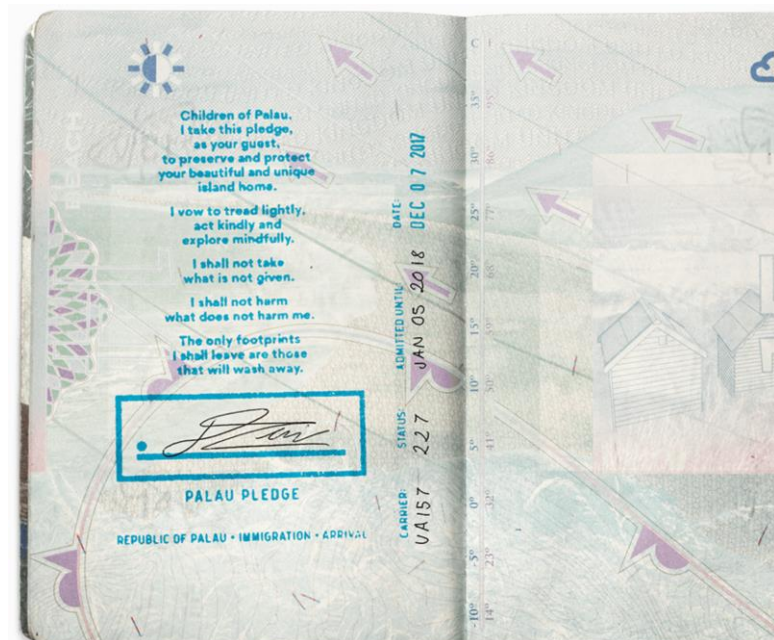


FIGURE 1: Palau passport pledge, signed. Image from <https://palaupledge.com/>.

The driving force behind the initiative has been The Palau Legacy Project² (PLP). Reacting to an increased influx of tourists since 2015 and recognizing the Palauan islands’ infrastructural unpreparedness for such a drastic development, PLP sought to raise awareness for the island nation’s encompassing vulnerability in the face of climate change and environmental challenges including the impact of large-scale tourism on natural resources. President Tommy Remengesau (2018) commented on the initiative as follows:

“It is our responsibility to show our guests how to respect Palau, just as it is their duty to uphold the signed pledge when visiting. While Palau may be a small-island nation, we are a large ocean-state and conservation is at the heart of our culture. We rely on our environment to survive and if our beautiful country is lost to environmental degradation, we will be the last generation to enjoy both its beauty and life-sustaining biodiversity. This is not only true of Palau. Human impact on our earth’s environment is one of the biggest

¹ This article is based on fieldwork in Palau spanning more than a decade since 2006. I wish to thank Kiblas Soaladaob for wonderful discussions and productive input.

² <https://palaupledge.com/>. Last accessed 31 August 2018.

challenges facing our world today. As a small country we feel the impact of these actions acutely. We hope that the Palau Pledge raises global awareness of the responsibility that this generation has to the next.”³

The Palau Pledge itself is written in a style reminiscent of the Palauan *bul*, a formal restriction issued by traditional leaders (*rubak*). A *bul* places an immediate strategic veto on the further consumption of a specific species, particular in connection with traditional fishing customs; the continued use of a given site or thing; or any other over-consumption that may cause irreparable harm to the natural environment. The undergirding consumption rules and restrictions, designed to ensure the sustainable use of natural resources, can be found across various genres of Palauan performing arts and traditional law; a *bul* is the context-specific, performative institutionalization of these traditional guidelines and Palau’s most restrictive natural resource management mechanism. Already in 2015, Palauan president Tommy Remengesau signed into law the Palau National Marine Sanctuary Act, an ambitious ocean conservation initiative protecting Palau’s marine resources.⁴ Banning commercial fishing in Palauan waters, the Act programmatically claimed the status of a *bul* already, thus gesturing towards the authority of traditional ecological knowledge as a potent resource for the well-being and survival of Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

To prepare inbound visitors prior to their arrival for this unusual visa procedure, and to get their message across more strongly, the PLP campaign has also created a video spot, *The Giant*. This highly acclaimed⁵ clip⁶, playfully announced through the slogan “declare something worthwhile at customs,” is required inflight viewing for all inbound visitors to Palau. At the beginning of the spot, a rhetoric question appears in white letters on black background: “Legends help Palau preserve its past. But can they protect its future?” Before the white letters fade into the black background, nature sounds come in, and a traditional *chesols* commences. The lyrics of the recitation attribute ownership of the (Palauan) land exclusively to the water and the rocks. This solo chant here stands metonymic for the “legends” that help Palau preserve its past. Like the institution of a *bul*, the traditional performing arts repertoire is here used to evoke a sense of deep connectedness with the land: an old, oceanic wisdom viscerally connected with the islands themselves, inscribed into traditional Palauan value structures and customs but apparently overrun by the speed and inequalities of both a long and burdensome colonial history and a present carrying the legacy of that history.

“Legends help Palau preserve its past. But can they protect its future?” is a rhetorical question. It articulates a strong sense that traditional knowledge, encapsulated in traditional song and narrative repertoire, is utterly relevant today but unable to fully address the complex challenges of modern life in the twenty-first century: it appears to need translation, which comes here in the form of the ensuing video clip. A similar sentiment is mirrored in Palauan governance, where a modern legal system co-exists with traditional leadership structures. In many ways, the elected government is taken to be a pragmatic extension of the traditional leadership system, installed primarily to adjust to the political necessities of the modern world (Trust for Conservation Innovation 2013). Both the *chesols* opening the video and the ensuing cinematic narrative of the clip seem to promise that in spite of its seeming irrelevance to the daily struggles of current day to day life, traditional wisdom is lingering on as a resource—a resource harboring a slumbering body of knowledge that may prove vital for a small island nation to survive the threats of climate change, economic inequality and social desolation, to name but a few. When it comes to the performing arts, this resource is “sound knowledge” in a two-fold sense: sound as in sonic, and sound as in solid. A uniquely musical comprehension of the world that crosses the mind/body divide, sound knowledge forms a particular epistemic register. This register of knowledge significantly differs from standard accounts of the nature of knowing, according to which knowledge is primarily a mental state entailing truth (Williamson 1995; Nagel 2013; also McGlynn 2014). Sound knowledge, by contrast, actualizes through the felt body’s encounter with sound. It is procedural in nature, formed in the performance of a practice. The knowledge of music is, therefore, the

³ Tommy Remengesau, quoted by Havas Media. <https://havasmedia.com/palau-creates-world-first-conservation-pledge-stamped-in-visitors-passports/>. Last accessed 31 August 2018.

⁴ The Palau National Marine Sanctuary Act amends Title 27 of The Palau National Code (PNC). It declares 80% of Palau’s exclusive economic zone as the Palau National Marine Sanctuary; creates a Domestic Fishing Zone where only domestic fishing is allowed; and prohibits most commercial fishery and fish export, among other things.

⁵ The spot won three Grand Prix awards at the International Festival of Creativity Cannes Lions 2018.

⁶ <https://palaupledge.com/>, homepage. Last accessed 31 August 2018.

knowledge we derive from making, studying and learning, in short: experiencing music. It is a type of knowledge that suspends language and is, therefore, often prematurely considered ineffable. “Suspend,” here, means to

“defer knowingly, to make present as a potentiality rather than an actuality. [...] The effect of such suspension is not to solicit silence but to solicit an enriched return of language: more language, not less, and language refreshed by being reconnected to the primary domain—the universal impetus toward becoming intelligible that Walter Benjamin identified as the linguistic character of being [...]” (Kramer 2016:xii).

The knowledge of music unfolds itself through musical structures, textures and forms, as well as through the meaningfulness (Abels 2018) arising from making music. This is how music ‘makes sense’: as an enactment of a knowledge-as-discovery. It allows for an inchoate understanding of the world which can both supply and become a force of transformation (Kramer 2016:xi).

But in the messy global realities of the twenty-first century, Palauan sound knowledge as a resource seems to be bereft of its natural authority. It needs to be acted upon, translated and apparently—that is what *The Giant* suggests—it also needs to reach out in new ways for it to help Pacific Islanders face the inexorable natural disasters that will transform their life-world beyond recognition in the decades to come.

In this article, I take a closer look at the traditional performing arts in Palau as sound knowledge. In some ways, this project aligns with recent work across the humanities that seeks to address emotional responses to environmental degradation. (Szeman & Boyer 2017; Cann et al. 2017; Cunsolo & Landman 2017; Allen & Dawe 2015) I look at *chesols* as a type of knowledge that is substantive in nature and at the same time distinct to the qualities and affordance of its medium, i.e. sound. I will pursue this idea by, first, conceptually exploring the notion of sound knowledge as a resource for Pacific Island cultures and loosely situating it within recent debates in phenomenology, the theory of knowledge as well as music studies. Following this, I will return to *The Giant*, PLP’s inflight video, looking at what can be gained from the idea that music offers a resource that may be key to survival in the complex environmental predicament of Palau, and by extension, Micronesia. What do Palauan musical practices know about sustainable ecologies and how do they know it? How does music-making make this knowledge operable and, consequentially, how do humans mobilize on this knowledge in coping with their changing life-world through music? Addressing these questions, I take a closer look at the musical genre employed in *The Giant*, *chesols*. In closing, I will adumbrate the implications of the notion of sound knowledge for a Palau seeking to ensure its future livelihood. In exploring music as a distinct epistemic form, I am thus addressing issues that are usually filed under the ever-elusive “power of music.” I contend that music research has the tools to unlock significant aspects of this power and make it available as a resource. This article intends to plough a path leading up toward this goal.

SOUND KNOWLEDGE

Scholars in Pacific studies, and Western Pacific music studies in particular, have long observed that music constitutes knowledge in many Pacific cultures (e.g. Steiner 2015b; Drüppel 2009; Kaeppler 1998; Love et al. 1998). Recently, they have also suggested music’s relational and ecological complexity as a central category for the analysis traditional performing arts in the Pacific Islands (Dietrich 2018b, 2018a) and elsewhere (Schippers & Grant 2016, Allen & Dawe 2015; Pettan & Titon 2015). Rarely, however, have they inquired into the material specifics of this mode of knowledge that is distinctly sonic by virtue of the qualities of its medium. Meanwhile in both music and sound studies more generally, discussions of the epistemic character of music-making have often focused on listening cultures (e.g., Downey 2002; Erlmann 2004; Jouili & Moors 2014; Daughtry 2015; de Mori & Winter 2018), communicative aspects of music-making (Hahn 2007) or been more conceptual, defining the knowledge distinct to sound as a form of circulatory feedback between bodies, body and environment and body and machine (Novak 2013), sometimes even with reference to the idea of a “sound knowledge” (Carter 2004, Kapchan 2015, 2017). The last-mentioned discussion is still residually in the process of overcoming the mind-body problem (Crane & Patterson 2000) that has so fundamentally characterized anthropological projects of all shades and led to the systematic analytical detachment of the affective from the discursive that continues to guide North Atlantic analytical approaches to sonic practices in the broad sense. This

chasm also accounts for the idea that any knowledge distinct to the sonic must be a categorically non-discursive form of affective transmission (e.g. Kapchan 2017:2). In this article, I am using the notion of sound knowledge in a different way, one originally derived from Pacific Island ideas about the performing arts. Ethnographies of Pacific Island music-making often give detailed accounts of how Indigenous Pacific Island ideas about music and dance are incommensurate with the mind-body divide and other binary ontological categories. Resonating with both discursive and nondiscursive frames, music-making transcends inside and outside by way of its primarily corporeal experiential quality and, at the same time, relates to both. Sound knowledge mediates between different experiential orders, operating in their in-between. This is how it derives its efficacy. But *how* does music know? Importantly, the knowledge of music is not primarily affirmative of a world ‘out there;’ rather, it is part of a dynamic formation of processual knowledge that “rides on the cusp of the very movement of the world’s coming-into-being” (Ingold 2011:245). Already constantly tossed in the immediate experience of engaging with music and leveraging affective, interpretative and corporeal frames, the knowledge of music—sound knowledge, that is—is as much part of a world coming about as of humans relating to that world. Sound knowledge, therefore, is always one step ahead of the reflective language that seeks to capture its meaningfulness (Abels 2018) in full. This, then, is also what has been described as the unsayable and ineffable, even as the power of music.

Then what *is* sound knowledge? Scholars have increasingly asserted the need to reassess “our ways of gaining knowledge and processing it towards better interpretation,” and, in the same breath, emphasized the role of cultural practices, including music, in this endeavor (Jaclin & Wagner 2017:1). This is becoming more and more imperative in the light of the transformations anthropogenic forces work on the natural environment, and human cultural responses to them (Chakrabarty 2009, 2017). They have also already identified the “alter-knowledge production potential” (Šlesingerová 2017) inherent in any artistic expression, and scholars within Pacific studies have specifically pointed to music’s resourcefulness in this regard (e.g., Steiner 2015a; Diaz & Kauani 2001). For the purpose of this article, my working definition of ‘sound knowledge’ takes Lawrence Kramer’s understanding of aesthetic knowledge as a point of departure:

“[K]nowledge in its most robust form is never a matter of simply knowing what is true or false. Knowledge of the world, as opposed to knowledge of data, arises only in understandings that can neither be true nor false, that is, in understandings the epistemic form of which is the form of the aesthetic.” (Kramer 2016: xiii–iv).

Sound knowledge, therefore, is a performative mode of knowledge deriving its efficacy from the experiential impact of its own unfolding in sound. The challenge is to show *how* music is a specific form of such knowledge, what the distinctly musical capacities and dynamics of this knowledge are, and how, in specific contexts, music-making enables a uniquely musical comprehension of the world. This ambition coincides with more general developments in postcolonial lifeworlds around the globe, which have contributed to the acknowledgment of the performing arts, and cultural practices more generally, as counter-knowledge practices (e.g., Ingersoll 2016). Legal practice, for instance, increasingly admits oral history and especially chants as legal evidence in cases of land rights disputes (Babcock 2013). This amounts to the evidentiary framework central to the (neo-)colonial juridical system being overturned. It also signals an epistemological shift, in the light of which, any legal denial of music-making’s ontological status as a significant medium of understanding the world immediately bears the suspicion of colonial practice: A colonial practice habitually oppressing the knowledge of music that was key to, among other things, cultural practices of precolonial societal organization. Within postcolonialism’s ideological framework of fiercely competitive epistemic configurations, however, the knowledge of music requires analytical and political intervention to serve as an adaptive resource. Not coincidentally, this is precisely the instinct the Palau Legacy Project followed when they created *The Giant* and the *Palau Pledge* to get across their message.

Music is significantly more than expressive of something else (e.g. the ‘extra-musical’) or an abstract system of thought detached from the world. Instead, music is a form of knowledge-unfolding. Its distinct procedurality is what makes the knowledge of music unique: It allows music to become a coercive force of transformation (e.g., Kramer 2016:xi). Looking at music as a mode of knowledge bears a fundamental challenge: it requires scholars to rethink the “sound work” (Guilbault 2007) that music does. Analytical attention to this sound work requires an integrated analysis of affordances of music-making that have

traditionally been considered to be separate dimensions in music studies: the affective, the atmospheric, the cognitive, the (felt-)bodily and the interpretive, among others, need to be addressed. However, scholars have also acknowledged (e.g. Vadén & Torvinen 2014) that the space of music is in between these categories. The interstitial nature of the space of music significantly complicates scholarly attempts to render music’s presumed ineffability intelligible in academic terms. We will need to critically reexamine the tensions, ruptures, reinforcements and general dynamics that emerge when music does its sound work in between these categories to theorize the nature and the dynamics of sound knowledge; and, more importantly to many, to tap into its resourcefulness. Such an in-depth examination is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, my goal in the remainder of this article is to make some initial steps toward the sound knowledge about how to adapt and survive that the Palauan performing arts hold. Conceptually, I will build on recent work in the fields of music phenomenology (Berger 1999, also see 2015), music epistemology (Kramer 2016; Abels 2017) and Pacific Islands (music) studies (e.g. Alexeyeff 2009; Steiner 2015; Teaiwa 2009, 2012; Diettrich 2018b, 2018a).

THE GIANT

The Giant (4’1” in total) begins with the opening rhetoric question “Legends help Palau preserve its past. But can they protect its future” (figures 2 and 3).



FIGURES 2 and 3: Screenshots from *The Giant*.

Accompanied by nature sounds, the viewer hears the beginning of the *chesols* “*Obil ngesur iiang*”, chanted by a girl:

*Obil ngesur iiang
Kom diul merrael e mei
Meng kal beluad a ikang
Meng kal chetemed a ikang
Ng di bad ma ralm ma
Badngeasek a merredel era a
Chutem iiang.*

(Obil ngesur iiang, Palauan chesols)⁷

As the *chesols* unfolds, aerial footage shows Chelbacheb, Palau's Rock Islands, a group of 250 to 300 small limestone and coral uprisings and a signature landmark of Palau. Following the *chesols* excerpt, the clip's piano-and-strings-based musical theme takes over while the camera zooms in on one of the Rock Islands, where a small group of children is exploring the islet's lush rainforest. A child narrator begins to tell the story of how out of the blue, one day a lavender-colored giant shows up, ingenuously but carelessly stomping on the reefs and feasting on its abundance. Completely indifferent to the harm he is doing to the reef, he playfully explores the area. The children realize how destructive the giant's behavior is. They turn to him, warning him that Palau's beauty will be gone soon if the giant does not change his behavior.

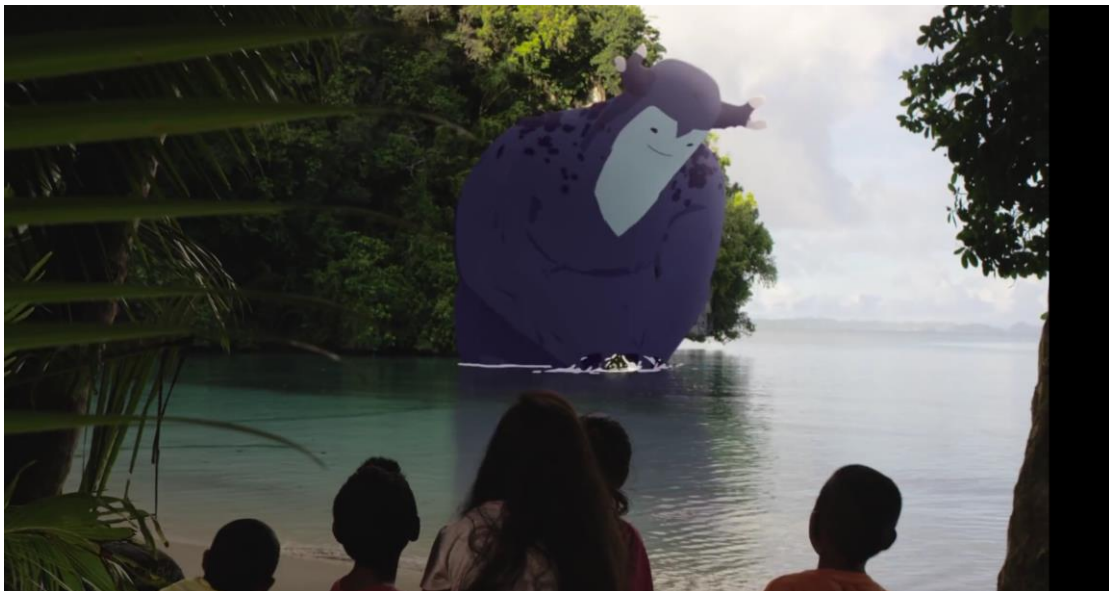


FIGURE 4: Screenshot from *The Giant*.

The giant, who obviously stands for naïve and pleasure-minded tourists, ponders their words. He takes some time alone to look at the growing amount of trash in the water, and decides he wants to help. The children explain to him how to tread more carefully, asking him not to step on fragile corals and to leave wild animals alone. Now the giant and the children, living in peaceful co-existence, share a spirit of mindful, loving care for Palau.

In the Palauan context, the figure of the giant invariably brings to mind Chuab, a central character in Palauan oral history. A baby girl born to Latmikaik, she was extremely tall and hungry. Her demand for food exceeded all resources. The whole community helped feeding here, but by the time Chuab had grown so big that she towered above the islands with her head in the clouds, the other islanders were starving. To end the situation, they decided to set a fire around Chuab when she was asleep. Consumed by the fire, her body came crashing down into the ocean; the scattered limbs turned into the Palauan islands. For those familiar with Palau's mythological lore, this reference to oral history points to a visceral connection between Palauan traditional historiography and the current situation. Chuab had to

⁷ I thank Kiblas Soaladaob for information on the various spelling variants of this *chesols* and additional discussion. Besebes & Tellames (2014) record this *chesols* as follows: "Obil meai iiang, a kededul di milrael el mei, ma beluu a diak el ngii aikang, ma chutem a diak el ngii aikang, leng di ralm ma bad el ngeasek a merreder ra chutem iiang. We both came to this place with nothing. The land and the rocks are not ours. We are not the rightful owners of them. It's only the water and the rock that own the land."

be killed but then became Palau itself; the lavender giant has to be domesticated to become a positive presence on the islands.

The clip's opening sequence brings up a dilemma existential to current-day Palau. The country's self-understanding is based on a rich tradition of oral history ("Legends help Palau preserve its past") that contain essential knowledge vis-à-vis the preservation and sustainable exploitation of natural resources ("The land and the rocks are not ours/ We are not the rightful owners of them"). But in the light of environmental disasters, rising sea levels and competitive global economies, the efficacy of this body of knowledge appears threatened and powerless as Palau has entered the twenty-first century: "But can they protect its future?" I will now look at aspects of the sound knowledge *chesols* as a genre and *Obil ngesur iiangof The Giant* hold.

CHESOLS

The genre of *chesols* is related to *kelulau*, a Palauan word often translated as "whispered principles," a set of guiding principles which emphasize "respect and honor, praise [and] appreciation, compassion, cooperation and communication, good conduct and character, and unity" (Iechad 2014: 3) as central values of Palauan governance. It was Chuab, the mythological giant introduced above, who had been tasked by the gods to install a council of *rubak* (chiefs), *klobak*, to oversee and preserve these guidelines (*ibid.*); *chesols*, traditionally, are a central part of *klobak* meetings, discussions and negotiations. Today, they are also a preferred medium for a *rubak* to criticize or comment on decisions of the elected government.

Many *chesols* were composed by deities and ancestors. As such, their lyrics are imbued with a partly divine authority. At the same time, *chesols* handle a complex, at times archaic language full of hidden meanings and references.⁸ They materially embody a complex cultural history of making sense of one's surroundings both historically and spatially; at the same time, they encode political ideologies, value structures and historiography in terms of mythological stories and musical genre. Chant language in Palau has received substantial scholarly attention which inquired into the semiotic patterns pivotal to, among other things, the *chesols* rhetoric. (Parmentier 1987) Parmentier's work has shown that myths, and chants in particular, are key cultural practices in Palau when it comes to the categories of traditional space, time, transformation, and knowledge. Here, I build on this work by inquiring into the efficacy of the sonic dimension of chanting *chesols*. Palauans have regularly told me they felt that *chesols* were "incredibly powerful" and "overwhelming," carrying a "deep meaning." For instance, "It's all there," said a member of staff of the Palauan Ministry for Community and Cultural Affairs, a woman in her early 30s, during a project meeting on the ethnography of traditional landrights in Palau in 2006: "It's all there in traditional *chesols*, the chants spell it all out." She wasn't referring to the lyrics, which tend to be elusive and sometimes, ambiguous. She was referring to the actual knowledge inherent to, and rendered experiential by, *chesols*.

Unlike written evidence, this type of knowledge works across several analytical categories, I have suggested above, among which the affective, the atmospheric, the cognitive, the (felt-)bodily and the interpretive. This is what accounts for the relevance of *chesols* at court and as the opening item of *The Giant*. I have offered a more detailed exploration of these individual categories elsewhere (Abels 2018). Here, my aim is to flesh out the dynamics that bring about the processual knowledge of *chesols* in performance. How, in distinctly sonic ways, does *chesols* chanting render the knowledge inherent in the traditional performing arts in Palau experiential?

CHESOLS: MUSICAL STRUCTURE

All *chesols* follow a similar musical structure both in musical form and in terms of melodic-rhythmic features. They are recitations which divide into verses, and their verses subdivide into recitative line and cadence.⁹ Verses are not necessarily identical in melodic and rhythmic details, but they will always

⁸ For a more detailed discussion of *chesols* lyrics, see Parmentier 1987, particularly pp. 180ff.

⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the genre *chesols*, see Abels 2008: 74ff.; 2015.

follow recognizable, genre-conventional melodic and rhythmic contours. *Chesols* usually have several verses, but often only one or two are performed. Characteristic of *chesols* performance is the involvement of the audience: after each verse, they respond to the chanter, “*hm...huei!*” “*Hm...huei!*” does not carry semantic meaning. Rather, it is the community’s approval of the chanter, the chosen *chesols* and its suitability for the occasion in question. Without this interpolation, an *chesols* is incomplete. This already gestures toward a category key to the meaningfulness of *chesols* in Palauan public life: relationality, in this case in terms of social networks.

Verses start with a recitative line, a loose sequence of variations on the same melodic motif. The basic melodic contour of this motif is standardized and immediately signifies to the listener the genre of *chesols*. It is characterized by the repetition of one central tone in punctuated rhythm that bends down roughly hundred cents to reach its final note. Repetition of this motif results in phrases, and phrases generally develop a descending melodic line. So does the overall melodic movement of the verses. Verses typically proceed from the upper tonal material at the beginning to the lower end of the tonal material at the end, producing a slightly downward-arching melodic shape. In the course of this descent, one or two pitches often serve as recitative resting points. The tonal material of an *chesols* does not normally exceed five hundred cents. Sound example 1, a traditional *chesols* detailing the foundation of the Palauan state of Airai by the hand of a god recorded in 2005, illustrates these musical characteristics; sound example 2, the *chesols Obil ngesur iiangas* embedded into *The Giant*, also conforms to these genre conventions.

CHESOLS AS CONNECTEDNESS

Deeply entangled with the cultural history of the genre as such, *chesols* actualize a number of discursive configurations, and they do so through their musical specificities. Often originating from the gods who created them, they extend, first, into the Palauan present from a mythological past, thus charging current performance situations with a deep sense of historicity. As *chesols* are often transmitted along family lineages and their history of use is often well known, this historicity concerns both individuals and the community’s historiographies. *Chesols* evoke the individual’s as well as the community becoming up until the moment of the given performance. Second, they contain the cultural memory of the ethical configuration constitutive to the ideal Palauan society as devised by the Gods when they created the Palauan islands. They are thus resoundings of a divine vision of the islands, and as such, scripts for another, ideal Palau. Chanting an *chesols*, therefore, invariably evokes the idea that the ideal society is possible, and that Palau was created to be one. Third, the *chesols* musical form rests on the interaction between a chanter, who chants by virtue of his social standing, and the audience, whose response affirms the *chesols* message as well as the chanter and their legitimacy to present this chant in a given situation. The fact that an *chesols* is incomplete without the group’s response means that the genre *chesols* requires an active involvement of all present persons: a conscious, performative “I too belong” that turns the experience of sound into the experience of one’s own social relationality. Palauan historicity, ethics and social fabric are emotionally charged discursive formations. But in *chesols* chanting, they resound with yet something else, and it is this ‘yet something else’ that I refer to as sound knowledge. It gradually manifests as a felt-bodily certitude as the musical form unfolds, amplifying, complicating and commingling discursive and emotional configurations.

In the effort to analytically tap into this knowledge that lingers on in *chesols*, this process is key: the gradual emergence of sound knowledge along musical form, layered discursive formations and emotional dispositions. Inquiring into its workings necessitates a consideration of the process’s material dynamics, i.e. sound. Drawing on neo-phenomenological approaches to atmospheres, suggestions of movement have recently been suggested as apt analytical tools to grasp this process (Eisenlohr 2018; Abels 2018, 2019), and in my appraisal this approach offers productive pathways into in-depth analyses of specific musical situations. For a more general consideration of sound knowledge, which is the purpose of this article, it suffices to refer to the material specificities of the medium sound. Sonic events, from a single sound to a complex sonic texture, are sound waves moving through space; acoustically, sound waves are variations in air pressure. When sound waves hit the felt body, the latter transforms the energy of the sound waves into nerve impulses. But beyond neural activity, there is also another, transductive process that takes place as sound moves. Process philosopher Erin Manning has referred to

this process as “body-worlding.” To her, movement “is one with the world, not body/world but body worlding” (Manning 2012 [2009], 6).” In movement, the body brings about the world it experiences. Sonic motion, therefore, actualizes the interlacing of the felt body with its surroundings both in material terms, i.e. referring to physical vibration permeating both body and world, in terms of discursive configurations, i.e. referring to cultural and social dispositions. In movement, the human body comes about vis-à-vis the dynamics of its own relationality, actualizing itself along the divergent registers from which lived experience emerges. Seen this way, sound experience is centrally the experience of relational repositioning. Musical conventions such as genres, then, are cultural techniques to actualize, stimulate and transform the dynamics of human relationality. Musical genre conventions accentuate, but also stimulate resonance across temporal, spatial and social axes. Such resonance is always resonance *of connection*, and this connection is where sound knowledge is located. Chanting *chesols* sets resonance in motion, and in this way, actualizes sound knowledge as a relational resource.

This, then, is also what *Obil ngesur iiang* does for Palauan listeners at the opening of *The Giant*. The chanting voice, the distinct melodic contours of the *chesols* recitative line, the recitative rhythm, which in the Palauan context is unique to *chesols*, and the fact that *Obil ngesur iiang* programmatically opens the clip, all sonically situate everything that follows firmly within the Palauan cultural-historical context. This evokes a strong aura of Pacific Island wisdom and care for the islands, as well as a spiritual past that is not bygone but very much present. *Obil ngesur iiang* makes this bond resonate, and this resonance then serves as the experiential backdrop of *The Giant*'s ensuing plea to tread carefully on the islands. The sound knowledge *Obil ngesur iiang* leverages for *The Giant* is not in “[w]e both came to this place with nothing/ The land and the rocks are not ours/ We are not the rightful owners of them/ It's only the water and the rock that own the land.” To the tourist on board the incoming flight to Palau, who does not normally understand the lyrics of the chant, it is in the atmospheric sensation of diffusely connecting with the island's traditional wisdom, which infuses a sense of respect. To those familiar with *chesols*, at the end of the *Obil ngesur iiang* excerpt, the *chesols* is far from finished: the *chesols* stops right at the point where the group's response “hm...uei!” would need to come in for the chant to finish. In *The Giant*, there is no response. This renders the recited stanza from this *chesols* a cliffhanger, a question mark and an invitation. What will the response be? *The Giant* then taps into this relational sensation by getting across its message, i.e. to ask the tourists for increased environmental awareness. The sound knowledge of *Obil ngesur iiang*, in this particular context, is not about what to do; it is about how to do it.

“Legends help Palau preserve its past. But can they protect its future?” The producers' choice to open the video clip with an *chesols* and then introduce an Chuab-like figure which is ultimately domesticated suggests that the answer to the video clip's initial question is “yes”—a “yes, if.” Yes, if the sound knowledge of chants and oral history manages to find new conduits and alliances. Clearly, *The Giant* aspires to be one such conduit. The sound knowledge of *Obil ngesur iiang*, here, is not simply one that is affirmative of the normative narrative put forth in the lyrics. Not a knowledge of absolute truth but one of relational situationality, it always arises **in connection-with**; even more, it is **about being in connection-with**. *Chesols*, then, can safely be considered a knowledge practice. *The Giant* uses an *chesols* to reach out, using this knowledge practice's layered meaningfulness towards the forging of new relationships.

CONCLUSION

Climate change will continue to impact on small Pacific Island nations. There is no evidence that this process can be stopped. (IPCC 2007) Reflecting on the irresolvability of grief, Judith Butler famously asked what may be gained from “tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearable and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief” (Butler 2004, 30). For the analysis of sound knowledge, the question is, what can be gained from tarrying with environmental change musically? Resounding with the complex and layered human connectedness with the world, music has the capacity to render one's being in the world an encompassing, and at times, highly ambivalent, experience. Calling upon vitality and life's resilience across the divergent registers of daily life experience, sound knowledge can activate physical, emotional, spiritual, and social capacities other modes of knowledge fail to address, or address less efficiently. Sound knowledge is about relationality and connectivity. It is also about

shared pain in the face of desolation and inexorability, as is the case in connection with the impact of climate change on the Western Pacific Islands. Sound knowledge is capable of facilitating emotional and social transformation and as such, of making a difference—a crucial difference perhaps. As Dipesh Chakrabarty put it in his essay on how humanist practices of historiography might respond to the geological realities of the Anthropocene, “climate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe. It calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity.” (Chakrabarty [2009] 2017:50) Music is far from being that “figure of the universal” climate change seems to seek desperately. But as it mediates between the competing experiential and epistemic orders characterizing the postcolonial Micronesian setting, music is capable of providing an experience of and a relation to the connectivity of Chakrabarty’s human collectivity, opening new avenues, new belongings, new horizons. In tarrying with environmental change musically, the Palauan traditional arts are thus becoming a resource in the face of climate change, the uncontrollable growth of tourism and the injustice of global market economies.

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Audiovisual Supplements

- AEMR-EJ02 Birgit Abels ex1: Sound example 1 – A tengelekl el cheós, chesols chanted by Ieychad Yaoch on 24 February 2005. Recording by the author.
- AEMR-EJ02 Birgit Abels ex2: Sound example 2 – Short excerpt from “The Giant” (*Obil ngesur iiang*).