

DANCE IN TONGA: THE COMMUNICATION OF SOCIAL VALUES
THROUGH AN ARTISTIC MEDIUM*

An understanding of dance in Tonga and much of Polynesia requires not only a three-dimensional analysis of the artistic form itself -- which encompasses study of poetic text, melodic and rhythmic rendering, and visual expression in movement -- but also an examination of the social structure of which it is an integral part. The complex visual and auditory product communicates social values in an artistic form -- but only to those who have the cultural knowledge to understand what is being communicated. A tourist, for example, will not receive the same messages as a Tongan when watching a traditional Tongan dance. Texts are the basic and most important part of such performances, imparting historical and cultural information in an aesthetic form, while the musical and movement features are best considered as a secondary and tertiary "decoration" of oral literature. To those who do not understand the text, much of the communicative values of these performances is lost and the outsider is forced to view them only as an art form. And, as an outsider does not understand the indigenous aesthetic system, he is forced to metamorphize works of art from other cultures into his own aesthetic system. Indeed, it is my contention that it is the lack of communication of indigenous values inherent in works of art that has given rise to the concept of "primitive art". I would argue that primitive art is simply art that does not communicate the social or aesthetic values that were intended by its maker. Thus, to an outsider, a Tongan dance will not communicate what was intended by its maker, but may still be appreciated as primitive art. In contrast, to a Tongan, a dance in traditional style communicates layer upon layer of social and aesthetic messages. Dance is probably the most sophisticated and subtle of all Polynesian art forms, but in most island groups, it still awaits intensive study.

In many parts of Polynesia, ceremonial danced poems often have considerable musical elaboration and decoration by movement. Such compositions are traditionally performed on occasions of national importance or on occasions in which the societal structure takes precedence over kin obligations. These danced compositions are not only interesting in themselves for their poetry, musical elaboration, movement, and aesthetics, but are important in analyzing social structure and the role these dances play in social cohesion. Indeed, meaning in such compositions is to be found at the social level as well as at the aesthetic level.

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In Polynesia, social structure and religion are intimately related to music and dance. Although work songs, game songs, songs of derision, and laments were used in everyday life, highly structured, formal music and dance was usually used to honor gods and chiefs (or beloved family members that one wanted to elevate in a chiefly manner). Genealogical rank based on descent from the gods resulted in pyramidal social structures with the highest chief at the apex and commoners at the base. Relative rank within the pyramid influenced social relationships, and power resided in chiefly offices and with individuals who were born to them. Political regimes were long and enduring and succession to chiefly office was by genealogical rules. In these relatively stable societies specialists composed poetry, added music and movement, and rehearsed the performers. Yet each Polynesian society conceived the relationships between musical manifestations and social communication in a different way, ranging from criticizing social institutions (with performers breaking the rules of the society), to paying allegiance to the sociopolitical system (with performers being placed under rigid taboos and supported by the chiefs).

Many of the traditional functions or evolved traditional functions of ceremonial dance songs are still found today in Tonga. The most important danced genre today is lakalaka, which can be described as a metaphorical danced speech, performed by "all" the men and women of a village on occasions of societal importance, often of national or religious significance. The structure of a lakalaka is based on formal speech-making and includes three sections or movements. The first movement is an introductory fakatapu, which recognizes the chiefs and asks their permission to speak. This usually acknowledges the important societal divisions of the Kingdom. This may be very short, for example, in a lakalaka from the village of Lapaha,¹

Tapu mo e Kalauni e Fonua

Permit me to speak, oh
Crown of the Land

'Oku fakamala 'a Lalo mo 'Uta

Embodiment of Kauhala'uta and
Kauhala'uta

These two poetic lines, in addition to acknowledging the two major societal divisions of Tonga from which all chiefly lines derive (Kauhala'uta and Kauhala'uta),² honor Prince Tungi (now King Tupou IV) in whose honor it was composed, for he descends from, and therefore embodies, the three major chiefly lines (two through his mother and one through his father) of these two major societal divisions.

Or the fakatapu may be longer and more specific, for example, in a lakalaka of Fahefa, composed for the Coronation of Tupou IV in 1967.³

Tapu ange mo Ha'a Moheofo⁴
Pea tapu mo Tu'i Faleua
Pea tapu ange mo Ha'a Ma'afu
Pea tapu mo Ha'a Lātū Hifo

Pea tapu ange mo Ha'a Vaea
 Pea tapu mo e ongo Ha'a Ngata
 Pea tapu ange mo Falefisi
 Tapu mo Molofaha mo Maliepō
 Tapu mo e Fokololo 'o e Hau
 Tapu mo e Kano Loto'ā 'o e Hau
 Tapu mo e Tangata o Tu'itonga
 'Oku fio he 'alofi 'o e Hau
 Pea tapu mo e Tou'a 'Eiki na

Thus, the fakatapu, in recognizing the chiefly societal lines, by implication recognizes and supports the traditional social system. By performing this poetry each individual pays allegiance to the village noble (that is, landed chief) who has commissioned the lakalaka and asked his villagers to perform. One way to show displeasure with the village noble is by not joining in the dance. But for most Tongans dance is a pleasurable activity and, even if displeased with the noble, the displeasure is often subjugated in order to join in, and thus the dance serves as a unifying force for the village. Furthermore, by commissioning the dance and encouraging his villagers to perform it, the noble pays his allegiance to the king, and thereby he and his dance serve as a mediating force between the people and king -- the proper role for a chief, who holds an intermediate position in the social structure.

The second main section or movement of a lakalaka is the longest, and is the main part of the composition which tells the story. Often this lakalaka section begins by introducing the dancers and the village from which they come. This is usually done by referring to something for which the village is well-known, such as a famous bit of scenery, an historical event that took place there, or an important chief of the area. Chiefs are never mentioned by name but in figurative language by references to birds or named flower necklaces (or the flowers from which they are made). This village identification is often enhanced by the costumes worn by the dancers, such as a particular kind of shell, seaweed, or leaves that the village is known for, or that is associated with its chief. Many villages have a special lakalaka name, such as Lomipeau (the name of a large legendary canoe) for the village of Lapaha, or fala osi (a specific length of tapa) for the village of Kanokupolu which specializes in making tapa and uses this length of tapa for its lakalaka costume. This second movement (or lakalaka section) elaborates the reason for the composition of this particular dance, for example, the coronation of the last king (1967), or the celebration of a century of freedom (1962) when many villages performed their lakalaka at a nationwide katoanga, or celebration. Sometimes lakalaka are composed for departures or welcoming ceremonies of one of the royal family, for example, when Prince Tungi went away to school (Kaepler, 1976).

The third major section or movement of a lakalaka is the tatau or closing counterpart to the opening fakatapu. Here the performers say their goodbye, and defer again to the chiefs, thereby subjecting the village orientation of the second section to the broader perspective of the Kingdom. Thus, in addition to entertainment for the spectators and pleasure for the performers, the poetry imparts traditional and cultural information about the celebration itself, about the historical background

for the performance, and about the genealogies of those honored and those dancing and their village -- making it an intellectual or educational exercise contributing to village and national social cohesion.

However, not only does the poetry impart such information, but much of it is reinforced visually. The societal divisions differentiated by blood and collateral segmentation of the chiefly lines, as well as the family ranking system, can all be seen to operate in a nationwide katoanga, which uses dance. First, it is the nobles, that is, legal landed chiefs, who bring their villages to dance for the celebration and thereby show their subservience and allegiance to the king. Second, the dances represent the great traditional societal divisions and have an internal ordering that reflects the importance of the divisions. And third, the physical arrangement of the individual performers visually portrays important concepts of the social structure. The performers, that is, all the men and women of a village are ranged in two or more rows facing the audience, the women on the left (from the spectator's point of view), the men on the right. The center positions for both men and women are the highest positions in the dance. These positions are called vahenga and are held by the highest ranking individuals in the village. The female vahenga may be the noble's eldest daughter. The male vahenga may be the eldest son of a collateral line. Because in the status system based on family rank, sisters outrank their brothers, and because of the Tongan principle of brother-sister avoidance, brother and sister may not stand next to each other (although in some cases the principle of high rank takes precedence and brother and sister do stand next to each other). Next to each vahenga position is a position called ta'ofi vahenga, which literally means to "separate the vahenga". Ta'ofi vahenga positions are usually filled by individuals of the matapule or ceremonial attendant lines. Perhaps the matapule himself will stand next to the male vahenga, and the eldest daughter of the matapule will stand next to the female vahenga.

The position next to the ta'ofi vahenga is the place of malie taha, the best dancer, which is an achieved position rather than one ascribed by genealogical rules. Occasionally, the ta'ofi vahenga is also the best dancer, and the third position is not distinguished from the rest. Or in some villages where there are several chiefly lines, the noble's daughter will take the first position, the daughter of one of the other chiefs in the village will take the second position, the matapule will take the third position, and the malie taha will stand fourth. Good malie taha are very important to the village because their skill may be transferred to the two vahenga. Even if the vahenga do not perform well, the excellence of the malie taha may be ascribed to and absorbed by the vahenga and the dance will be a success.

The two end positions (male and female) are called fakapotu, and are usually occupied by individuals of the second most important chiefly line represented in the village or by the mokopuna 'eiki⁵ (chiefly grandchild)

of the village noble or one of his predecessors. The dancers between the malie taha and the fakapotu are not differentiated. These positions are filled by the common people (tu'a) of the village, and just as commoners are not differentiated from each other in the societal structure, neither are the dancers.

Before the actual performance of the lakalaka at an official government celebration, it is usually taken to the palace and presented to the king and/or his ceremonial attendants for their approval. At this point the individuals who have been chosen by the village chief to fill the positions of importance may be changed. It is a great honor to have the named positions and much discussion in the village may have occurred before the individuals were assigned. In some cases the decision is clear-cut, but in others genealogies are traced, often in several different ways, in order to show that one individual outranks another. In Lapaha, traditionally the village of the Tu'i Tonga line and the seat of government, there are so many chiefly lines, all of whom want to be represented in the named positions, that the choice was often left up to Queen Salote. It is desirable not only to show who is of highest chiefly rank, but also to show how many chiefly lines are represented in the village. On the occasion of the final performance the spectators look first to see who the individuals are who occupy the named positions and decide which chiefly lines they represent on that occasion. Only then do they settle back to enjoy the dance.

The dance itself is judged in four ways. First, the poetry is judged by how skillfully the poet has included the necessary speech-making elements within the structure of the poetry and how he has alluded metaphorically to the people and history of the village that performs it. Second, the movements are judged on how skillfully they allude to the poetry and reflect the rhythm and mood of the associated music. Third, the dancers are judged on their overall performance, including the concept of ve'ehala or ve'etonu; that is, do they all step to the same side and together, or do they move in opposite directions and bump into each other? They are also judged by the movements of the arms, including moving together as a group, and on the contrast between the women's graceful movements and the virile movements of the men, which must communicate visually the sex-linked movement values of the society. Fourth, the dancers are judged individually mainly on the proper movements of the head and their ability to "act and look alive" while they dance.⁶

In many respects, especially for a national occasion, the dance itself is a gift to the king and is presented, along with food, mats, and tapa, in a ceremonial manner and is accepted by the king's matapule in ceremonial language. Villages may also present their dance as a gesture of honor to other chiefs. This, however, is always a complex undertaking because of the social and societal implications of who may dance for whom within the overall ranking structure of individuals and societal lineage. For example, the Tu'i Ha'ateiho's village ordinarily would not dance

for the present-day descendants of the Tu'i Tonga line because the Tu'i Ha'ateiho's line derives from a sister of the Tu'i Tonga and in the family ranking system she would outrank her brother -- that is, someone of higher rank would usually not dance for someone of lower rank. However, during the 1967 coronation festivities the Tu'i Ha'ateiho's village did dance at the mala'e of the Tu'i Tonga. But as it turned out, they were not dancing for the descendant of the Tu'i Tonga, but for the Fijians who were guests at his home for the coronation, and the Tu'i Ha'ateiho, a chief of the Falefisi, was activating his Fijian relationships.

Composers are the only true "specialists" in Tongan dance. In a full composition one, two, or three specialists may take part -- the composer of the poetry being most important. He may also add the melody and polyphony or this may be entrusted to others. Finally the dance movements are added -- sometimes by the poet or the composer who had added the melody or by someone who specializes only in movements. The composers are usually also the teachers, although the composer may appoint someone else to do the teaching, especially if he himself is getting old. The performers, however, are not specialized or specifically trained. Each part is simple enough in itself but a proliferation of parts creates a complex performance in which poetry is rendered polyphonically, polyrhythmically, and polykinetically (two or more simultaneous sets of movements). Elaboration is achieved by adding more parts rather than by making the parts more elaborate. Coordination among the parts is achieved by extended practice -- often as long as three months for a major performance. This necessitates following the directions of the composer and emphasizes the importance of each villager to the total performance -- the practice sessions serving to integrate the village and the non-dancers being outsiders.

At the final presentation, precision in simultaneous variety engages the spectator and challenges him to understand not only the aesthetic relationships among the parts, the poetry, and the abstract qualities of precision and individuality, but also challenges him to understand the social interrelationships displayed before him by each village and the societal implications in the order of the dances and the overall social structure. Dance in Tonga is important in integrating an individual into the village in which he lives, the village in which he was born, or the village in which he has some social claim. Villages gain prestige from a well-composed and well-performed dance in which dancers represent important chiefly lines. Dancers and spectators absorb historical, genealogical, and legendary information about their own and other villages -- information that is displayed poetically and visually only on such occasions. Such katoanga are long remembered with pleasure and those who initiated them and made them possible are admired and honored. The dances are essentially a conservative force, and serve as a medium of social cohesion at both village and national level. An individual is pleasurably enculturated into the time-honored values of this society, that is, he learns of the social roles and relative importance of chiefs, matapule, and tu'a, the statuses ascribed by birth and what

mobility is possible by achievement, and the social values regarding male and female in movement patterns and in family ranking and avoidance patterns. These social values influence aesthetic enjoyment, for if these social niceties have not been adhered to, the performance cannot be enjoyed for its decorative qualities manifested in melody, rhythm, and movement. Indeed, the social principles and aesthetic principles are so closely intertwined that one cannot be fully appreciated without the other. Aesthetic values are internalized within the socially stratified microcosm of the dance group and social values are imparted in an aesthetic environment. The importance of each individual to the whole is made abundantly clear, while at the same time this importance can also be seen in terms of the relativity and inequality so apparent in the dance and in the social structure which this metaphorical danced speech reflects.

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NOTES

1. For the entire text, translation, and explanation, see Kaepler, 1976.
2. See Kaepler, 1971b.
3. Text from the Honorable Ve'ehala, Noble of Fahefa and composer of this lakalaka.
4. See Kaepler, 1971b, for an explanation of these societal lines and their relationship to each other.
5. Mokopuna 'eiki may be of higher class rank than the noble himself owing to the rank of his wife or the marriage of his son to a woman of higher rank.
6. See Kaepler, 1971a, for further discussion of the aesthetics of Tongan dance.

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