

## Review Essay

*Poetry In Motion: Studies of Tongan Dance*. ADRIENNE L. KAEPLER. 1993. Vava'u Press, P.O. Box 427, Nuku'alofa, Tonga. [To Order, write East-West Center, 1777 East-West Highway, Honolulu, Hawaii, 96848; Attn: Denise Hera]. xiv + 149pp., including 58 illustrations, Glossary and Bibliography. Hardback: [U.S.] \$ 22.00. ISBN 982-213-003-1. REVIEWER Frank A. Hall.

*Poetry In Motion* is a very welcome collection of essays on dancing in Oceanic Tonga, the site of Adrienne Kaeppler's dissertation research entitled *The Structure of Tongan Dance* and one of several other sites for her extensive research into human movement systems.<sup>1</sup> The essays contained in *Poetry in Motion* were originally published in a number of books and journals between 1967 and 1978. It is gratifying to have them all in one place.

The author's patron, HRH The Princess Salote to whom the book is dedicated, hails the republication of these essays as valuable for bringing attention to a historically important aspect of Tongan culture. Whether one includes the promotional aspect of this work or considers it notwithstanding, the value of this collection to an anthropology of human movement is certain. Kaeppler's early essays concerning Tongan dancing demonstrate an anthropological approach consistently oriented to theoretical issues emerging from research into the expressive forms of another society. She clearly explicates an ethnoscientific approach which she consistently employs to explore a variety of issues including the structural principles of local aesthetics, the communication of social values, formal and functional aspects of culture change and especially the relation of cultural to social forms.

In the case of Tonga, dancing is often intimately linked with spoken poetry, hence the title which gives a good sense of a main theme and ethnographic fact of the collection. Although the book is oriented to cultural forms, these are consistently related to social structure in Tonga, which is ranked through kinship and descent. In fact the relations of aesthetics to social structure in every case figure in the explanation and interpretation of Tongan dance.

The chapters of this book may be roughly grouped according to three categories: (1) explicitly theoretical and methodological, (2) diachronic studies and (3) synchronic studies, though naturally many themes interpenetrate these categorical divisions. The Introduction and especially the final chapter ('Method and Theory in Analyzing Dance Structure with an Analysis of Tongan Dance') address theoretical and methodological questions specifically relating to the anthropology of human movement. Readers who

are not familiar with Kaeppler's use of a linguistic analogy in dealing with formal aspects of movement systems will find it clearly explained in the final chapter with descriptions, photos and illustrations. She explains her use of Labanotation; my only wish is that she would have exemplified it as well.

The Introduction presents an overview of the various forms of Tongan dancing, some of the aesthetic principles involved, the importance of poetry, and gender differences in movement. Kaeppler also articulates her anthropological approach to several theoretical questions, including the definition of dancing and the non-universality of movement as a language, i.e., the necessity of approaching forms of dancing as cultural products and processes.

Three chapters take a diachronic perspective on dancing: 'Tongan Dance: A Study in Cultural Change'; 'Preservation and Evolution of Form and Function in two types of Tongan Dance'; and 'Dance and Interpretation of Pacific Traditional Literature'. The first two of these (second and seventh chapters in the book) deal with dancing at the level of genres and attempt to account for both stasis and change in their various forms and social functions. Historical data for these studies include detailed descriptions by Captain Cook, illustrations by John Webber from Cook's third voyage in 1777, as well as other descriptions and illustrations by other visitors to Tonga in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both studies reveal important connections between form, function and the changing social context of movement genres. While Tonga maintained its political independence, Tongans adopted either Methodist or Catholic religious practices according to its chiefs' lineage affiliations. Varying sectarian attitudes toward dancing, its purpose and meaning, resulted in generic formal as well as functional preservation or change, depending in some cases on religious affiliation which also implied a political significance.

*Me'etu'upaki*, a paddle dance described by Cook in 1777 continues unchanged in form, although now it is associated only with the Tu'i Tonga line, whose members, upon losing power, chose Catholicism in defiance of the victorious Tui' Kanupolu line. As the latter had chosen the Methodist affiliation they were prevented from performing their traditional dances because both these and the accompanying poetry were seen by missionaries as a challenge to Christian orthodoxy. Consequently, after a lapse of time during which a genre known as *me'elaufola* fell out of practice, a new form was invented which through ingenious changes met Methodist clerical approval yet it constituted movements remembered from or resembling *me'elaufola*.

Performance of the new form, called *lakalaka*, was eventually not restricted to the Methodist or Tui'Kanupolu lineage; rather it became associated with village identities and was performed as a formal means of honoring chiefly presence at many public functions. In these two chapters Kaeppler makes sense of preservation and change in various movement genres by relating historical contingencies to structural features of Tongan social and political life—an approach that makes a great deal of sense.

One might expect the problems of dealing with movement forms in historical settings to raise serious questions. The alleged 'ephemerality' of movement and the inadequacy of both pictorial and verbal descriptions (if one assumes a 'purist-performance' view), not to mention problems of interpretation are all potentially undermining. Kaeppler, however, is a master of circumscription in her studies. To begin with, she is clear about *which* levels and aspects of form, function and meaning she can interrelate. Her analysis does not over-reach that which her data is able to sustain. And, perhaps most important, *she is clear in tracing her trail* from data through analysis to conclusions.

The third diachronic study ('Dance and Interpretation of Pacific Traditional Literature') advances a theory of diffusion of human populations through the Pacific area by focusing on theatrical presentations including poetry and dance in Indonesia, Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. Comparison at the most inclusive level is made possible by the fact that formal movement systems throughout these areas involve the interpretation of literature, whether written or oral. By comparing inter-semiotic tropes (e.g. decorating vs. illustrating texts, noun-oriented vs. verb-oriented allusions to poetry), functions of the dance and socio-political systems, Kaeppler illustrates an hypothesis of relative distance in historical relations between the peoples of Asia and Oceania.

Although oriented to different specific issues, three of the four synchronic chapters share many common themes, most obviously, the aesthetic principles which govern the creative and evaluative aspects of Tongan dance. Central to these discussions is the principle of *heliaki*, or poetic allusion. Poetry *alludes* to social facts and known stories, rather than representing them. Movements which accompany poetry further allude to the poetry or the story, in neither case making direct iconic or representational connections. Rather, movement indirectly refers to the word, concept or story at hand.

In the third chapter ('Aesthetics of Tongan Dance') the author spells out the dimensions according to which performance is evaluated which include features directly related to *heliaki*, and others related more or less to social

principles, including appropriateness, solidarity through synchrony of movements and reference to shared knowledge with the audience. The following chapter ('Sangone, a *Lakalaka* from Lapaha: Folklore as Expressed in the Dance in Tonga') illustrates the tight relation of the Tongan socio-political system and folklore. Stories alluded to by poetry trace the genealogy and praise the deeds of chieftains' lineages. As this cultural knowledge is differentially shared, stories alluded to in poetry and movement provide levels of deeper significance for more sophisticated audiences.

The communication of social values (fifth chapter, 'Dance in Tonga: The Communication of Social Values Through an Artistic Medium') is shown to inhere in the form for those who share basic cultural knowledges. The structure of the performance genres, the principles of evaluation, and the facts of who performs on what occasions link the social system of Tonga with the valued symbolic systems of music, poetry and movement, brought into immediate relation in performance, though indirectly referring to each other via *heliaki*.

One of Kaeppler's central points in this collection is that local cultural knowledge of any art form is necessary to its understanding. As the main operative trope in Tongan aesthetics is allusion, this point is well demonstrated by a system which seems to avoid direct reference (which, of course, would still be arbitrary even if more clearly motivated) and encourage play with the variables of differentially shared cultural knowledge and hidden meaning. It is as if the Tongans make an aesthetic game of Kaeppler's main point, demonstrating the importance of cultural knowledge within (as well as between) cultures.

The last of the synchronic essays, 'Melody, Drone and Decoration: Underlying Structures and Surface Manifestations in Tongan Art and Society' is an exercise the author calls "ethnoscience structuralism". Her point is to bring out a set of structural principles which underlie both artistic and social domains. The musical concepts of melody, drone and decoration are applied to the relations of body areas of the dancer (arms, legs, head), the relations of art forms (music, dance, poetry), political relations (chiefs, commoners and special relatives of the Chief), social relations (father and father's brothers, ego and sister's children) and relations of design and decoration in bark-cloth. What this chapter distills at the abstract level of structuralist principles, her whole collection of articles articulates in ethnographic detail, the relation of form, knowledge and social system in an aesthetic system and social practice.

It may strike the contemporary reader of ethnography that what these essays lack are the voices of informants, consultants and local people. Indeed,

Kaeppler's more recent writing reflects this change in ethnographic style. I use the word 'style' advisedly, for it seems to me that while the critique of the monological trope in ethnographic writing raises important and sensitizing issues regarding the intersubjective nature of ethnographic objectivity and the political location of authorship, the problems indicated cannot be resolved simply by the use of more dialogical or carnivalesque manners of presentation. It remains to be discovered to what extent any scholar can avoid the deep issues of objectivity (intersubjectivity) inherent in authorship, even with a liberal use of quotation. No anthropological writing is more or less valid simply because of its manner of presentation. No style can avoid its own political location nor guarantee transparent motives. The arguments eventually have to stand the multi-stranded tests of time. In this respect, I believe *Poetry in Motion* illustrates the timeless though historically located quality of good anthropological scholarship and provides what the discipline of anthropology offers at its best, a coherent and collaborative account of local customs.

The themes illustrated in this book (necessity of local knowledge for interpretation of aesthetic form, the inseparability of cultural form and social formation, and the like) are familiar. Nevertheless, Kaeppler's clear writing and sound scholarship demonstrate how dance forms as structured systems of movement provide unique perspectives on matters of anthropological interest. Included here would be matters such as the meanings of culture change, intersemiotic relations in communicative style, the role of expressive forms in differential enculturation, the diffusion of expressive practices, the relation of local expressive forms and practices to regional and larger social formations, and more. Perhaps most valuable to student and professional alike, Kaeppler articulates the levels of comparison and analysis, her theoretical assumptions and methodologies which both circumscribe and specify her treatment.

I count myself among those who believe that anthropology at its best also produces work as useful to the people it describes as it is for the scholarly discipline through which it has been produced. *Poetry in Motion* meets this challenge, if HRH Princess Salote and my interpretations are to be believed.

Frank A. Hall

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<sup>1</sup> Another of Kaeppler's major works, *Hula Pahu: Hawaiian Drum Dances*, Volume I, Ha'a and Hula Pahu, was also published in 1993 (Bishop Museum Press). It will be reviewed in a forthcoming issue of *JASHM*.