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**DANCING FROM THE HEART:
MOVEMENT, GENDER AND
SOCIALITY IN THE COOK ISLANDS**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of

The Australian National University

August 2003

This thesis is the entirely original work of the author except where otherwise cited in the text.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "K. Alexeyeff". The signature is written in a light grey or blue ink on a white background.

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisory panel. My supervisors: Nicholas Thomas, in the earlier stages of the thesis and Don Gardner, who kindly took on the job in the final stages. Thanks also to my advisors, Francesca Merlan and Lissant Bolton, who read drafts of chapters. This thesis would not have been completed without the encouragement and practical assistance of several people. So thank you, Mandy Thomas, Rose Lilley, Andrew Walker, Martha Macintyre and Ray Madden. I appreciate that these very busy people made time to assist me.

Many thanks to my family: Nan, Pop, Mum, Pete, Luke, Andrei, Eloise (and kids), Nick and Kate. And my friends: Ruth Hansen, Dianne Currier, Monica Zetlin, Astrid Scott, Jack Taylor and Steven Adlard. Thanks to all the staff and students in the anthropology program at the Australian National University especially Roberta James, Michael Ward and Stephen McNally. A special thanks to Ian Bryson for his help (and patience) with editing the DVD.

My greatest debt is to those in the Cook Islands who assisted with this project. I hope I can repay you one day. Thank you to the National Research Committee for permitting me to undertake research in the Cook Islands. Especially the chairman Temu Okatai and Tauepa Tutakiau for her continual support and interest in my project. Thank you to the Minister for Culture and Education, Ngereteina Puna and all the staff at the Ministry of Cultural Development especially Carmen Temata, Ota Joseph, Tepoave Raitia, Reu Urirau, Dwayne Murarai, Ake, Ake, Morris, Dennis and Ngatuaine Maui. I would also like to thank John, Ina and Tapaeru Herrmann for their interest and kindness. Also, the late Papa Mana Strickland and Papa Maeva Karati for Cook Islands Maori lessons.

The Orama dance group deserve particular thanks for putting up with me and so generously involving me in everything. Thank you especially to the Orama leaders

Sonny Williams and Gina Keenan-Williams and beautiful Tia Mai, Apii and Dan Turua, Mata Arnold (and Tim and kids).

For those in the outer islands who gave me accommodation and lots more. In Aitutaki all the Tunui's especially Papa Tunui. In Mau'ke, No'o and Kamoe Aituru and their girls, and all the Tararo's. In Tongareva, Wilkie Rasmussen, and all his family, in particular Rara, Rama and Vic. Wilkie has been a continual support throughout the thesis writing process.

Finally to my friends in the Cooks, I can't thank you enough: Ngatuaine Maui, Audrey Brown-Pereia, Teresa O'Connor, Mike Alexander, Vaea and Fletcher Melvin, Tuts, Liana Scott, Tina Vogel, Pam and Tepora Solomona and Alex Sword. And especially, Mamia Tunui Savage and Utivaru Hewett for giving me a home and taking me into your lives. I miss you very much.

Abstract

This thesis examines contemporary Cook Islands dancing and, more generally, expressive culture and their links to Cook Islands sociality. I argue that in the contemporary moment, dance plays a key role in negotiating modernity, mobility and regional identities. At the same time it is a deeply embodied and affective experience for many Cook Islanders.

Using participant observation, in-depth interviews, archival research and media material, this thesis aims to contribute to an understanding of how Cook Islands sociality is generated, performed and negotiated. The ethnographic material for this study involved spending extensive time with dancers, musicians and community leaders. It ranged from sites of cultural production in the Cook Islands and in the diaspora.

Contemporary dance practices are shaped by competing ideas about the Cook Islands past. Debates about precolonial traditions, missionisation and colonialism pervade discussions concerning contemporary dance and expressive culture. I argue that the attention paid to the politics of tradition reflects the competing moral, political, personal and economic agendas of postcolonial Cook Islanders.

Contemporary dance practices are also an important part of the production of ideas about Cook Islands modernity. The Cook Islands economy relies on tourism as its major source of income. Dance and dancers are foregrounded in the promotion of the tourist industry and in the entertainment of tourists. As well as formulating relationships between Cook Islanders and tourists, dance is central to the dynamic relationships between Cook Islands communities.

In addition, dance practice is a vehicle through which notions of gender are produced, circulated, affirmed and contested. Cook Islands femininity is often represented as the paragon of both traditional and moral (Christian) ideals. An exploration of the ways in which women negotiate these normative ideals through their dance practice and their gendered comportment is a central component of my ethnography.

This thesis explores dance through the lens of theorisation about performance, globalisation, gender and postcolonialism. It also relies on contemporary Pacific scholarship to argue about the centrality of active agency in cultural production. Cook Islands dancing is not simply a reflection of past and present gendered cultural politics. Throughout, I argue that the mediational power of expressive practices actively produces the modalities through which regional and local identities engage with broader global processes. Dance, I suggest, is a generative process which occupies the hearts, minds and bodies of many Cook Islanders.

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Glossary

<i>akama</i>	shyness
<i>akauka</i>	smooth, graceful hip movements
<i>akava'ine</i>	show off, act about oneself.
<i>ariki</i>	high chief
<i>aro'a</i>	love, affection, kindness, generosity, pity and sympathy
<i>ei</i>	wreath worn on the head or draped over the neck (<i>ei katu</i>). Usually made from flowers
<i>ekalesia</i>	the church, church community
<i>imene</i>	sing
<i>imene tuki</i>	style of Cook Islands Christian Church religious singing
<i>marae</i>	ceremonial place
<i>mata'iapo</i>	sub-district chief
<i>mataora</i>	entertainment, pleasure, fun
<i>oro metua</i>	church minister
<i>papa'a</i>	white person. Also 'four layers' referring to the layers of clothes worn by missionaries.
<i>pareu</i>	cotton material worn as a garment. Dance costume made from cotton <i>pareu</i> , hibiscus (<i>pareu kiri'au</i>), or green leaves (<i>rauti</i>)
<i>patupatu</i>	double time hip 'flicks' perform on one hip and then the other
<i>pe'e</i>	chant
<i>kaparima</i>	action song
<i>kia orana</i>	a form of greeting, good day

<i>kopu tangata</i>	extended family
<i>Koutu Nui</i>	council of sub-chiefs
<i>rangatira</i>	junior chief
<i>rekareka</i>	happy, cheerful, delighted
<i>tamataora</i>	to entertain, to make joyful, to do those things or acts that will be a source of joy, pleasure.
<i>ta'unga</i>	an expert in traditional matters
<i>tapere</i>	sub-district
<i>tarekareka</i>	entertainment, sport, or dance. To cause pleasure or merriment
<i>tere pati</i>	travelling party
<i>tiare</i>	flower
<i>titi</i>	overskirt or girdle often made from <i>rauti</i> leaves. Worn over <i>pareu</i>
<i>tivaevae</i>	appliquéd quilts and cushion covers
<i>tumu korero</i>	an expert in traditional knowledge
<i>uapou</i>	Bible meeting, religious gathering
<i>Ui Ariki</i>	Council of Chiefs
<i>ura</i>	dance (Rarotongan and Cook Islands Maori). <i>Koni</i> (Aitutakian), <i>kosaki</i> (Tongarevan)
<i>ura kaikava</i>	'drinking style' of dancing
<i>ura pa'u</i>	drum dance
<i>ura piani</i>	impromptu dance genre which involves dancing with a partner
<i>ute</i>	commemorative or topical song
<i>vaka</i>	district on Rarotonga, canoe

Orthography

Cook Islands Maori is the official language of the Cook Islands. It is based on the Rarotongan dialect. Each inhabited island of the Cooks group has its own dialect. Most people in the Cook Islands speak Cook Islands Maori, the dialect of their island of origin and English. The orthography used in this thesis is based on Rarotongan and is referred to as Maori.

The graphic representational system for Cook Islands Maori, like many Polynesian languages, is a site of contestation. Following Sissons (1999) and Elliston (1997), I preserve the glottal stops which lace the language and I do not include the differences Cook Islands Maori speakers articulate between long and short vowels. This orthographic system is the most commonly used in the Cook Islands.

Prologue

Mamia sat at the kitchen table with her ukulele. I sat opposite her with my laptop. It was around ten in the evening on a cool night during the Rarotongan winter. Mamia was trying to compose a song; it was her eldest sister Rose's 50th birthday in a few months, and Mamia wanted to write a song for the occasion. I was trying to record fieldnotes. Neither of us were particularly absorbed in our activity; we talked more than worked. Our conversation was interspersed with Mamia strumming occasional chords and singing fragments of melodies and the clicking of my keyboard. Rose lived in Auckland and Mamia would be there at the time of her birthday because Mamia was sitting her international netball umpire exams. At one point, Mamia suddenly stopped her casual playing and talking. I looked up and realised she was going to 'perform'. She sat up straight, gazed into the distance and began to sing. I remember thinking how beautiful she looked; she was wearing a long maroon velveteen dressing gown, her dark hair offset by a single white flower behind her ear. She sang confidently, in a voice that stretched from deep and rich to sweetly high. The song's melody was melancholy and the lyrics sorrowful:

Mama Kuramaeva
Koe taku e mi'i nei
Topata roimata
Aue ra te manini e
No'ou e
Kura – ma – e – va

Mother Kuramaeva
It is you I yearn for
My tears are falling for you
Oh how my heart hurts
For only you
My dear mum Kuramaeva

After the song she began to tell me a little bit about her life. She had written the song about her mother, Kuramaeva, who died when Mamia was a teenager. After her mother's death Mamia said she went *koka* (roaming about); she was wild, she did not listen to her elder siblings or her father, she stayed out all night and slept all day. If she was punished she still did not listen to them because she did not care. She was so sad. While she was close to a number of her sisters and her father, she felt from the point of her mother's death that she was alone: "I had to look after myself". Mamia said the clearest image of her mother was that of her playing the piano in the village hall and the organ at church,

skills she had learnt at boarding school in New Zealand. Her mother was also a singer and composer, and Mamia was seen to have inherited her talents. Family members had also suggested that Mamia had inherited some of her personality traits. Both were reputed to be tough and straightforward: "With Mum, if something was wrong she would say it straight to your face, not go behind [your back]".

Later I found out that Mamia's song belonged to a popular tradition of lament songs. At the death of a family member, or in the case of other tragic events, a person might compose a song to express their sadness. Mamia had recorded the song in the 1970s on a cassette which included other original compositions and her favourite songs. In the 1990s another Rarotongan composer, Tepoave Raitia, used the song's melody in the death scene of a musical he wrote and directed. He told me that Mamia's song was part of a genre he calls "music of the dawn" (*akatangi mamaiata*, literally, play the dawn): "It is the sort of music you play when you have drunk all night. You get your guitar or your uke [ukulele] and play, the sun isn't up yet and everyone is still asleep, it is still and quiet".

The evening was an unusual one. Mamia was not given to reflection about her past, particularly not difficult periods in her life. She had, however, composed a number of songs about sorrowful events. For instance, she wrote a song about a friend who died suddenly and her sister's marriage break-up. Some evenings I could hear the sound of her playing the guitar or ukulele outside, alone in her garden, and the melodies were invariably melancholy. Despite the exceptional nature of the evening (or perhaps because of it), it is pivotal in my recollections of Mamia – the song, its sorrow, the night and the figure of Mamia in her dressing gown were captivating.

These solitary moments were also unusual because most of the time Mamia was an extremely social person. Her paid work and community roles meant that it was very rare for her to be home before ten p.m. on any given evening. Her paid employment was as sports development officer for the Cook Islands Sport and Olympic Association. In the time I knew her she was heavily involved in netball umpiring and would have meetings and competitions at least three nights a week. She was also constantly travelling to

various islands of the Cooks group to assist with local sport development. In addition, she made numerous trips to New Zealand for international umpire training and toured with the Cook Islands netball team to Commonwealth and South Pacific games.

Mamia's musical abilities meant that she was often asked to play the ukulele and sing at functions and informal parties. Whenever she went out to an evening function, she always travelled with her ukulele in the boot of the car. At a party where Mamia and some other women had been singing and playing for two hours, someone turned to me and said: "You know how at parties sometimes we can't think of songs to sing? Not if Mamia's here, she always knows what songs to sing, she can play the ukulele non-stop".

In her twenties and thirties Mamia danced in a number of dance groups, often travelling with them overseas to represent the Cook Islands in tourist promotion. She had won a number of dance competitions and was considered one of the most beautiful dancers of her generation. A number of people I spoke to about recent dance history and dancers would, without prompting, reminisce about Mamia's dancing and singing abilities. On separate occasions two middle-aged men became misty-eyed as they recalled her talents. Now in her forties, she mainly confined performing to informal occasions. Sometimes Mamia would perform a solo dance at a family event, a dance to honour a wedding couple for example, but more often she would dance spontaneously at parties and at nightclubs.

At a small party Mamia had at her house, her sister Apii and her husband Dan Turua (both accomplished musicians and singers) played guitar and ukulele while the next-door neighbour, Mama Kan, beat out drum rhythms with a spatula and plastic bowl. It was a hot night and we sat on the veranda, leaning against its pillars, enjoying the sea breeze and swaying with the music. They mainly played "island music" (local songs), particularly songs from Aitutaki, the home island of the women. The songs were sentimental and laid-back, songs about village life, school and love. Some were *papa'a* (white) songs from the 1950s and 1960s, like *Over the Reef* and *Be Faithful*, sung with alternating English and Maori lyrics. Late in the night Mamia and I got up to dance. We

danced in a joking style common at parties and at nightclubs. The style is called *ura vi'i vi'i*, literally dirty dancing. Its humorously suggestive movements are usually done between women; sometimes one woman will dance exaggerated versions of men's dancing. Our musicians laughed and made ribald comments. Mama Kan gave me instructions: "make your bum smooth, it is so stiff!". The music became faster and cumulative. We all watched Mamia whose hips were the epitome of *akauka*; effortless, graceful and fast. She was laughing as she danced, a cheeky gay laugh. She shone.



Figure 1: Mamia, 1980 Dancer of the Year