

Dance and Gender Relations in Oceania

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The image of the iconic dancing hula girl is one of the most gendered stereotypes of Pacific peoples and cultures. Her image often gives us the impression that most dancing in the Pacific is done by women and is mostly about fun or entertainment. But dance is central to both sexes across Oceania, is usually a very political matter, and includes rules about body movement and costuming for men and women. In the Pacific where dance is usually grounded in the land and seascapes these different rules for performers can tell us a lot about a community.

In some Pacific societies men and women have distinct ways of holding or moving their bodies, particularly during a ritual or dance event. In islands such as Rotuma or Fiji, men and women will dance side by side in separate lines or blocks. When they dance in adjacent groups, this usually illustrates the ways in which males and females have complementary but distinct roles in their respective societies. In Fijian, Tongan and Samoan dance, men may move with large, expansive, and sometimes aggressive movements while women are usually graceful and take up far less space. Men may jump but women's feet rarely leave the ground. Men may dance with an open stance while women usually keep their legs together. In Samoa and in the Samoan Diaspora, fa'afafine or transgendered males will sometimes perform as women but women will rarely dance as men.

Migration from the home islands to new lands often gives Pacific Island men and women new opportunities in dance. *Black Grace: From Cannon's Creek to Jacob's Pillow* is about one of the most successful modern dance companies in New Zealand led by Samoan choreographer, Neil Ieremia. While inspired by Pacific metaphors, stories and concepts, the former all-male dancers of Black Grace performed very different dances from their relatives in the Pacific islands and indeed from their male peers in New Zealand. Polynesian men are much better known for rugby or football than modern dance.

While traditionally men in lavalava (sarong) jumped, slapped, clapped, lay on the ground, and waved their arms, the intense jumping, rolling, spinning, kicking, and running that Black Grace did- often in tights and on stage- was a new sight for most Pacific audiences. This early work of Black Grace illustrates how Pacific Islander migration to countries such as the United States, New Zealand or Australia, impacts cultural values and practices changing or expanding them to incorporate new styles, choreographies and contexts of performance. A theater stage, for example, is very different from the cleared space of the village *marae*. Traditionally, it is also very unusual for a young man, such as Ieremia, to head a dance group of such prestige. Thus, the Black Grace Company in its original all-male form represented some new and powerful images of the Polynesian man.

Contemporary dance in New Zealand also gives us new images of Pacific Island women. Whereas their traditional dances usually maintained the

sacredness or taboo of the lower body, ballet, jazz and modern dance requires women to lift and kick their legs, spin, jump and roll. While many forms of traditional Pacific dance have women firmly rooted to the earth, modern dance and ballet direct their bodies up to the sky transcending space and place. While hip hop dance, which is very popular in New Zealand, is much more oriented to the ground, it also requires women to perform expansive movements, roll and gyrate, and execute gymnastic feats that few girls in the islands would attempt. For many elders in both the islands and Diaspora, these movements, increasingly performed by girls may be quite alarming.

Today the Black Grace Dance Company includes 12 women and 1 man who are mainly of non-Pacific descent. This is a radical shift in the gender and ethnic composition of a dance company whose first identity was centered on its all-male Polynesian composition. This shift gives us an opportunity to reflect on gender, power and identity in the contemporary dance world and in Pacific societies. Dance communities are always changing and in the islands, once performers became older, or get married and have children, the composition of a performance group changes. However, dance groups are usually rooted in communities and members never really leave, they just take on new roles depending on their age or status.

In the west, a dance company usually revolves around someone who is considered a genius and many dance companies are headed by male choreographers or directors. While there are dance masters and teachers in traditional Pacific dance contexts they are usually of both sexes and are often older men or women. However, this is changing and increasingly, young people are creating new dance communities that challenge older modes of choreography and performance.

An I-Kiribati poet poignantly illuminates the dynamics between home islands and the Diaspora across the sea, between men and women, and their oceanic environment.

They say in some parts of the Pacific
That men have wings while
Women only have feet.

They say in other parts of the Pacific
That women belong to the land
While men belong to the sea.

Have you ever seen and heard
A woman stand on the beach
And wail, wail at the sea and sky?
If you have, then you have felt
The peace of pain and
The pain of peace.

Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa (1995)