Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage
The Tongan Lakalaka: Sung Speeches with Choreographed Movements

The Kingdom of Tonga consists of an archipelago of islands in the South Pacific including the three groupings of Tongatapu in the south, Ha`apai in the central area, and Vava`u in the north. The population of Tonga is about 100,000, who form a homogeneous community. The capital is Nuku`alofa on the main island, Tongatapu.

Lakalaka is one genre of a rich Tongan poetry/music/dance repertoire. It is an historic form that retains its uniqueness in the aesthetics (heliaki) of poetry, sound, and movement while maintaining its relevance for contemporary society. Lakalaka are major artistic productions that combine history, politics, and entertainment as sung group speeches with choreographed movements. Each lakalaka ranges in length from twenty to forty minutes and encodes the oratorical voice enlivened as a sung and danced performance. Oratory is a major art form in Tonga and through oratory emotions are expressed and reciprocated. The job of the orator is to make people laugh and cry, by metaphorical references to people, places, and the Tongan way of life.

Lakalaka, with their oratorical power, are central to social activity through which fundamental cultural values are constructed and passed from generation to generation. They are village based and are performed at the behest of the chief by men and women of the village in praise of their village and Tongan society. Lakalaka are performed in public at least once a year during the celebrations of the anniversary of the investiture/coronation and birthday of the present King of Tonga, Taufa`ahau Tupou IV, during the first week of July. They are also performed on other occasions such as the openings of new buildings and celebrations of important chiefly and village events.

The performers number a hundred or more, arranged in two or more rows facing the audience. The men stand on the right side (from the observer’s point of view), the women stand on the left. Men and women perform different movement sequences that are consistent with the Tongan view of what is suitable and appropriate for that gender. Women's movements are soft and graceful, men's movements are strong and virile. Leg movements are minimal, especially for women, who move only a few steps from side to side and forward and back. Men may take larger steps, bend, turn, and sometimes strike or lie on the ground. Arm movements allude to words of the poetry—which are often allusions to a deeper meaning, thereby creating double abstractions much admired in Tongan performing arts.
The structure of a lakalaka is based on formal speechmaking having three sections: (1) an introductory fakatapu, which acknowledges the important chiefly lines relevant to the occasion; (2) the main lakalaka section, which conveys the theme, information about the occasion, genealogies of relevant people, history, or mythology of the village performing, and other relevant information; and (3) the tatau, a closing counterpart of the introductory section, in which the performers say goodbye and again defer to the chiefs. One stanza may be a tau or chorus, a verse that expresses the essence of the performance, during which the performers do their very best and compel the audience to pay strict attention. This formal structure forms the outline of the composition. The overall design, and thus the meaning of any specific composition need not be apparent until the end of the performance. The meaning is revealed as each verse, through verbal and visual allusions, builds on those that went before, mediated through the aesthetic principle of indirect meaning called heliaki (not going straight, to say one thing but mean another).

The positioning of the performers mirrors the social structure of the village. The central male and female performers (known as vahenga) are high status individuals, such as the son or daughter of the village chief, or the prefect of a school. Next to the central performer is an individual of ceremonial attendant status. The dancer in the third position is the best dancer of the village. The end positions of the front row are also filled with individuals of chiefly or achieved status. The positions in between are not distinguished from each other. Audience members participate by bringing gifts to the performers, called "fakapale". These gifts, presented during the performance, include large pieces of barkcloth, woven mats, long pieces of European cloth, and money. After presenting the gift, individuals occasionally join in the dance.

VIDEO EXCERPT

The word lakalaka, refers to the leg movements--basically a walk that moves one step to the left, then one step to the right, and occasionally forward and back. Although this sung group-speech with choreographed movements is considered a late nineteenth-century performing genre, it appears to be an evolved form of the pre-European me`elaufola, a word that refers to the arm movements.

These sung group-speeches with choreographed movements are the key to understanding Tongan cultural and social values. Here, history, mythology, and genealogy are brought to bear on contemporary events, and the values imparted deal primarily with the overall societal structure and the people of rank through whom it operates. The poetry of a lakalaka is a series of concepts and references rather than a complete story, and is usually composed for performance at a specific event. Although the choreography visually alludes to the poetic text, a "narrative story" is not actually told because it is assumed that everyone already knows its basic elements and because of the Tongan love of heliaki--the aesthetic concept based on indirect references.

The men and women perform different sets of movements simultaneously. The arm movements allude to words of the poetry--which often are themselves allusions--creating the double abstraction so admired in Tongan performing arts. The movements do not pantomime the words, nor do they symbolize in the sense that one movement symbolizes one phrase, or idea. Rather they are figurative; the movements create an abstract picture to which a number of meanings can be assigned, and conversely, one idea can be alluded to by several different sets of movements.

The poetry is sung by a chorus of men and women who, along with the dance leader, stand behind the dancers, and by the dancers themselves. Lakalaka is a unique legacy to Tonga and is considered by the Tongans as the living cultural history of the community. Through performance
Lakalaka have become chronicles of the history of the Tongan people. Lakalaka is in danger of disappearing, due primarily to the lack of means for safeguarding and protecting this oral and intangible form. Tonga is a small society of 100,000 people and about an equal number living overseas in metropolitan countries. The influences of European and Asian cultures are strong and difficult to resist, especially for the younger members of society. Performances of lakalaka are recognized as the most important cultural tradition in retaining Tonganness. Overseas Tongan communities attach their identity to music and dance, especially to lakalaka—which holds the key to the uniqueness of Tonga's performing arts.

In addition to affirming cultural identity as a nation, lakalaka texts are a source of information about the history and important places, monuments, and natural features of islands and villages--many of which have now disappeared. Lakalaka bring together people from throughout Tonga for national and religious events in a spirit of artistic competition. This cultural legacy is held in the oral tradition and must be activated through oral tradition to keep it alive.

Tongan musicians believe that the music of the lakalaka cannot be written down. Notation could be made (with difficulty) by listening to a tape recording and writing down what occurred on a specific occasion. But this does not cover the possibilities of how a lakalaka could or should be sung. Each time a lakalaka sung speech is performed, it is performed differently and each rendition is "correct". Indeed, the music can only be perpetuated through the oral tradition--both for known historic lakalaka, and the structure and strictures of lakalaka composition. Likewise, Tongans believe that the dance movements of lakalaka cannot be written down, but must be passed in the oral tradition by learning the dance and reconstructing it each time the lakalaka will be performed.

Since the deaths of Queen Salote in 1965 and Leilua Veʻehala in 1986, only a few new composers have attempted to stage new major compositions. Most lakalaka that are presented today are restaged or revised from known lakalaka texts, either learned in a village context through the oral tradition or heard on the radio. At the request of the King, the dance leader of the village of Tatakamotonga, Malukava III, has taught lakalaka to students at Queen Salote College girl's school and Tupou College boy's school and they have performed lakalaka together on selected occasions. Composers do not have access to old relevant texts or sufficient knowledge to create new ones. Without a concerted effort to preserve old texts and to train new composers, the lakalaka genre is in danger of disappearance or stagnation. In fact, this has already happened. Many Tongans have migrated to the capital Nukuʻalofa, abandoning their villages and thus their village-based lakalaka. Poets and composers no longer have the in-depth cultural knowledge necessary to compose the lakalaka poetry, polyphonic music, and two sets of choreographed movements for men and women. Many of today's composers, compose in the less restrictive hiva kakala genre. The pressures of everyday life have kept many individuals away from the prolonged practices that are necessary to stage new compositions or to reconstruct old ones.

As most of this knowledge is held in the oral tradition and traditionally learned by performing for major events, there is a lack of published or readily available examples of the poetry from which to learn. Further, relevant history, aesthetics, or cultural traditions are not basic parts of school education. A concerted effort is necessary in order to revitalize the composition and performance of this most important cultural legacy.

Recognition of the lakalaka as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by UNESCO has given the needed impetus to preserve and revitalize the lakalaka and restore it to its recognized place of highest prestige in the hierarchy of the performing arts of Tonga. Since the declaration of the Lakalaka as a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" in 2003 and its draft action plan, work has already begun on a project of
"The Preservation and Revitalization of the Lakalaka." The committee charged with preservation and revitalization is under the aegis is the Tonga Traditions Committee (founded in 1954). The Chair of the Tonga Traditions Committee is the King of Tonga, Taufa`ahau Tupou IV. The Secretary of the Tonga Traditions Committee is Hon. Albert Tu’ivanavou Vaea, son of Baron Vaea of Houma. The chair of the preservation and revitalization committee is HRH Nanasipau’u Tuku’aho (daughter-in-law of the King), who lives in Kolovai--the village of the famous "Milolua" lakalaka. She is one of the co-authors of a book on the poetry and songs of the late Queen Salote, which includes 42 lakalaka and was published in 2004.

The members of the committee are recognized poetry/music/ dance specialists, including Malukava III, dance leader of Tatakamotonga, the village of origin of the lakalaka under the present Malukava's great-grandfather, Fineasi Malukava I; Ma'u Matapule, now in his 90s, a dance leader from the eastern area of Tongatapu, who is the doyen of all present-day poets and dance leaders; Afuha’amango Taumoepeau, a teacher at Liahona High School, dance leader for the village of Kolofo’ou, and formerly the music and dance instructor at the Tongan National Centre. In 2001 Mr. Taumoepeau traveled with the performing group of the Tongan National Centre to take part in a festival of Music and Dance of the Malay people, of which Tonga is the most eastern branch and Madagascar is the most western branch.

The committee also has the participation of well-known performers and spokespersons for Tongan music and dance, including HRH Princess Pilolevu Tuita, renowned performer who has served as central performer (vahenga) of the lakalaka of the village of Kanokupolu and has performed in the lakalaka of Vava’u island, and the lakalaka of Tatakamotonga--and is the Director of the Tongan National Museum. Also important is Tauatevalu Fonua, who is the organizer of the annual Tongan Music Festival, and will be activating the villages to perform lakalaka at this annual event.

The National Action Plan includes:
1. Field research throughout the Kingdom of Tonga and overseas to identify and record (by audio and video) lakalaka practioners, including composers, dance leaders, and outstanding performers, and enter this information into a database.
2. Research in Tongan and overseas archives to find texts and other information about lakalaka. This will also be entered into a database.
3. Recognized practioners and composers will give workshops to entice young people (and old) into learning about lakalaka as well as learning compositional techniques and how to mount a new lakalaka--including its poetry, music, movement, and costume.
4. A national lakalaka festival will be held in 2006 and a book of texts will be published to assist composers to stage new lakalaka and reconstruct old ones.

Through these efforts it is hoped that old lakalaka will continue to be part of the repertoire and that major new compositions will again be composed and performed that are appropriate to Tongan poetics and politics of the 21st century.

In summary, lakalaka are concerned with the metaphorical validation of Tongan social forms. Composed by culturally and aesthetically knowledgeable individuals, delivered in an aesthetically charged atmosphere, sung and moved by aesthetically motivated men and women, received and evaluated by receptive audiences, performers and audience members combine politics with poetry. In effect, the preservation and revitalization of the lakalaka, now in progress, will be the preservation and revitalization of Tongan culture.