THE ‘OTUHAKA AMONG THE OTHER TONGAN DANCES

It is customary to divide the Tongan dances in 3 groups:

1. The dances of the old tradition, that is to say those which were performed before the coming of the Europeans. They include the meʻetuʻupaki, the meʻelaʻoufoa, the ula and the ‘otuhaka.

   - The dances of the new tradition, which originated after the coming of the missionaries. They include in order of their arrival: the tauʻalaonga, the lakalaka and finally the māʻfaleʻula.

2. The dances from abroad, mainly from other Polynesian countries, like Fiji, Uvea (Wallis), Futuna and Samoa. Some of these dances, however, came to Tonga such a long time ago, that they have shifted out of this group into one of the others. They include: the kalālo (from Uvea), the sīkā (originally called eke, also from Uvea), the meʻke (from Fiji), the mako (from Uvea) and the tauʻalaonga (tualala, from Samoa).

The dances from abroad:

   - First, let us have a quick look at the differences between the ‘foreign’ dances.

   - The baulo is a war dance for men. They mock fight which each other, using stylized wooden javelins. The rougher and the more exciting the movements they make, the better. There is no song associated with it, only a quick drum beating.

   - The meke is also a man war dance, not too different from the baulo. But where the baulo is a war dance nowadays and almost seen as a real Tongan dance, the meke is a form used by the people of Kaatou in Haʻapai. The text they sing while dancing is in an old non-understandable language, related to Fiji.

   - The sīkā was originally a war dance for men too, but has now further evolved than the baulo and the meke. Where in the former two males and women may participate, in the sīkā this is taken for granted. The javelins are replaced by sticks, long ones for the men, and short ones for the women. The dancers perform in small groups of four: two men and two women. They all take their sticks against each other on the rhythm of the beating of the drum. There is a simple accompanying song, but that is usually drowned out in the noise of stick clashes.

   - The mako is a standing dance for men, it is very rare. The tauʻalaonga is a standing dance for women. Or better: for one and only one nice looking girl, preferably a Sāmoan taupou, a daughter of the local chief, and preferably at the end of a dance evening as the final climax of the show. Then she steps around in the centre of the stage with dignified movements of her hips. The legs. Lesser chiefs, nukula, may accompany her, but they have to stay in the corners of the stage, keeping their movements as rough and wild as possible. The greater the contrast between their ugly performance and the beauty of the girl, the more they honour her and the better it is. The tauʻalaonga came about two centuries ago to Tonga, mixed there with the Tongan ula and evolved in the tauʻalaonga of today.

Meʻelaʻoufoa & Lakalaka

When we look at the dances of the old tradition, then we see that some are still performed nowadays, while at least one of them is lost. That one is the meʻelaʻoufoa (meaning dance with stretched arms). According to the journals of captain Cook and other European explorers, as well as the diaries of the first missionaries, it was a standing group dance for men, men dancing while moving legs and arms sometimes in some gestures, other times in softer and gentler ways, but always with grace and dexterity. The men and women danced in their own groups, but the groups moved along and through each other from time to time.

And that was something the missionaries did not like. Their vocabularies were narrowed down, the words ‘sin’ and ‘vice’ only, and when they saw men and women so close together, making all kind of suspected movements, they feared the worst. So to avoid taking any risk, they forbade the meʻelaʻoufoa completely. The Tongans obeyed, but unwillingly.

They tricked the people by using the missionaries as a cover. Around 1870 they created a new dance style building from the nursery rhymes which were approved by the missionaries. Probably they had done so with the thought that if it was fit for children, then there could be no sin in it. Anyway, the new dance was extended with hand gestures and movements, which were ‘accidentally’ just those as those used in the meʻelaʻoufoa. The missionaries noticed nothing and gave their consent.

That was the lakalaka, the dance now considered as the national dance of Tonga. Although it would be too simple to state that the lakalaka is the same as the meʻelaʻoufoa, that the latter was only removed, it is quite clear that the lakalaka is a worthy descendant of the now forgotten meʻelaʻoufoa. It is still a standing dance for men and women. They are nicely separated, the men to the women, the women to the right (as seen from the group itself) and, noisily, in this way they are closer together than what was considered to be good for the meʻelaʻoufoa. The lakalaka is always performed by a large group of people, on some special occasions more than a hundred. And it still has its gentle movements and its vigorous movements, just as its name, lakalaka (meaning: to step briskly or carefully), indicates.

There are many different lakalaka, and new forms are continuously created by the people (the artists who make the text of the song, compose the music for it and design the accompanying dance movements). For that reason the lakalaka is really a dance of the new tradition, a living dance, as one says, a dance which still evolves.

Meʻetuʻupaki

The meʻetuʻupaki (meaning: standing paddle dance) is a dance done by men, although nowadays women may be included too. They handle a small symbolic rowing paddle (the upaki) using it in all kinds of movements, elegant yet vigorous enough to be wild, the men are not to run and fro, rearranging themselves, forming and unforming lines. Everything is done on the rhythm of the beat of the slit drum.

The meʻetuʻupaki is a dance of the old tradition, that is to say: no new forms for it are created anymore. Nowadays, there is only one version. The way in which it was already performed by captain James Cook, is still the way in which it can be seen today. Although in Cook's time probably more versions existed than the single one left over today.

Nevertheless there are some slight variations in the movements as performed by one dancer compared to another. Even shows of groups directed by one and the same dancer master may differ. In addition to that there are also slightly different versions of the accompanying text. The reason for this all is that the text and choreography have been handled down from almost immortal times by people who may have lapses in their memory from time to time. Especially the text is now so archaic that nobody can understand it. Then of course, errors can easily go unnoticed.

Why has the meʻetuʻupaki survived up to today, but not so the meʻelaʻoufoa? One reason is that the meʻetuʻupaki is not a royal dance, as was the meʻelaʻoufoa performed by and for the king. It is a royal dance, the tuʻi Tonga. And of course also for the king himself. Now it happened that in the middle of the 19th century the tuʻi Tonga was still heathen. Other chiefs, however, were already converted to Christianity, that was to Wesleyan Protestantism. Those chiefs were already converted and therefore the tuʻi Tonga had to convert. As a result, the tuʻi Tonga converted to Christianity, but not to Wesleyan Protestantism. Instead of acknowledging the old gods, they included them in their catholic tradition, especially after 1865 when Lau‘iti Hou, the last tuʻi Tonga, died.

There are still nowadays the people from Muʻa, the capital city of the eastern district on Tongatapu, once the residence of the tuʻi Tonga, who are the authorities not only concerning the meʻetuʻupaki, but also the other two ancient royal dances, the ula and the ‘otuhaka. As they believe, whether they want to show that, though loyal now to the current royal dynasty, their heart is
still in the reminiscence of the tui Tonga.

Ula & tau'olunga
The ula (meaning dance) was a standing dance for women in which they made graceful gestures with hand and arms. It is only since quite recently that, occasionally, men may perform too. Indeed, the dance is still performed today, but not too often. Even less than the already rare me'etu'upaki.

Traditionally an ula was performed after a 'otuhaka, to which it is quite related (see below). Some (2 to 6) of the seated performers rose and started dancing, while the others remained seated and became the chorus. But nowadays the dance can be done in the front, the performers enter on the stage from one side, from the left and one from the right. For those reasons the ula is also named fa'atu ula (meaning: split dance), which is, however, usually mispronounced as fa'uta ula.

The text of the ula is quite simple, every song consists of two lines which are repeated and repeated and repeated again. There are the graceful motions of the arms, the hands and the head which must give the dance its beauty. The movements of the legs and the body have in the ula only secondary meaning. Like in the Sāmoa tauvalu, the motions do not reflect the meaning of the text in any way. The more since most of the text is in archaic Tongan and/or Sāmoa. Therefore most people do not understand the meaning of the text. Maybe that is why there is still so many who new the text by heart, even now, the translation sometimes turns out to be a silly child song.

The ula is really a dance to look at. Those dancers who look prettiest and perform the traditional movements best are selected and placed in front. This contrasts with the 'otuhaka where the best positions are allotted to rank. Originally both ula and tau'olunga could only be danced by chief women only: the ula for the young ladies, the tau'olunga for the old ones.

The ula is the only Tongan dance where the explicit display of female beauty is coming on the first place. The reason is, it is said, that in former times the ula was preferably done at night in the presence of the tui Tonga, who would then select one, or even more girls he liked best to spend the rest of the night with him in bed.

The tau'olunga (meaning: reaching high) came originally from Sāmoa, perhaps already as early as in the beginning of the 19th century, so that by now it may well be considered as a real Tongan dance. In fact the current tau'olunga is a blend of the Sāmoa tauvalu and the Tongan ula. However, for a long time the tau'olunga was danced in the Sāmoa way. It was only the involvement of queen Salote in the beginning of this century, which revolutionised the dance into its current style.

It is a standing dance, principally for young nice girls, but nowadays boys sometimes will perform it too, though they should dance wilder. Like in the tau'olunga, the movements of the girl, initially dancing solo on the centre stage, are subtle and elegant. But very often seen solo in groups of girls, especially in fundraising meetings. These performers, men and women, are often women hopping around her, are supposed to dance roughly and primitive, as contrast against the beautiful movements of the girl, making her dance even more splendid.

But unlike both the tau'olunga and the ula, where the beauty of the movements is a goal in itself, unrelated to the text sung, in the tau'olunga the dancers perform as to interpret the text. However, especially when solo, the dancer is quite free to do what she wishes, within certain rules of course. For example: when the text talks about the heavens, arms should go up to outline the sky dome. But that still can be done in many ways. A group dance, however, the tau'olunga is best when all dancers synchronize to make the same movements at the same moment.

The tau'olunga is danced very often, it is much more popular than the ula. The reason is that the ula is a dance of the old tradition. Therefore there is only one ula, the dance is unique and can only be performed in the traditional way. (There exist some modern dances, also called ula, but that is only to fool tourists.) The tau'olunga on the other hand is a dance of the advanced modern times. There are many different tau'olunga songs, the Tongans can understand the meaning of their texts, they can dance as they want and can use the music they want, guitars and pop. With the ula this would not be possible, there every movement is rigidly dictated. So in daily life the old ula has given ofspring to the new tau'olunga, and only a few people, interested in the old-fashioned parent, are left over.

- Oouhaka & MB'u'ulu'u
The oouhaka (meaning row of arms movements) was also a dance for women in which they performed the same kind of movements as in the ula. But this time they were seated side by side in a long curved row. Nowadays the oouhaka can be done by men and women alike, and if it is done so, the two genders are seated alternately. We are tempted to think that this was forbidden to women's attendance at that time even if a man and a woman are seated so close to each other, that if they remain fixed on their places, there is no opportunity for int.
The performance of the 'otuhaka

The 'otuhaka is a dance done with the performers seated. They sit side by side in a single row in a half circle. In the centre of this semicircle sit the one or two drummers. If space does not permit, a same layout for the dancers as with the mā'ulu'ulu can be taken: seated in several straight horizontal rows.

The legs are crossed in the usual manner, left leg in front, while both feet are folded away under the thighs or knees. The legs remain in this position for the whole dance, save for an occasional temporary forward shift of the left leg.

The costume of the dancers is not standardized, but is usual as follows: a tapa (skirt) of any colour, a white lote (shirt); a small single white seliteki (leather) on the head; a pai'ai (necklace) and a kohou (shoulder guard) made of orange pandanus leaves over the upper body; and ve'eva'i (bracelets plaited out of small leaves) around wrists and ankles.

The drummers keep the beat of the dance by hitting with their sticks a sōfa'a: bamboo wrapped up in a rolled mat. Nowadays a real tapa is rare, but any other drum will do, as long as all drummers can hear it. The drummer is usually the dance master, especially in small groups. After the first part of every new song, then all the dancers will follow up with the rest. Every song is repeated a few times, either with the same or with different movements.

The main beats of the drum are about one second apart, but a few lesser beats are given in between. As usual with Tongan dances, when the songs progress the beat increases, and with it the speed of the song and the dance movements, so that when the final repetition of any song is reached the tempo is breathtakingly quick. After this climax there is a small pause, in which dancers and drummers can rest, while the public applauds. And when it goes on with the next song the tempo restarts again in the slow pace.

A peculiarity is that the 'otuhaka (as well as the mā'ulu'ulu) starts (and ends) with a part in which no song is sung. There is only the beating of the mat and the gestures of the dancers. If you do not know what is going on, it can be quite boring. In fact there is a text for this period, called tapa after the mat itself, but this text is supposed to be silently understood. However if you do know the text, the movements of the dancers immediately become more interesting since it turns out that they interpret it. The tapa itself is written in modern Tongan and clearly an addition to the old dance. By consequence the movements therefore are not fixed by tradition and will be different from dance to dance and from dance group to dance group. In the tapa the dancers ask permission from the chief or from god to do the dance, not because they want to attract attention to themselves but because they want to honour their chief in the traditional Tongan way. Or so it is supposed to be. It is only after the completion of the tapa that the song parts follow.

In fact one should remember that the formal traditional Tongan dances, like the 'otuhaka, were never done to please the public, but only to show off for the guests of honour: the king, the local chief or whoever was available. Because that were the persons you could beg for something, not the ordinary people who possessed nothing.

In case of the 'otuhaka the best place for the audience is directly behind the drummers, well inside the circle, where one has the full view on all the dancers. Therefore those places are reserved for the guests of honour, even when they usually are so busy with eating that they have no time to look on anyway. All other places are inferior, but the normal people have to find a place to watch there, and therefore will miss most of spectacle.

"OTUHAKA — THE SONG"

Those sections of the 'otuhaka, which will be analysed in detail in this chapter, are given below. The numbers in straight brackets [] behind the lines indicate either the number of repetitions, or when the verse is to be done. The term 'dance' will be used for this section, while the 'verses' are the separate lines of it. A dance is usually identified by its first few words. For example the dance Moengango consists of 12 verses (all with the same text, but with different movements).

Vowels printed in boldface indicate the main beats and should have the stress. Sometimes they are lengthened into the following half beat, which is indicated by "(...)". Once this is not the case, and then there is only a silence after the syllable, as shown by "...". Usually the first part of every song is sung by the dance master only, so that the dancers will not make a mistake. Those parts are printed italic. After this solo, the rest of the participants follow in chorus. Remember that the tapa is not sung, but is to be recited in your mind only.

TAFUA: Ko au eni ku lele mai, ke fa'i ha'oe fa'e, pe'a pe'a ni mo va'e e tua ai no hau. 'Ou poi ai he matelole. Ou likuna 'a 'itāniti. Lau ai e tangata mo e finemotu'a ko kia, ko e u a ni, 'oku taha pe. Leve'eva e malanga, kai tau tu'a ola 'eiki atu. [2x]

"Oi, inu le 'a-va e; tau fa'a sulu'ia... 'i le alofa..." [3x]

"Oi, soi lena, soi lena mala; tui Tonga toki sala;
au manu la e." [2x] [then repeat "oi inu" once again]

Muli tu'pe'ai lua; tau la-fo 'ene lue. [7x]

'A-nilai 'a e; afe Siulafata, fai le lani, fanā e. [8x]

'Amui le pue--; pue Tonga, e Tonga. [2x]

'Amui le pue, pue, pue, Tonga. [3rd time]

Moengango tau fea?:
ke fanguna tua mo e opea. [12x]

"Oiau leone; 'ua ta toe fa'alongo; 'ua liu lea fonofono;
tama 'o le seila, lata, tātōtoto. [2x]

'Alu e niti, vave 'ese, ma le fa'afelefele. [fū]

Nau fa'alongon'i le talai 'o Meleke;
ua sisi na futu 'o le ne'eni mele. [2x]

Alu e niti, vave 'ese, ma le fa'afelefele. [fū]