

The Dancing Church of the South Pacific: Polynesia and Melanesia

Study Guide by Thomas A. Kane

INTRODUCTION

Today, not only the world dances, but the Church dances. Liturgical dance is happening around the globe, especially in cultures where dance is such a vibrant life principle. My journey to the South Pacific took place in 1995-96 and included many islands in Polynesia and Melanesia.

As I traveled the deep blue waters of the Pacific, I had incredibly moving experiences regarding life, family and the living faith. Not only was the Church dancing, but the Christian faith was embodied and connected to everyday life. No longer a traveler, my journey became a pilgrimage as I learned to pray and move in unexpected ways.

Over the years, I have learned that there are two journeys: the outer journey covers the itinerary-thousands of air miles with many flight segments. The study entailed flying in small planes through the perilous mountain passes, and navigating canoes to avoid crocodiles. There were moments of sheer terror and of total delight.

However, there is also an inner journey that can reveal the landscape of one's very soul. Travel certainly can broaden one's worldview, and also raise questions about what one holds dear. Even one's theological stance can be challenged. When I think of *Church*, I no longer see baroque palaces, Renaissance paintings or the flurry of clerical entourages in scarlet and ermine. I see a Church that liberates, that feeds people and nourishes them with a living Word. It is a Church with a variety of colored faces, praying in languages I will never know and in so many different cultural ways--dancing, singing and celebrating God's presence--a community that is Catholic in the very best sense.

Inculturation, the blending of culture and faith, is becoming a hallmark of the Vatican II Church. Many Pacific Islanders are developing a Pacific theology by exploring the integration between their island ways of life and the age-old traditions of Christianity.

The so-called mission *Church* seems much freer than the Church back home. Evangelization and liturgy are one. Reminiscent of the early Church, there is a feeling of openness and a deep affection and bond among the ministers--bishop, priest, sister, catechist and lay volunteer. The work of spreading the gospel rather than church politics seems to focus the energy. The concern shifts from getting the liturgy "right" to letting the liturgy speak freely in a local language. The Church dares to celebrate with the full body--reverent, holy and festive.

The Pacific is a wide expanse of deep blue. If you look at a map, Oceania comprises not only the small bits of land, the islands and archipelagos, but also the ocean. Rarely does an atlas ever show Oceania intact. We never get a good look at the Pacific. Those little islands don't really seem to matter much to cartographers, yet they comprise Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia.

The islands don't really seem to matter to the Big Powers as well. The United States used many atolls for testing, destroying massive amounts of sea life. In addition, the government basically enslaved the native Hawaiians, destroying much of their culture and forbidding the use of their own language. Investors took away much of the people's lands. In Aotearoa (New Zealand), similar struggles continue among the indigenous people, the Maoris.

This video documentary presents actual worship. The aim is to acquaint audiences with the liturgical developments within the wider Church. Many of the locations were selected because of the creative use of cultural elements in the worship, especially dance. Through careful planning and the generous support of my school, Weston Jesuit, my sabbatical projects have allowed me to search out the intersection of liturgy and culture. I have been fortunate to uncover the Dancing Church and, more importantly, to survive the trips to tell the story.

Kia Ora, Talofa, Bulo, Maio e Leie, Aloha.

Welcome to the islands of the Pacific.

Welcome to Polynesia: the exotic paradise, the stuff of dreams, the land of Bali Hai-the elusive magical island. Here are the islands where Gauguin painted, and where the Greenpeace ship moored in the Papeete harbor while people demonstrated, warning the world about nuclear testing.

Welcome to Melanesia, full of secrets and myriads of mysteries. To Fiji, the islands of hospitality and lost cannibalism; to the Solomons, of World War 11 memories. To the highlands of Papua New Guinea, home of lost tribes of stone age people; to the haus *tamburon* or spirit houses of the Sepik River, where magic still intoxicates and the arts flourish.

Instruction for use: This material may be shown in four screenings:

POLYNESIA

Part 1: 18 minutes

Part 2: 19 minutes

MELANESIA

Part 1: 21 minutes

Part 2: 23 minutes

HAWAII

Malia Puka 0 Kalani, Hilo

This parish has encouraged using the Hawaiian language and symbols as the community continues to work out the connections between culture and liturgy. Notice the effective use of the ti leaf for sprinkling with holy water and its use in the sacrament of the sick. The joining of traditional Hawaiian culture within the church rituals is a start---a way to honor a culture and a people that almost disappeared.

Interview with Father Alapaki Kim

King Kamehameha Celebration

Because of the repression of Hawaiian culture and language for so many years, the Malia parish sponsors this yearly celebration, reviving the ancient customs and reawakening the Hawaiian imagination.

Interview with Paul Nevis

Saint Rita, Nanakuli

The Hawaiian hula has always been an expressive religious dance, not just a cultural spectacle for the tourist industry. On Aloha Sunday, the parish prepares the liturgy in the Hawaiian way. For the presentation of the gifts as well as after communion, a group of women dance the hula. Each hand gesture has a meaning, and the movements are gentle and beautifully constructed.

Interview with Nellie Trujillo

SAMOA

Youth Mass for Evangelization, Apia

This is a special youth mass. Notice the use of *action songs*, which incorporate symbolic gestures to accompany the lyrics. The movements are natural and non-self-conscious.

HAWAII

The stained-glass flowers are the saints of the islands.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

What struck you as you watched the videos? What did you learn?

What role does music play? What did you learn about the use of symbols in worship?

What elements might you include in a presentation of the gifts?

INTERVAL

YOUNG PEOPLE AND LITURGY

The people of the Pacific dance! They learn movement as little children. Dancing with hand gestures is perfectly natural. Thus the inclusion of dance in the liturgy can be very natural, too.

Rarotonga, Cook Islands

The Cook Islands are in the midst of a cultural revival. The Maoris, the indigenous peoples of the Cooks, are beginning to relocate their Polynesian identity. At the cathedral, they are beginning to appreciate Polynesian elements, including gesture and dance. At a first communion celebration, the boys and girls have learned simple hand gestures for a post-communion thanksgiving. The gestures are elementary but powerful.

Nuku Hiva, Marquesas Islands

In Taipivai, the Marquesans celebrate a first communion with drama and flowers. Notice the elaborate use of flower crowns.

Pago Pago, American Samoa

For the dedication of the new cathedral, children bring up a large flower lei to sanctify the elements at the eucharistic acclamation.

Fielding, New Zealand

Public speech has a special place in Maori culture. At the beginning of the mass there is a special welcome in Maori style, and within the eucharistic prayer there are special prayers for the dead.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

With music from different island traditions, we explore the various styles of architecture, carvings and paintings used in Tonga, Samoa, the Marquesas Islands and New Zealand.

SAMOA

Leava'a, Western Samoa

The feast of Pentecost is an example of the creative liturgical work of Cardinal Pio Taofinu'u. The cardinal recognizes that the future of the Church in Samoa and possibly the world depends on an evangelization that speaks the language and culture of the people.

The fa'a samoa (Samoan way) is still very strong in the islands. The liturgy expresses the rich Samoan symbols and folkways. Three moments stand out- (1) A penitential rite in which the paramount chief and his wife are covered with fine mats as a symbol of reconciliation. This custom follows traditional village life in the seeking of forgiveness. The couple remains under the mat during the singing of the kyrie. They are then greeted with the sign of peace. (2) A liturgy of the word wherein the talking chief speaks to the people and presents the talking stick and the whisk, which allows the cardinal to speak. The cardinal, with the appropriate symbols in hand, then advances to the ambo for the reading of the gospel and the homily. (3) A gifts procession in which flowers are presented around the altar and to the presiders in traditional Samoan style, with oiled bodies and unique hand gestures.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Everyone seems to be participating in the Dancing Church. What is your experience on Sunday? How do you participate? How can we involve all age ranges of the Sunday assembly? What symbols might we use for reconciliation? How we do decorate our churches? Does the church space really speak?

MELANESIA

One of the interesting features of Pacific liturgical dance is that many dances come directly from the culture with little adaptation. While there may be a new dance adapted from the rich assortment of movement patterns, most Pacific people themselves make the connections and design natural movements to fit the liturgical moment. The dances use hand gestures and a gentle swaying of the body. In some cultures, the congregation itself would remain seated on mats throughout the ritual. Standing up or changing positions, except for communion, would be disrespectful.

Gizo Island, Solomon Islands

For the episcopal ordination, the Solomon islanders from the local high school play the pan pipes, swaying in rhythm to the hypnotic tunes. These traditional musicians lead the procession from the downtown cathedral to the open field where the liturgy is to be celebrated.

The women from Kiribati present the bishop-designate to the apostolic nuncio with a rhythmic and patterned dance. The women surround the candidate, weaving intricate cross patterns with their steps, as the men stay on the outside edge, singing and gently clapping.

The papal letter is presented to the nuncio by three warrior-messengers. The contrasting image is startling: three young men in grass skirts with painted bodies interact with a white-and-gold-vested bishop with towering miter. Here is a meeting of two very distinct cultures!

PACIFIC REGIONAL SEMINARY, SUVA . FIJI

Palm Sunday Gospel Dance

Throughout the South Pacific, women play an important role in bringing the Scriptures to the congregation. It is quite traditional for the women to dance in the Word with a group of four to six. The dance styles, costumes and chants are as varied as the cultures.

Easter Vigil Preparation Dance

Using traditional Samoan dance styles, the altar is revered by the dancer, and the gifts are brought forward with flower leis.

Interview with Father Vitori Buatava

Fijian Royal Kava Dance

For the patronal feast of St. Peter Chanel, the seminarians created a traditional presentation dance. In the original dance there is a presentation of the kava bowl to a royal personage, such as the chief. In this gifts procession dance, the dancer, in full Fijian attire, presents the chalice to the archbishop. While the chant has been rewritten for the liturgical act, the movements are the same as the original royal kava dance.

Misa Pooja

Inculturation is happening throughout the world. A large portion of the Fiji is populated by Asian Indians who came to work in Fiji. In this section, the Indian Catholic community assembles for a home Mass that uses many of the traditional Indian elements of the Missa Pooja, which is celebrated in India and for the Indian community.

Mendi, Southern Highlands

For the celebration for the new bishop of Mendi, the Huli tribes came to the city after a three- or four-day trek. On the Saturday before the ceremony, the tribes gather for a *singsing*. This is celebration dance in one of its truest and most original forms. With multicolored painted faces and plumage from the birds of paradise, these tribal people are stunning and fierce in appearance. Each group then assembled, performing in place. Some pounded their drums and did a form of jump dancing; other groups marched around as if in a military parade. They were celebrating the new bishop and showing themselves off to the people of Mendi.

Many of the assembled groups participate in the liturgy the next day by dancing in the word procession, the alleluia dance or the gifts procession.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

How can dance be a renewing force in our spiritual lives, whether it is used for personal or public prayer, or for liturgical celebrations?

How can we recover a holistic sense of the person, acknowledging the body-spirit connection?

How does the body express in movement our deepest longings and yearnings, and connect us more powerfully with our God?

What is the connection between dance, prayer and culture?

How can we learn from the peoples of the globe? How can we break down the barriers that divide us?

How are we in our local situation adapting to the liturgy to express who we are: our culture, our beliefs, our local context?

IN CONCLUSION

Art and ritual can elevate and expand our spiritual horizons. Symbols can express what the heart feels and the tongue cannot articulate. Let this experience of *The Dancing Church* invite you to a ritual world of symbols and dance. Just as poetry transcends the use of everyday language, so too does dance transcend ordinary body movement to elevate and uplift the spirit. One does not need to have a complete understanding of the poem to experience the transcendent. Likewise, an understanding of every movement is not necessary for the dance

experience to be felt and appreciated. Let *The Dancing Church* raise questions and open new possibilities for worshipping God and celebrating the spirit.

"For the Peoples of the Pacific "Who Praise the Lord with Timbrel and Dance

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Malia Puka O Kalani Church, Hilo, HI

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FOR THE PEOPLES OF THE PACIFIC
WHO PRAISE THE LORD
WITH TIMBREL AND DANCE



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HAWAII

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SAMOA

*Parish Church
Leava'a, Western Samoa*

*Cathedral Church of the Holy Family
Pago, Pago, American Samoa*

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PAPUA NEW GUINEA

The Carmelite Monastery, Port Moresby

The Cappuchins of the Mendi Diocese

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The Obene People of Kanj

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