

History of 'Ori Tahiti

'Ori Tahiti, Tahitian dance, was a vital part of life in ancient times and was present in religious ceremonies and rituals, warrior training, social gatherings and celebrations, and everyday life, and often took place around a *marae*, place for worship or place of gathering. Prior to the arrival of written word, song and dance were used by the people to pass down information about their history and traditions. Every dance contains knowledge presented as story.

Early dances that were eventually observed by the early navigators and missionaries at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, were highly erotic and sexual which, of course, was shocking to the missionaries. Due to this, details were omitted from recorded accounts, either from indignation or embarrassment, and with Tahiti's conversion to Christianity at the beginning of the 19th century and the subsequent banning of dance, much information about the dances were lost.

The conversion happened quickly and was formalized in 1819 with the Pomare Code, named for the island's king. This code, designed by the missionaries, forbade "immoral" behaviour such as tattooing and dance. "All lascivious songs and pastimes are strictly forbidden," stated the code, and dance thus disappeared for about 60 years, though during this time, there were testimonies that *'upa'upa*, dance and music parties (usually with drinking), did still happen at night in small groups and out of missionary earshot.

By 1881 traditional dance was allowed again but only modestly in celebrations of French Bastille Day in July. Because of this, most of the islands in recently annexed French Polynesia, began to celebrate the national holiday with great enthusiasm.

Originally, the best dancers often came from modest backgrounds, but after the arrival of cruise ships and the influx of tourism, along with the Tahitian dance and cultural renaissance that happened in the 1950's dance became a more noble pastime and made its way to centre stage of Tahitian culture and lifestyle. Today, the Heiva i Tahiti, which takes place every July, is the biggest event in Tahiti and a source of huge cultural pride.

The reclaiming of identity was expressed through tattoos, dance and music and arts and cultural institutions began were established in Tahiti in order to reestablish and perpetuate Tahitian culture. "Today there are at least 30 dance schools that together teach more than 5,000 students. If in developed societies – where much tradition has been lost – dance is the art of movement, Polynesian dance is above all the expression of an ancient culture, original and unique, that drinks from the collective spring of memory in its cultural and natural environment."

The Art of 'Ori Tahiti

'*Ori Tahiti* translates to dance of Tahiti. The most important aspect of 'Ori Tahiti is that the movement is directly linked to the music and that a *tumu parau*, theme or story, is represented. There are two main types of dances in 'Ori Tahiti and both are used to tell stories and pass down knowledge.

The recognisable dance, the '*ote 'a*, is fast-paced and accompanied by the lively beating of drums– typically the *tariparau*, the *fa'atete* , and the *to'ere* drums– which together make up *pehe*, beats or rhythmical motifs, and the dance movements reflect the dynamic and energetic *pehe*.

The '*Aparima*, which translates to gestures of the hands, tends to be slower and is typically accompanied by stringed instruments and voice. In an '*aparima*, the gestures of the hands directly represent the information

that is presented in the song. Therefore, the concept of 'Ori Tahiti encompasses the dance, the music, and the information or message being portrayed.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, 'Ori Tahiti has been experiencing a renaissance, and it is still very much in it to this day. The steps are still evolving, shifting, changing and being reinvented though, with Tahiti attempting to officially codify the movements of 'Ori Tahiti, there has been a shift in mindset with more and more practitioners returning to what is now being established as 'traditional'.

Pupu 'Ori

Pupu 'Ori, school of dance, is a group of people who come together to practice the art of 'Ori Tahiti and perpetuate Tahitian culture through movement. Pupu 'Ori often put on shows under a broad theme, to teach and entertain. The leader of a pupu 'Ori is called a *Ra'atira*, or leader. There can be several ra'atira and they can change depending on who is leading a specific event, though the director of the group is usually the one being referred to. An *Orero*, or writer/narrator, helps to establish the story of a performance and the musicians of the group are an essential component.