

Culture Moves – beyond Western Categories

By Asoka Mendis de Zoysa



“Most people think that the Pacific region is just some small islands”, says Katerina Teaiwa, “but all continents and one more Africa would fit into this vast space.” The anthropologist from the Australian National University takes her audience through lessons in space and time, filling up holes in history. Alternating with the performer and dance professor Carol Brown from the University of Auckland, New Zealand, she presents ‘Beyond the Binary: Indigeneity in Choreographic Practices in the South Pacific’, moderated by choreographer Jochen Roller. Personal biography, academic curiosity, passion for dance, and experience in choreography locate their choreographic practice beyond the concepts labeled as “traditional” and “contemporary”.

Over here, culture moves

“Most people think *indigenous* is something fixed in a place, immobile and static”, says Katerina Teaiwa, naming another preconception of the binary. The adjective “indigenous” is often used to categorise peoples, who according to the ‘UN Working Group for indigenous populations’ are “composed of the existing descendants of the peoples who inhabited the present territory of a country wholly or partially at the time when persons of a different culture or ethnic origin arrived there from other parts of the world, overcame them, by conquest, settlement or other means, reduced them to a non-dominant or colonial condition”. This adjective “indigenous” elevates the life styles, values, symbols, aesthetics and procedures of the people as being the most untainted from any external influence. It is firmly rooted to the place they live, standing as a timeless monolithic monument. Referring to the Pacific region however, Katerina Teaiwa acclaims: “Here culture moves! It is not static. It moves ‘From Hiva to Hiphop’”. She thereby cites the motto of the Festival of Pacific Arts held in 2005 at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington.

Hybrid identities like ‘Fiji-Indians’

The Pacific region or “Oceania” is vast – and was divided into the regions Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. In the process of colonisation and decolonisation, the names of the islands, its ownership and ethnic composition changed over the years. Two World Wars also changed the destiny of the people. The British, French, German and Japanese, also Australians and New Zealanders were the stake holders of exploitation, displacement, deportation and also massacres that took place on these ‘paradise’ islands immortalised in fiction and films. Tropes such as the waving palms and grass skirts keep seducing tourists to the islands.

“How do you dance this relationship between people and place, past and present?” Teaiwa asks. The word “kinship” becomes a key word in her answer. A kinship between islands and main lands, created by migrants who not only migrated to neighboring main lands, like Australia, the United States or New Zealand, but also migrated from one island to another. The migrants seem to have carried a kind of cultural baggage with them when crossing the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean. And the long history of occupation by the colonisers and introduction of sugar cane plantations have led to identifying very unique hybrid identities such as “Fiji-Indians”: Indian migrant dancers singing in Hindi, wearing Fijian costumes, causing an outrage in the racial tensions of the 1800s.

Fluid identities

Katerina Teaiwa, who is of Banaban, Kiribati and African-American descent, presented the work of the Banaban Dancing Group from the island of Kiribati through some footage. She also demonstrated how she was instructed by her dance teacher in Honolulu to “know and dance your landscapes”, locating the dancing body between the ocean (*makei*), mountain side (*manaka*), diamond head (*leahi*) and dry side (*ewa*). “You have to invoke the river, the rainbow, and everything through your dance”, she reported from her lessons, “also palms in the wind and waves of the ocean”. To Teaiwa, dance is “a thing of land” and “an expression of our land”. In her research, she dove into the colonial histories of phosphate mining by the British Phosphate Commission which focused on the export of rock from the Banaban Island – with all its complex relations of mining, shipping of phosphate and the subsequent displacement of the inhabitants. So to Katerina Teaiwa, the Pacific identity is more fluid, like the islands moving across the water. The footage of Banaban dance demonstrated a cultural mix of dance styles, where even traces of Michael Jackson and Bruce Lee can be noticed – and Spanish castanets be heard in the music. When it comes to dance, the myths of the “indigenous” seem to evaporate, just as Banaban phosphate crossed many national borders, fertilising foreign soil. In return, many styles of dancing returned to the island from far away regions, Teaiwa concluded.

The past is in front of you

It is phosphate and the colonial history that bind the work of Katherina Teaiwa and the work of Carol Brown. The latter’s grandfather in 1911 came from Ireland to New Zealand, where he was using the Banaban’s phosphate to fertilise the farm they were living from. When she was a child, her grandfather told her “Don’t talk to the Maori” – communication with people who were seen as indigenous was avoided in the colonial days. Working with indigenous communities today, Brown showed that concepts around time and space are completely different than in the West, for example: “The past is always in front of you”, because “the ancestors are always there”.

Where would you place your results within post-colonial studies? is being asked in the following discussion with the public. The scholars resume: Post-colonial studies always talk about people moving. “But we are saying: our land is moving.” And a last question: In the English language, there is a differentiation between ‘place’ and ‘space’. How would they position their research results in that debate? The scholars shake their heads: In Maori, the word for place also means “space”, but also “body, relationship, past, future”. “For Banaba people, that is their way of being in the world”, concludes Katerina Teaiwa. “We are not hung up by these differences”. How far away from the binary can you get.