

Music of Polynesia: A Guide to Incorporating Music, Dance, and Drumming of Polynesia Into Curricula

Jeremy Kirk



SOUTHWESTERN
COLLEGE

2025 Kansas Music Educators Association Conference



February 28, 2025
Wichita, Kansas

Why Polynesian arts?

Cultural art forms of Polynesia are among the most underrepresented in western curricula. There are many misconceptions of these art forms (especially Hawaiian hula and Samoan siva afi) and misinterpretations of music and language. Providing students with the correct foundational knowledge of these art forms and culture will strengthen students' global citizenship while providing *malama* (protection/care) and *kuleana* (responsibility) to the beautiful cultures of Polynesia.

Benefits

- Strengthen global citizenship
- *Malama* (protect) and *ho'omau* (perpetuate) culture
- Positive physical effects – cardiovascular and strength/muscle improvement as well as similar effects of yoga and meditation
- Illustrates teamwork and celebrates diversity to create a healthy community
- Fun!

Hula Kahiko

- Pre-contact hula
- Originally a warrior's dance
- Often told stories of battle as well as honoring akua (gods) and ali'i (chiefs)
- Instruments:
 - Pahu (sharkskin drum)
 - Puni'u (coconut shell drum strapped to leg)
 - Ipu heke (double gourd)

Hula 'Auana

- Post-contact hula
- Often tells stories of places, people, nature, etc.
- Influenced by western contact (ukulele, guitar, harmonies)
- Instruments:
 - Ipu heke
 - Ukulele
 - Guitars
 - Keyboards/Piano



Pahu



Puniu



Ipu heke

Fundamental hula steps covered in this session

- Kaholo
- Hela
- Ami
- Uwehe
- Kawelu

Language basics

13 letter alphabet

5 vowels:

A

E

I

O

U

7 consonants

H

K

L

M

N

P

W

1 glottal stop

' (okina)

OLI MAHALO
(trans. Jeremy Kirk)

UHOLA 'IA KA MAKALOA LA

To spread forth, open up the fine quality mat

PU 'AI I KE ALOHA LA

Exchange/share as aloha

KUKA'I 'IA KA HA LOA LA

Exchange as greetings

PAWEHI MAI NA LEHUA

To honor and adorn with the lehua flower

MAI KA HO 'OKU'I A KA HALAWAI LA

From east to west; sunrise to sunset (we are discoverers, navigators, take care of our 'aina)

MAHALO, O E NA AKUA

We thank our creators

MAHALO O E NA KUPUNA LA, EA

We thank our beloved ancestors

MAHALO ME KE ALOHA LA

We thank you with love

MAHALO ME KE ALOHA LA


We thank you with love

Score

Oli Mahalo

trans. Jeremy Kirk

Voice



U ho la i a ka ma ka loa a la Pu ai ke a lo ha la

5



Ku ka i i a ka ha loa a la Pa we hi ma i na le hu a

9




Mai ka ho o ku i a ka ha la wa i la Ma ha lo o e na a ku a Ma

13



ha lo o e na ku pu na la e a Ma ha lo me ke a lo ha la Ma

17



ha lo me ke a lo ha la

Tahitian Drumming

Rhythms of Tahiti are some of the most complex found anywhere in the world. The complexity and speed are due to traditional Tahitian dances. One of the most notable dances is the tamure. The tamure is characterized by fast, hip-shaking movements.

The heart of a Tahitian drum ensemble are the toere (log drums). The toere combine to create polyrhythms that interlock and help convey the excitement and complexity of the dance.

Typical Tahitian drums found in an ensemble are:

- Toere (log drum)
- Fa'atete ("running" or "rolling" high pitch skin drums); also called Fa'akete, or Pa'u Mango.
- Pahu Tupai (hand drum with skin head that adds padding and rhythm; played standing); also called Pahu Rima
- Pahu (bass drum); also called Pa'u, or Tariparau

While most cultures do not separate drumming and dancing, Tahitian drumming has evolved to be performed outside of dancing. The complex rhythms and performance skills are often showcased as an ensemble in festivals and competitions throughout Tahiti and other areas of Polynesia (and some in California).



Samoa Siva Afi (Fire Dance)

Historically, knife dancing (without fire) has roots in ancient Samoan traditions and has associations with ritual, ceremonial, festive, and victorious occasions. The ancient dance that is the genesis for the modern fireknife tradition is a dance called the ailao. The ailao dance was a warrior's ceremonial ritual after battle victories and utilized agile spinning, throwing, catching, and other flashy displays with a wooden club to demonstrate his battle prowess to the community.

The modern dance has undergone many choreography adaptations to become better suited for entertainment, but the element of war from the ancient tradition still has an undeniable presence in the modern version. The ancient weapon of choice was a wooden knife or nifo'oti (deadly tooth or cutting tooth). This war implement was made by tying a wild boar's tooth to the end of a carved handle made from hard ifelele wood. Modern fire knife implements are not made of wood but of steel, and it is believed that whalers introduced the metal blade into the islands. The whaling blade had a hook on the end that had gruesome usefulness for both the whalers and the ancient warring Samoans. Many years later, the hook made the addition of fire and the connection of two blades possible.

With Siva Afi drumming, the goal is to establish mood, set tempo, and support each dance movement. Movements might include knife lighting, slow ritual-like gestures, random swipes, acrobatic positions, tosses, one knife spinning, group dances, spinning with two conjoined knives, and other elements. Certain drumbeats work well with certain movements but it should be understood that the beat/movement marriage is not standardized. Some combinations are simply more frequently used.

Instruments:

Apa (tini)

- Tin can
- Loud & rowdy, yet shimmering tone, which is acquired through burning
- Mouth of can faces audience
- Lead drummer is usually apa player; Lead drummers set tempo, signal transitions w/ vocal shouts (hey!), signals beginning & end of a routine

Pate

- Log drum
- Predominantly a filler instrument
- Supports lead and gives substance to shallow sound of apa
- Can play same lead part, underscore the lead part with 16th notes, or subtle improvisations based on 16th notes

Bass Drum

- Contemporary; not part of original fire knife drumming, but is now integral
- Defines the pulse, provides heartbeat and supportive energy.
- Typically positioned vertically on a stand so that the bottom head can resonate.
- Very aggressive playing

SPECIAL THANKS



Internationally recognized percussionist, educator, composer, and ethnomusicologist, Jeremy Kirk is Associate Professor of Music at Southwestern College (Winfield, KS). Recipient of the Southwestern College Exemplary Professor of the Year Award, Kirk is deeply committed to providing students the skills necessary to excel in today's world as an educator, performer, and global citizen. Highly regarded and in demand for his expertise in arts and culture of Polynesia, he combines his traditional training in Western percussion with his extensive knowledge in world music to create a unique global perspective in his teaching and performing. Kirk is an artist and clinician with Majestic Percussion, Mapex Drums, Vic Firth Sticks & Mallets, Sabian Cymbals, Remo Drumheads & World Percussion, and Black Swamp Percussion. To learn more about and connect with Kirk, please visit www.jkpercussion.com