

COMIC THEATER IN SAMOA AS INDIGENOUS MEDIA

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Through media like that of play, society is enabled to comment to itself about its own routine conditions of existence, their values and their contradictions. . . . Following Bateson (1972), the epistemological assumption here is that all of the *information which a viable social unit requires for its survival* is not communicated through everyday, routine channels of information-transmission. Instead, such information may be communicated through the reality and *media of myth, ritual, art, dance, music*, and so forth. *Play* is one such medium which carries reflective messages to the self.

--Don Handelman, 1982 (emphasis added)

A work of art is a crossroads; the number of paths that meet in it seems to me to be closely related to the work's artistic value.

--Milan Kundera, 1991

As a poet and storyteller of Samoan-American descent, I see my own work as being essentially about convergences. Art, politics, culture, history: mapping the crossroads where those paths intersect in my own metaphysical backyard is one version of the story I tell myself about what it is that I actually *do* for a living. With complete sympathy for *Homo erectus*, Richard Pryor's primordial "dude" (black, of course) arising from the primal muck, for the first time standing upright to have a look around--I scratch my head and ponder the ancient questions: Who am I? Where am I? and How do I get to Detroit?

The process of posing such elemental questions has led me, by a number of back roads and disreputable cowpaths, to the present inquiry. As in Borges's marvelous story, "Garden of the Forking Paths," each track has continued opening onto yet another, years passing in the meanwhile, until the present moment when I find myself sitting at a desk in Samoa thinking about traditional folk comedies. In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) lyrically traces the polyphonous chorus of folk humor along its carnivalesque romp through the thicket of medieval European church and state. Victor Turner (1982) explores the multivocality of African Ndembu ritual and performance. Bradd Shore (1977) recounts a hilarious parody of Prince Philip's visit to Samoa forever memorialized by a couple of cheeky Samoan clowns. Having prowled down one and another such intriguing avenues of inquiry over the years, I repeatedly find myself emerging at a crossroads and bumping unceremoniously into folk comedy. It is at that now-familiar intersection then, at least in my own tilted geography, where many of the paths in question appear to entwine: where art and politics rub elbows with culture and history, while waiting for the light to change.

There is a saying I have heard more than once about Samoans being the "politicians of the Pacific." A bright young anthropologist from Korea tells me of her abiding appreciation for Pacific islanders, because "they can joke about anything, even serious matters." Epeli Hau'ofa (1988) celebrates this comic gift in an anecdote about Tongans telling funny stories while a hurricane does its best to relieve them of the roof over their heads. As a Pacific islander myself, such observations from perspectives both "outside" and within Oceanic cultures strike a clear chord that resonates with my own experience. It is in a patch of that fertile terrain then, where a confluence of comic art and politics enrich the soils of culture and history, that I would like to linger awhile in this essay.

A notable misconception lurking about is that Pacific islanders have no indigenous tradition of theatrical performance. This uninformed notion has recently been dismantled and formally corrected by Vilsoni Hereniko (1990) in his doctoral thesis on the subject. A gifted clown himself (and distinguished playwright to boot), Hereniko ably demonstrates and documents the present vitality of indigenous theater throughout the insular Pacific. Like contemporary theater anywhere in the world, Pacific regional theater is essentially rooted in traditional forms of dramatic performance, including ritual and farce. And, as Hereniko points out in this volume and elsewhere, the link between politics and theater is intrinsic.

Why Comedy?

A case in point is traditional Samoan comedy.¹ While Samoan culture abounds with various types of comic presentations, most of which are expressed in song and dance, this essay will showcase *fale aitu* (literally, house of spirits), as the most formalized of the humorous performance genres. These satirical sketches serve a variety of purposes in Samoan society. Entertainment and play, informal vehicles of social control and ritual perhaps--their dimensions are manifold, but those are other stories for other times. What I would like to explore here are certain particular ways in which the sketches serve as modes of communication, which hum with political undertones, in contemporary Samoan society. My intention in this essay is to inquire and reflect, rather than to assert or contend. I therefore invoke the postmodern spirit of *bricolage* in serving up this pastiche of echoes and giggles. For, as Barbara Babcock points out, the “oldest forms of literary criticism were the dialogue and the *satura*. The Roman *satura* (a plate of mixed fruit) was the traditional vehicle for literary as well as social criticism and consisted of a mixture of genres, prose, and verse, and inversive parodies. It is from this as well as the word *satyr* that *satire* derives” (1984:105).

An apocryphal definition of theater as a “community talking to itself about itself” may serve at the outset as a useful conceptual frame for our discussion. This idea posits two key suppositions about theater in general: (1) that theater is in fact a form of communication--something is being communicated by the playwright and players to the audience; and (2) that that same “something” is being communicated by the playwright and players to themselves, in the process of making theater. In a social/psychological sense, we might describe this same process as a dialogue between self and other. The players are self; the audience is other. However, since together both groups make up the larger community, we might from that larger perspective say that what we have here is the community talking to itself, so to speak.

In order to gain a singular degree of understanding about any human community, one does well to consider its theater and to pose three apparently simple questions. What is being said? Why? And, What difference does it make? In the spirit of that claim, I undertake now to address those questions to traditional Samoan comedy as practiced today. I will suggest that, generally speaking, *fale aitu* represents a particular type of communication that functions, among other things, to help bridge a historical gap between a cultural past and present, a cultural self and other. But first, a brief introduction to the form itself.

Into the Fun-House of Culture

Fale aitu are satirical sketches that commonly serve as interludes between sets of songs and dances in a traditional program of entertainment or "concert" (*koniseti*) among Samoans. Improvisation plays a major role in the performance of these skits, which are orally Composed, rehearsed, and presented by a small troupe of amateur actors.² These comics, usually younger untitled men,³ are informally trained by an older, more experienced comedian who often composes and directs the skits as well. Caricature, hyperbole, and satire characterize plots that often turn on the ridicule of authority figures. In the sketches, normative status roles are reversed: the high are made low and the world momentarily "turned upside down," as found in carnival traditions elsewhere.

Performances generally occur at night, outdoors on the village green, unless rain drives the festivities under cover in the communal meeting-house. Produced by one or more village organizations to raise funds for local projects, the concerts consist of songs and dances drawn from both traditional and contemporary repertoires. Following every four or five, numbers, the comedians take the floor with some irreverent sketch that charges the air with gleeful hooting and howling laughter from the audience. Performers' families and friends show public support by approaching the performance area with donations after their kin's act.

In addition to the village context, an entire performing group may travel to other villages, islands, and countries nowadays to raise money for church, school, and other village needs. In recent years, one of the most popular features of independence celebrations in Western Samoa is a national *fale aitu* contest. Radio and television crews from Western and American Samoa regularly tape these performances for broadcast to enthusiastic audiences during the rest of the year.⁴

Many of the earliest accounts of Samoan culture contain descriptions of formal traveling parties (*malaga*), which often featured extravagant concerts including the popular clown shows. Such elaborate visiting parties were frequently mounted for the purpose of negotiating the marriage of chiefly offspring, or otherwise establishing political alliances. Thus, a frequent and important performance context for the *fale aitu* was such explicitly political occasions. In the modern context of the traveling party cum benefit concert, that political interest has become more implicit perhaps, although still very much alive in the form of reciprocal exchange of hospitality and resources. And, as always, marital and other important alliances may well be forged on such occasions.

As might be expected in a society where values of decorum and rank reign supreme, the dynamics of hierarchical relations typically comprise a major theme in the sketches. Thus, the performances discussed below are considered in the cultural context that informs their meaning and relevance for Samoans. (Working titles are my own; otherwise skits are untitled.)

“Mr. Reagan”

Sometimes, political themes in the sketches are explicitly drawn through the parody of particular figures. In 1987, for example, “Mr. Ronald Reagan” was featured in a skit performed by a traveling party from Western Samoa to New Zealand, the adopted home of a sizeable Samoan community. Essentially, the piece presented Reagan, “the man running America and Germany,” as an inarticulate dolt, whose halting gibberish is gaily and hilariously mistranslated by a smooth-talking “interpreter.”

Interpreter: And now we’ll try to explain and tell you all about the progress of these two countries. I’m going to translate into Samoan what he has to say for he is a true American born at Solosolo village!

Reagan: I want to speak. What do you mean? Just fine--

Interpreter: His excellency is happy, because he was escorted here by government motorcycles. And now he wants a bottle of Rum X. . . . It is difficult for him, the situation as it is now. The cost of living is extra high! . . . this must be blamed on his administration. He says our country must try to be self-reliant!

. . .

The prevailing joke here turns on the caricature of an important political figure. By initially neutralizing the mystique of the famous visitor through the claim that he is Samoan-born, the comics in effect appropriate this symbolic other into a familiar context where his status can then be reinscribed according to local standards. Then there is the double-edged parody that mimics Reagan’s halting speech on the one hand and insults him on the other, through mistranslation. The total effect of the comic treatment is to reverse the status of dignitary and subordinates. In the classic mode of folk comedy, we witness the high being made low, however momentarily, on the stage.

In the early 1970s, what may be a prototype for this sketch was performed, satirizing the visit of Britain's Prince Philip to Western Samoa. In Shore's perceptive account (1977), we see the royal visitor being lampooned in a similar fashion by a combination of mimicry, hilarious mistranslation, and insulting commentary about the royal personage. A significant footnote from that "clown show," in Shore's term, concerns a particular phrase, "people's nation" (*malo pipo*), extravagantly repeated by the prince in his speech. The phrase surfaces as a kind of centerpiece in a later sketch, discussed below; moreover, it has now passed into the vernacular to connote the clownish, impotent dialogue of posturing officials or any other foolhardy group: a kind of wry Samoan equivalent of Shakespeare's adage, "much ado about nothing."

"The People's Government (or Nation)"

The "people's nation" could well be the inspiration for the later, more well-known skit, this one featuring an extended debate in the Samoan parliament, whose illustrious members are portrayed as various parts of a human body.⁵ The issue at hand is a concerted effort by various members to eject a colleague, Stomach, for his troublesome behavior. Forehead complains that he suffers "a lot each day . . . I think hard all the time trying to find where to secure some food for this guy, Stomach. And here and now I propose that Stomach be removed from the nation." The two female members, Teeth and Nose, likewise declare their disgust at all they have to ingest and inhale to please "this guy Stomach," a "useless" character who does little more than "sit and lie around." Ear and Eyes are also fed up with Stomach's demand for eternal vigilance in the quest for the next meal. After Eyes points out some prominent examples of the culprit seated in the audience, the group decides on clemency: instead of removal, they will simply stop the food supply. When someone notices that the legs have ceased to function, alarm spreads, and the body decides to reconsider.

The sketch is essentially a parody of the Samoan parliament in which bombast and empty rhetoric are thought by many to be all too common, especially with the recent practice of broadcasting legislative sessions on national radio. When interviewed, several consultants, especially among the Western-educated Samoans in the capital, wryly dismissed the ludicrous posturing of certain parliamentary leaders as self-serving at best. Such discomfort among the electorate with the public presentations of legislators can be understood on one level as a kind of "con/fusion" between two essentially distinct forms of political

organization. In the parliamentary structure, on the one hand, we have a Western notion of centralized governance and nationhood. In the traditional chiefly system, on the other, we have an indigenous practice based on decentralized, situationally aligned clan groups. One way of reading the skit as political text is to take the parliament as factional body politic writ small. When the individual members finally acknowledge that they simply cannot exist without Stomach, the necessity for acting on behalf of the “common good” can be realized. In a sense, the plot recapitulates a conceptual shift, however reluctant and tricky, from provincialism to nationalism. Here, comic energy lies in the difficulty and tensions of such a shift, the lurching process of adjusting to another way of being in one’s self and in relation to others.

Although there are notable similarities between this sketch and the foregoing ones targeting particular individuals, here the comic “spotlight” appears to shift somewhat from the individual to the systemic. In the neocolonial context of Samoa at the present time, a compelling issue is the matter of negotiating a social landscape whose cultural, political, and ethical boundaries have become ambiguous, contested territory. As Western cultural systems continue to permeate the soil of social life in Samoa, countless points of cross-cultural difference and tension continually crop up. Basic institutions--politics, medicine, education, religion, economics--appear as weird clumps of stunted, misshapen growths jutting from the altered ground. Comic sketches highlight the cracks and fissures of that social topography with satire and wit: the artful pun, a well-placed twitch, a Samoan Elvis singing about the sorry sight of Christian ministers squabbling over the most prestigious cuts of roast pig. Tectonic plates of social order have shifted beneath our feet; and traditional comedy is a plank bridge flung across the rifts and faultlines of that only half-familiar terrain.

While the performances noted above feature politics in the leading role, more often than not political themes simply (and perpetually) lurk in the wings. In fact, the essence of *fale aitu* is political, its very fabric being woven from the fibers of social commentary. Another recent sketch illustrates the more characteristic voice of folk comedy, with its shadowy inflections and bawdy chorus laying down a steady undertone of social critique.⁶ The scene takes place in a Western-style medical clinic for postnatal mothers and their infants, where several “women” and their new “babies” (played by coltish, pubescent boys) await their turn with the doctor. The story basically turns on the abusive “bedside manner” of the autocratic doctor, which eventually inspires a minor rebellion among the disaffected mothers.

“Nursing Mothers”

Between interviews with each mother, doctor and nurse sing a chorus pointing out that the doctor is present “to inspect the children and see whether the parents have obeyed his orders concerning their health.” One mother, Mrs. Onion, describes her baby’s symptoms as headache, “dizzy feet,” and “things growing all over the body.” The doctor retorts:

You know why this happens? It’s because you spend all your time gossiping from one family to another, leaving the baby alone where he eats stale coconuts. . . . So the thing to do is for you to get coconut wood to scrape the baby’s body once in the mornings and once in the evenings daily.

The next mother, Mrs. Brick, reports that her daughter was born with a “very thin stomach.” After establishing that the infant’s stomach sounds like a chainsaw and that she has malnutrition, the doctor stoutly announces his prescription: three teaspoonfuls of “weed killer chemical” each day. Two more medical consultations follow in the same vein, with one remedy calling for the use of a wooden axe handle, and another using dirt as an ointment. By this time, the disgruntled mothers have begun to threaten the doctor with a dose of his own medicine, and the piece hurriedly ends (presumably sidestepping a rout) with a final duet by doctor and nurse. Their song blames parental neglect as the cause of their children’s illnesses and exhorts parents to “wake up” and join the medical team as “soldiers of the nation of Christ, so the children may live healthily!”

While the mothers’ lack of sophistication is gently caricatured, the real satirical ammunition is leveled at the doctor and his brutal inanities. He is epitomized as arrogant, bullying, and ignorant--a figure whose ludicrous prescriptions are anything but therapeutic. Here, ironic inversion has him dispensing poison and violence instead of healing. Another level of comic reversal is articulated through the mothers’ sarcastic retorts to the doctor. On being advised to “stroke” her child’s head with an axe handle, one mother angrily replies, “What do you think, this is a breadfruit? You stupid! This is not a breadfruit!” When another mother is told to anoint her child with dirt, she retaliates, “How about if I bring dirt to rub you with?” In the context of social convention, the reversal is one of status in which the normative deference owed to doctors is turned to scorn by the angry women. Here, the high social status customarily enjoyed by medical professionals is under-

cut by the doctor's idiotic pretensions. In the classic mode of *fale aitu*, precisely such pretension and hypocrisy are the ultimate targets of ridicule.

A better-known sketch with a similar theme presents a parody of a surgical operation performed with carpentry tools, a large saw and hammer in place of scalpel and anesthetic.⁷ The piece, performed in the mid-1970s, employs similar comic techniques of slapstick, exaggeration, and reversal to achieve a burlesque of Western-style medical care. The patient's family attempt to intervene in the alarming procedure and are forcibly subdued by the surly medical team. Comic tension arises from the stark contrast of traditional and Western healing methods implicit in the satire. Where the former is more modestly marked by intimacy, massage, and active family participation, the latter touts its technological sophistication: members of the medical team appear to be hermetically sealed by mask, gown, gloves, and hauteur; they are safely distanced from the patient's family, who by contrast are portrayed as unruly, uncouth specimens. Here also, satire inverts normative status roles; the mocking of the medical team's skill and technological superiority turns political advantage on its head, however momentarily. They are portrayed as inhuman: automatons disguised as healers.

Why Satire?

As communication of a singular nature, the comedies publicly express collective concerns in a manner not possible in any other traditional medium (with the exception of one song form). Tensions inherent in hierarchical relations can be aired publicly through clowning and thus conveyed in a nonthreatening fashion to authority figures by the vehicle of folk comedy. From the sketches discussed here, for example, one might accurately infer a certain ambivalence or disaffection with the status quo. Many people are acutely dissatisfied with the self-serving, arbitrary exercise of power demonstrated by certain government officials; people are not entirely happy with the treatment they receive in neocolonial hospitals. These tensions, however, are traditionally denied direct expression and resolution by a powerful cultural sanction prescribing deference to authority. Such social criticism, then, must seek expression elsewhere: in satire, for example, a medium uniquely suited to the task, cloaking protest as it does with humor. Admittedly, such a transmission of information is largely implicit in nature: its modality is that of the proverb or folktale. Among other delights, it offers a "word to the wise."

Oblique as it can be as communication, however, traditional comedy has managed to survive into the complexities of this century. In the modern context of Samoa's colonial history, for example, traditional equations governing hierarchical relationships, among others, have been profoundly complicated by the imposition of a foreign cultural matrix onto the indigenous one. Now what we have is the grid of Western cultural and political authority overlaid onto the traditional social structure. Instead of one "boss," in a sense we have two. In the mere 150 years since Christian missionaries introduced writing into a culture several thousand years old, Samoa has been force-fed the fruits of the entire history of Western technological development. From the oral tradition to computers, from outrigger canoes to 747s, the sheer volume and speed of change is itself phenomenal. And with the overwhelming proliferation of cultural values and practices from the West since colonization, it is difficult to maintain a balanced perspective of potential benefits versus disadvantages arising from the emerging order. In the face of such rapid and bewildering changes in the social landscape, one can certainly imagine the challenge of articulating a discomfort that begins to feel both inevitable and overwhelming at the same time. The comedies then, provide a platform and vehicle by which such amorphous but pervasive concerns can be expressed with impunity to the powers-that-be.

That impunity, the unbridled license of the clown, derives from the conceptual framework of comedy, which communicates the metamesage (in Bateson's term [1972]) that "this is only play" or "I am only joking." This protective frame operates somewhat like a permeable membrane, in which two organic systems are both separated and connected at the same time. The past, a traditional culture, customary values, a familiar self are bounded and thus distinguished; they are declared, reinforced, and valued in contradistinction with the present, with a hybridized culture, eclectic and often opposing values, and a nonfamiliar self or other. Samoan comedy then, is like a cultural membrane--bounding, separating, negotiating differences. Like traditional clowning aesthetics elsewhere, it is an attempt, in Barbara Babcock's words, "to translate and interpret between worlds and to establish a dialogue between the knowns and the unknowns, be they present and past, self and other, or science and art" (1982:201).

NOTES

The original data for this essay are based on performances and rehearsals of traditional comedies, personal interviews, and observations recorded over fifteen years, from 1973 to

1988, in several villages of Western Samoa. This research was supported by grants from the East-West Center, the Ford Foundation, Fulbright-Hays Foundation, and facilitated by logistical support from the National University of Samoa and the Department of Rural and Economic Development (Ofisa o le Pulenu'u) of Western Samoa; the Folk Arts Program of the American Samoa Council for Arts, Culture, and Humanities; and residents of 'Upolu, Savai'i, and Tutuila islands.

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A seminal and much abbreviated form of this essay, with the same title, was delivered in 1991 at the Seventeenth Pacific Science Congress in Honolulu, Hawaii?.

1. For purposes of this essay, I use the following terms interchangeably: "clown, comic, comedian" to denote comic actor; and "sketch, skit, comedy, clown show" for *fale aitu*.
2. With rare exceptions, like that of Petelo, Samoa's most famous "comedian" (now living in southern California and performing primarily for Samoan audiences), comics tend to work at ordinary jobs such as farming, fishing, or driving village buses.
3. In general, women do not perform in *fale aitu* in mixed company, although there are occasional exceptions. Elsewhere I discuss this gender difference in more detail (Sinavaiana 1992a, 1992b). In field interviews, a majority of consultants, both male and female, remarked that the dignified status of women made it inappropriate for them to clown in *fale aitu* because of the typically risqué nature of the sketches.
4. While videotaping performances at Western Samoa Flag Day in Apia 1988, I met another Samoan also filming the skits; he reported doing so at the explicit request of his extended family back in Los Angeles.
Another interesting note here is the "metaframing" at work through broadcast of the comedies. To recast a perspective mentioned earlier, we might read this text as a community watching/listening to itself "talking to itself."
5. This version was performed in American Samoa around 1973 by a group of secondary school students from Western Samoa as part of a fund-raising concert for their school. KVZK-TV in Pago Pago filmed the event.
6. I saw this sketch done as a rehearsal in Lalomauga, Western Samoa, in 1988. As usual, the rehearsal drew a small crowd of appreciative onlookers, the occasion for an impromptu social gathering providing a ready-made, informal audience.
7. More detailed description and analysis of that skit, which I call "The Operation," appear elsewhere (Sinavaiana 1992a, 1992b).