
SHORTER COMMUNICATION

TONGAN CLUB ICONOGRAPHY: AN ATTEMPT TO UNRAVEL VISUAL METAPHORS THROUGH MYTH

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Many Tongan clubs are covered with incised geometric patterns, as well as carvings of animals, plants and humans figures. Small inlaid circles, stars, crescents and stylised birds carved from whale ivory were sometimes set into the shafts and heads of these weapons, displaying excellent craftsmanship. Although Tongan clubs were most frequently collected during the late 18th and early 19th centuries,¹ information about their intricate iconography is scarce. While early explorers, missionaries and adventurers commented on their decorations and use (e.g., Forster 2000:238, Martin 1981:359), information concerning the meaning of the geometrical or figurative designs on the clubs, regrettably, was not gathered. To shed some light on these carved, wooden pieces of Tongan visual history, analogies have been suggested between the carved patterns of the clubs and other forms of Tongan surface marking, such as tattoos or barkcloth designs (e.g., Kaeppler 1978:273, 1999:33). However, the meanings of Tongan club designs as signs and symbols remain obscure. In this article I attempt to unravel some naturalistic design motifs used on Tongan clubs. In so doing, I first gained a general picture of the most common motifs found on these weapons by examining the Tongan clubs held in several ethnographical museums located in The Netherlands, as well as studying the numerous images of clubs found in books and catalogues about Tongan culture, history and especially art. During this research I began to develop some ideas and interpretations about their symbolic meaning, and to explore the question of whether there is a possible relationship between some specific carved anthropomorphic and animal figures on these clubs and certain images and elements of Tongan mythology.

Interpretive Problems

A large number of the Tongan clubs collected during late 18th and early 19th centuries are still held in museums and private collections all over the world. But, whether on display or in storage, their collection histories and origins are rarely documented. Consequently, when writing about these clubs and their decoration it is difficult to specify their historical context. In his pioneering study *Club Types of Nuclear Polynesia*, William Churchill (1917) discussed many of the different human and animal figures incised on clubs. Several of his interpretations illustrate some of the difficulties one encounters when studying Tongan club designs. In the case of the lizard, for example, Churchill (1917:139) proposed that this figure might be more

than mere decoration because the lizard carried an element of luck, good or bad, in Tonga. Indeed, several animals in Tonga were somehow related to the spirit world (see Collocott 1921). According to Buck (1935:51): “Movements of living things were thus interpreted to indicate whether or not the individual person or group would be successful in a particular quest”, and “Usually movements in the same direction were favourable while movements in the opposite direction were unfavourable.” Therefore, if warriors saw a lizard running along the path with them, it was a sign of victory, but if the lizard crossed their path, they would turn back. From this, Churchill (1917:140) concluded, it might have been highly significant that a lizard incised on a particular club was carved in the direct thrust-line of the club. This may be true, but on a Tongan club in the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam a lizard is carved at right angles to the thrust-line of the club (Fig. 1). It may be that it should not really matter in which direction a lizard on a club is carved, for if we reason in the same way Churchill did, it would always symbolise bad luck for future enemies and good luck for the owner of the club itself. However, since the context of when a club was collected and from which of the Tongan islands is unknown, any remarks about lizards and clubs are speculative.

A similar problem arises with the description of human motifs incised upon clubs. The club in Figure 2, for example, has two persons standing next to each other. According to Churchill (1917:148), the figure with an arc above its head is carrying a club in one hand and a two-pronged weapon in the other hand. Churchill proposed three interpretations regarding this typical head ornament. One interpretation was that it is a large turban as worn by Fijian warriors; the second that it is the decorative headpiece as worn by Samoans, marked at the front by projections that also give the headpiece its radiant effect; and the third that it represented “the impromptu employment of one side of the tip of the coconut-leaf slit down the stalk and tied around the head from the crown to the occiput in such way as to cause the leaflets to stand forth like rays” (Churchill 1917:143). The figure standing next to the figure with the arc above its head is described by Churchill (1917:147) as a person with a missile club in each hand. Because of Churchill’s interpretations, most authors referring to

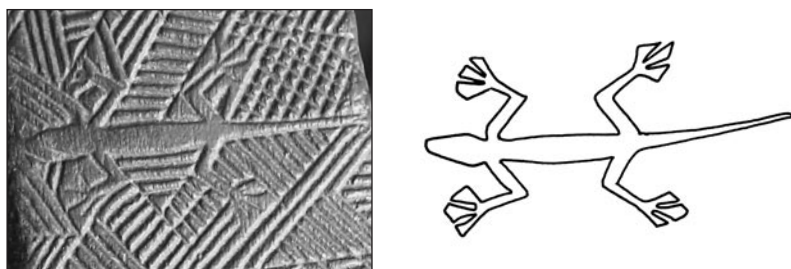


Figure 1. A lizard carved at right angles to the thrust-line of the club. Detail of a Tongan club, Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, A-1640. (Photograph: Frans-Karel Weener. Courtesy of Royal Tropical Institute Amsterdam.)



Figure 2. A common motif found on Tongan clubs are these two figures standing next to each other. According to Churchill, these men are warriors with weapons in either hand, ready for battle. Fragment of a Tongan club, Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, A-1640. (Photograph: Frans-Karel Weener. Courtesy of Royal Tropical Institute Amsterdam.)

these two figures describe them as “figures holding weapons” or “two warriors” (e.g., Buck [Te Rangi Hiroa] 1930:611, Campbell 1997:3, St Cartmail 1997:128). But according to Kaeppler (1999:30, 47, 65), the semicircular headpiece represents a feathered headdress, worn only by the highest chiefs, which “formed a semicircle over the forehead that stood out some eighteen inches”. Thus, Kaeppler concluded that this particular figure could represent the Tu‘i Tonga himself and that the person next to him does not hold a missile club in each hand but carries two fans (Kaeppler 1999:30). How can these two interpretations of what is visibly carved on the clubs be judged? Are these two men carrying weapons ready for battle, or a high Tongan chief with a servant to fan him? The question of the lizard’s direction, or of Churchill’s warriors versus Kaeppler’s Tu‘i Tonga, are clear illustrations of how difficult it is to determine what it is one actually sees when looking at these particular engravings incised on Tongan clubs.

Representations of Myth and Constellations

Apart from stand-alone or singular representations of men, birds and fish, Tongan club carvings depict humans in action. The club shown in Figure 3 has an incision of a human and an enormous bird. The wings of this stylised bird are sharply hooked, and its tail and beak are exceptionally long, while its head and legs are absent. It looks as if the human figure with both hands is holding on to the beak or neck of this creature.² This particular motif is found on a number of Tongan clubs and, although they differ slightly from each other, they all show the same specific features (see Figs 4 and 5). It is very likely that this carved motif depicts a certain episode of Tongan mythology, recorded by Gifford about the Ma’afu twins and the origin of the Magellan Clouds.³ According to the myth, the father of these twins was a great chief, Ma’afu, living at Vaini in Tongatapu and their mother was a huge lizard. The lizard mother named her sons Ma’afutoka and Ma’afulele. Even though in appearance, shape and size the twins resembled human beings, they were in fact the very incarnation of mischief, and the people of Vaini were afraid of them. Ma’afu, therefore, was determined to

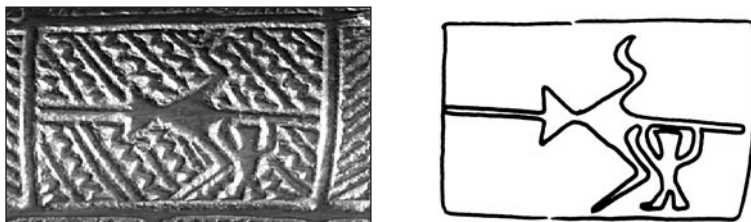


Figure 3. Incised motif of a human holding onto an enormous bird. This particular engraving is a common motif found on Tongan (war) clubs. Private collection. (Photograph: Michel Thieme. Courtesy of A. Pieters.)

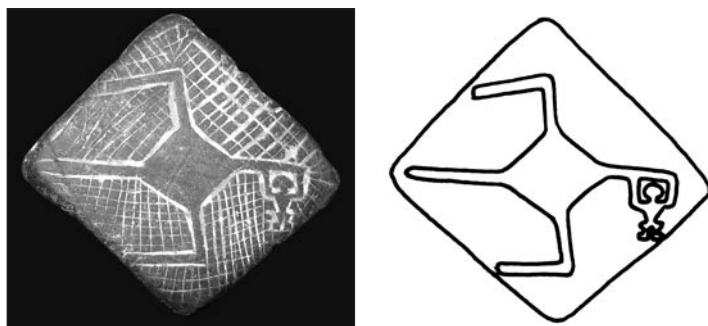


Figure 4. The motif of a man holding onto a giant bird engraved on top of a Tongan club. The sharply hooked wings, long tail and beak of this bird are typical of this motif. This particular carving is filled with white lime cement so that it stands out in marked contrast to the dark wood of the club. National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden (1877-5). (Photograph: Frans-Karel Weener. Courtesy of National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden.)

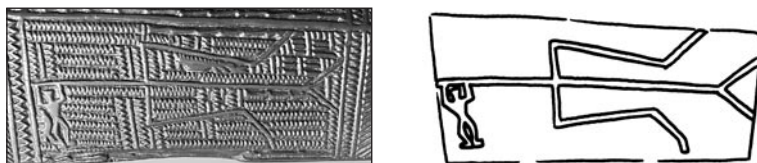


Figure 5. In this exceptionally fine example of Tongan craftsmanship, the bird incised upon this club has been reduced to a few lines. Private Collection. (Photograph: Michel Thieme. Courtesy of Michel Thieme.)

get rid of his sons, but in such a manner that he would not appear to be behind the deed. With this end in view, Ma'afu called the boys to him and told them that he wanted them to fetch him some water from a specific water-hole. He did not tell them that there was a huge duck living there and that people fetching water from this place never returned. As soon as they reached their destination, Ma'afulele waded into the water-hole, but before he had reached the middle, he heard a rushing sound like a roaring wind. Looking up, he saw a huge duck making straight for him. With admirable dexterity, he reached up and caught the bird by the neck as it was flew low over him. He swung it around until it was dead. The boys returned with the duck to their father in Vaini. Next morning, however, Ma'afu sent the boys away again to another water-hole from which they were to bring him water. Ma'afu did not tell them that in this water-hole lived a huge triggerfish. But again, the twins caught the threatening animal. When Ma'afu saw his sons returning with the water and the fish, he lost all patience and told them the truth. When Ma'afutoka and Ma'afulele realised what their father's feelings were towards them, they took the duck and the fish and went up to the sky to live there: "The two dark openings seen in the Milky Way are called *Ma'afulele* and *Ma'afutoka*. There are also two clusters of stars called *Toloa* (duck) and *Humu* (fish). This is the origin of *Ma'afulele* and *Ma'afutoka* (the Magellan Clouds)" (Gifford 1924:108).

Knowing this myth, one can easily recognise Ma'afulele killing the giant duck by catching its neck, as it is depicted on a Tongan club at the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) in St. Petersburg (Fig. 6).

On the same club there is an engraving of three people sitting in a canoe (Fig. 7). The two figures in the middle of the canoe appear to be holding hands. Note that the person to the left, holding a paddle in the right hand, is considerably smaller than the other two figures. This gives the impression that there are two adults and one child sitting in the canoe. This idea is supported by a narrative relating the origin of the reef Matahina, a myth recorded by Collocott (1921, 1922) and Gifford (1924). This myth tells the story of a man and his wife and their daughter Hina. Hina's father caught a little shark and gave it to his daughter. Hina put the shark in a pool ashore where she looked after it. But when the sea flooded the pool, the shark swam to the open sea.

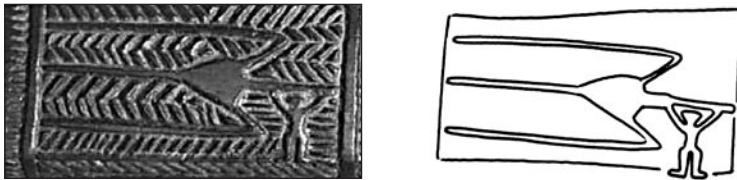


Figure 6. *Ma'afulele* who has just caught a giant duck by its neck. Fragment of a Tongan club at the Kunstkamera in St. Petersburg (MAE collection number 736-256). This particular club was collected on Tonga in 1777 during Cook's third Pacific voyage. (Photograph: Courtesy of Kunstkamera St. Petersburg.)

Hina was inconsolable at the loss of her favourite, and started off to seek it, with her parents, rowing three in the canoe. When the shark was at length discovered out at sea, *Hina*, in order to remain near her pet, jumped into the water and became a reef. Her parents set out on their return but, unwilling to leave their daughter, they leapt into the sea, and became two rocks. The three-oared canoe flew up into the sky and became part of the constellation of Orion. (Collocott 1921:238)

Gifford collected two myths about the origin of the reef *Matahina*, one of which was recorded on Foa Island of the Ha'apai Island group. In this variant is the following explanation about *Hina*'s canoe.

The boat is up in the sky and is called '*Alotolu* and *Tuingaika*. ('*Alotolu*, three in a boat; and *Tuingaika*, a string of fish; the names of two parts of Orion). (Gifford 1924:100)

Collocott noted earlier in his paper about Tongan astronomy that

'*Alotolu* means a three-oared boat, or three in a boat, and is the name of a portion of Orion. Tongan tradition asserts that '*Alotolu* is the boat in which *Hina* went with her father...and her mother.... Closely associated with '*Alotolu* is *Tuinga-ika* (string of fish).... Both *Tuinga-ika* and *Alotolu* are parts of Orion....' (Collocott 1922:160)

Apart from the myth recorded on Tonga by Gifford and the notes from Collocott on Tongan religion and astronomy in the early 1920s, information about these star constellations is scarce.⁴ The kingdom of Tonga is divided into three main island groups, Tongatapu to the south, Ha'apai in the centre, and Vava'u to the north. '*Alotolu* is the traditional Tongan name for Orion's Belt and navigators used these stars to locate Tongatapu from any direction. *Tuinga-ika* refers to the stars in and around the nebula south of Orion's Belt, also known as the Sword of Orion (Velt 1990:103).⁵ The cluster of stars called *Toloa*, referred to by Gifford in the myth of the

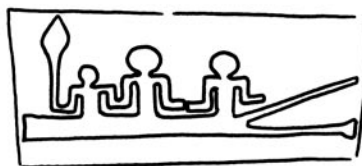


Figure 7. '*Alotolu* means a three-oared boat, or three in a boat. It has also been translated as three rowers or as three rowing together, and is the name for Orion's Belt. Tongan tradition asserts that '*Alotolu* is the boat in which *Hina* went with her father and mother in search of *Hina*'s pet shark. (Photograph courtesy of Kunstkamera St. Petersburg.)

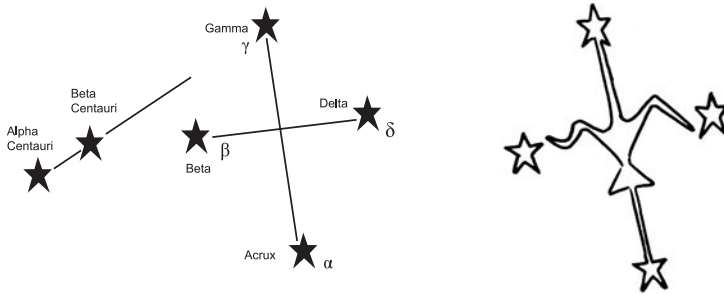


Figure 8. *Toloo* (Wild duck) is the Southern Cross Constellation. It is seen by the Tongans as a flying bird. The tail points south and the head is directed northwards (drawing). Alpha and Beta Centauri are known in Tonga as *Ongo Tangata* (Two Men). These two stars are well known in the Southern Hemisphere as the two “Pointers” to the Southern Cross. A line drawn from Alpha Centauri through Beta Centauri leads to Gamma Crux, the star at the top of the cross. By drawing a line from Gamma Crux to Acrux, navigators were able to determine south. The bird used for this drawing is that from Figure 3. (Drawing: Frans-Karel Weener.)

Ma’afu twins, is known to be the Southern Cross Constellation. Tongan imagination visualises the Southern Cross as a duck flying overhead, whose head is gamma and tail alpha, the wings being beta and delta (Fig. 8). Navigators used Toloo to determine the south⁶ when travelling between the islands of the vast Tongan Archipelago and beyond. The Humu, named for a triggerfish of the *Balistidae* family that was caught by Ma’afutoka, is associated with a dark nebula called the Coalsack, the dark patch near Toloo (Collocot 1922:159, Velt 1990:100). Ma’afulele (Running mist) is the name for the large Magellanic Cloud and Ma’afutoka (Laying mist) is the small Magellanic Cloud. According to Velt, both clouds were used to steer northward from Tongatapu towards Ha’apai and beyond (Velt 1990:102).⁷

Visual Metaphors

All the traditional names for constellations discussed above are mentioned in a *lakalaka*,⁸ composed by Queen Sālote Tupou III, based on the myth about the god Nailasikau who sailed the renowned Lomipeau canoe from ‘Uvea to Tonga. In lines 41 to 49 of the Lomipeau *lakalaka* from Lapaha, it is stated:

When the sun is directly overhead / And there is a full moon / Three rowing together and a string of fish (*‘Alotolu* and Pisces) Woman drawing water and a male sheep (Aquarius and Aries) Balance and the archer (Libra and the Archer) / Running *Ma’afu* and the wild duck (*Ma’afulele* and *Toloo*) / Triggerfish and stationary *Ma’afu* (*Humu* and *Ma’afutoka*) / All keep their own directions. (Kaepler 2002:302)⁹

In her paper about Tongan art and society, Kaeppler concluded: "The traditional function of the arts in Tonga has been to reflect and reinforce in a positive manner the socio-political system based on social status and societal rank" (Kaeppler 1978:274). Geometric *kupesi* (design) found on 18th-century Tongan barkcloth and other Tongan artefacts, such as clubs, were indeed visual metaphors or abstract images for rank and chiefly status: a design known as *fata*, consisting of concentric squares with crosswise lines, is an abstraction of the roof structure of a chief's house and therefore a visual metaphor of chiefly status (Kaeppler 2002:297). This *fata* design also appears on a Tongan club (Kaeppler 1998:219). Naturalistic *kupesi* found on late 19th century and 20th century barkcloths are, according to Kaeppler, visual allusions, figurative or symbolic references to places and people: a flying fox might be depicted, indicating that a piece of barkcloth comes from the *Kolovai* area on Tongatapu (Kaeppler 2005:219). Animals imaged as *kupesi* are also found as incisions on clubs and as depicted in inlaid ivory pieces (Kaeppler 2002:298). Kaeppler (2002:307) also stated, however, that the "visual arts of Tonga could be understood by analysing them in relation to poetry and oratory". An important Tongan concept in this respect is *heliaki*: "To say one thing but mean the other" (Kaeppler 1987:61), which could also be significant to the interpretation of club designs. Visual artists on Tonga create objects that express the *heliaki* of the poets. "Visual arts are integrally related to verbal arts, and both are used in the service of elevating and honouring the prestige and/or power of individuals or chiefly lines" (Kaeppler 2002:308). For instance, in the lines of the Lomipeau *lakalaka* cited above, the sun might have been used as a metaphor for Queen Sālote herself and the moon may represent her consort, Prince Tungī (Kaeppler 2002:301). As stated above, small inlaid circles, stars, crescents and stylised birds carved from whale ivory were sometimes set into the shafts and heads of Tongan clubs. Whale ivory was only to be used by high chiefs (Martin 1981:180), and these inlays were in fact visual metaphors for the monarch (Kaeppler 1999:28). From this I suggest that the designs carved as incisions on clubs, as described and depicted above (Figs 6 and 7), may be seen as visual metaphors, referring to the Tongan names for the Southern Cross and Orion's Belt, Toloa and 'Alotolu respectively.

The Lomipeau *lakalaka* text implies that individual stars and constellations were used for direction when sailing the Lomipeau to Tonga, but in a prelude to the poem called "The Harangue About Mumui", 'Alotolu and Toloa are used in a different context.

...I thought that I was of some use, that I was familiar with difficulties, and that war was my food. But you do not want me, so I will sit down (no longer rule). [Mumui speaking]

Angry be you. I will be weak. Why Tongatabu has already been left as a land of women. Alas! My lonely grief. You consider what is best to be done, as the chiefs are angry. Do anything that is right. "A king but blind." [Poet speaking]

There, bring the stars for *Mumui*, the 'Alotolu and Toloa, and all shining things; make afraid the wind and the breezes, because of *Mumui*. Bring *Ongomalie* (reef) and all the (other) reefs, and the thunder from the sky. The voyagers have left. Fear is back of the "regiments." *Mumui* is lord over all. Is there anything like this chief, or in keeping with his great dark mind? (Gifford 1971:156)

Reference to *Tongatabu* as a land of women may be linked to Tupoumohefo, a very ambitious woman who decided to make herself Tu'i Kanokupolu in 1793 when Mumui was the rightful heir. Tuku'aho, one of Mumui's sons, was infuriated by her action, and drove Tupoumohefo to Vava'u. In 1799, Tuku'aho, who succeeded his father as Tu'i Kanokupolu in 1797, was murdered. This murder turned out to be the beginning of the long civil wars of Tonga (Lātūkefu 1974:15). However, in the introduction to the poem called "The Harangue About Mumui", 'Alotolu and Toloa are somehow related to this heir. The suggested relationship with these stars on the one hand and Mumui on the other hand is not clear, though it might be stated that 'Alotolu and Toloa are amongst the brightest stars of the Tongan sky, and the brighter stars were considered "noble" throughout Polynesia (Craig 2004:229).

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Tongan clubs are scattered all over the world and knowledge about these weapons is fragmented owing to the lack of collection documentation. One function of the arts in Tonga has been to reflect and reinforce the socio-political system based on social status and societal rank, and Tongan design concepts are based on metaphor and allusion. According to Kaeppler, metaphorical designs incised on clubs representing chiefly attributes and the chiefs themselves are similar to those used on barkcloth and their layout has the same underlying structure. Indeed, figures on clubs are placed into a design layout similar to the design layout of motifs used on barkcloth. Nevertheless, even though fish, flying foxes and birds imaged as *kupesi* were among the images regularly carved on clubs from the 18th century, it was not until the late 19th century that Tongan women began experimenting with naturalistic designs on barkcloth. Thus, conclusions about these naturalistic designs found on Tongan barkcloth and clubs should not be drawn too hastily. As the use of whale teeth was a privilege of high Tongan chiefs, circles, stars, crescents and stylised birds made from ivory and set into clubs as inlays were visual metaphors for chiefly status. But the episodes of Tongan mythology carved on clubs, as described and depicted in this article, may also be seen as visual metaphors, referring to the Tongan names for the Southern Cross and Orion's Belt, Toloa and 'Alotolu respectively. So far, I have discovered no literature on celestial imagery in Tongan culture. Nevertheless, I suggest that 'Alotolu and Toloa are among the brightest stars of the Tongan sky, and that, therefore, they could have been associated with the nobility of high chiefs, such as Mumui. This might explain why we find these visual metaphors are incised on certain clubs, but there is not enough evidence to prove it. The textual, oral and visual past of Tonga is a rich source for clues about how to look at these carved clubs and their complex iconography.

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NOTES

1. At least 100 were gathered during Cook's second and third South Pacific voyages alone (Kaeppler 1999:24).
2. These particular figures are interpreted by Phelps (1976:165, 173, Plate 95-721) as "...tropic birds in flight and birds with shorter, thicker tails looking like a five-pointed star". See also Hooper 2006: Plate 263.
3. The following myth is a compilation I made from three myths collected by Gifford about the origin of the Magellanic Clouds (Gifford 1924:103-9). These myths tell a very similar story and were all recorded on the Ha'apai Group.
4. According to Collocott (1922:3): "Practically the whole of the available star lore of the Tongans is embraced in sailing directions written by the late Tukuaho, a high chief who was Premier of Tonga about thirty years ago."
5. Velt's booklet *Stars over Tonga* describes the sky as seen from Tonga. Though categorised as "popular scientific", this introduction into astronomy (written for Tongan and Niuean students) contains data I have not been able to find anywhere else.
6. "The first meaning of the Tongan word *tonga* is 'south'. Tongans may be conceived as islanders of the south" (van der Grijp 1993:13, see also Gifford 1971:160).
7. See also Churchward's *Dictionary* (1959).
8. A sung speech with choreographed movements (Kaeppler 2005:224).
9. In this particular case Kaeppler translated *tuinga ika* as Pisces.

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