



Posted on: Sunday, June 20, 2004

BOOK MARK

Fire knife dance inventor's story is rich, sweet

"Flaming Sword of Samoa: The Story of the Fire Knife Dance by Freddie Letuli," as told to Patricia Letuli; Watermark, hardback, \$24.95

By [Wanda A. Adams](#)
Advertiser Book Editor

It is impossible not to be charmed by this autobiography of the man who invented fire knife dancing, the late Paramount Chief Letuli Olo "Freddie" Ulua Misilagi Letuli of Fogagogo, on Tutuila, American Samoa. Letuli, who died last year at 84, lived in Hawai'i for a time, had many friends here and was a special guest at the World Fire Knife Championship at the Polynesian Cultural Center; a daughter, Taliilani Letuli Goeas, also danced with Tihati.

Part photo album, part memoir, the book recalls what seems to be a sweeter, simpler time and a man who, by all accounts, had an exceptionally loving and benevolent nature — especially surprising considering the warrior-like way that he had with the wicked-looking nifo 'oti (traditional Samoan hooked killing knife).

Letuli reports, but does not dwell on, racial prejudice he encountered when traveling across the United States with his Polynesian dance troupe in the 1950s. And he seems more grateful than offended by the fact that, in 24 years as a bit part actor in Hollywood, he was the generic "brown man," playing characters of ethnicities that ranged from Arab to Native American, Mexican to Hawaiian.

"I think I spent more time in Wardrobe and Make-up than I did on the set," he writes. "Now I look back at myself doing a double-knife routine in 'On An Island With You,' and two thoughts come immediately to mind. 1) I was so young! 2) it was such fun!"

How Letuli got from a tiny, remote island to Hollywood; how a boy raised on the land became (of all things) a professional dancer and actor; and how he got the idea for setting fire to his knife act all are interesting chapters in a most unlikely life. He apologizes not at all for the fact that much of what he did in early performances was made up or embroidered upon, even the famous slap dances he did to a song of nonsense syllables that just sounded Samoan. He would return to his authentic roots later, and his rightful place as a talking chief, but when in Hollywood at the peak of the fascination with all things Polynesian, he put on a show.

The book includes a scholarly look at the history of the Samoan "death knife"; some really amusing photographs and anecdotes about Letuli sidekicks Kui Lee and George Paoa, among others; and remembrances of him written by siva afi (knife dance) champions who studied under Letuli.

In 1964, after he had given up his Hollywood career to teach and work with youth in Samoa, Letuli returned to the U.S. Mainland to bring a group to the World's Fair. There, he met Patricia Adair. They married and returned to Samoa, where they raised 10 children, starting out in a thatched-roof fare and ending in an impressive stuccoed mansion with a driveway topped by a pair of fanciful crossed nifu 'oti. Only the bare bones of this story are told. Some day, I'd like to read it in detail.

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