

The Significance of the Poi

By SIR APIRANA NGATA

The poi, the Maori dance of welcome, is one of the most graceful of native dances. The gently swaying bodies of the performers, moving in time with the clicking poi balls, have a beauty and grace all of their own. The dance is a strong favourite with European audiences and never fails to please. Hence the appearance of a special party of poi dancers at the Wellington Radio Exhibition must be regarded as one of the attractions of the show. In the accompanying article Sir A. Ngata describes the two poi dances in a vivid and entertaining manner.

lips, and beaming great eyes, they keep their pois twirling and swaying with daintiest play of arm and wrist, and rhythmic swaying of bodies from side to side.

Sometimes the song speaks of welcome; sometimes it grows sad and slows down to a weird lament; now it quickens with a note of triumph, the maidens bow in salute to the visiting rangitiras. Anon it wanders gracefully over many appropriate themes. The whole effect is entrancing. The deliciously soft voices, the perfectly ordered motion, the bright colours of dress, and mat and piupiu, moving with brilliant beauty, together with the white kotuku feather against the dark hair, complete a singularly graceful and delicate example of the poetry of motion.

At length it comes to an end, like the finale of some admired composition, the approach of which gives the absorbed listener a pang of regret. As the pois flash overhead, the command rings out suddenly. The poetry and the motion cease at once. The flashing colours are still; the infinite variety of the faces give place to a settled gravity, and at the same

instant each poi ball glides down over the right breast of its owner, and is caught firmly in her left hand. Then the fluttering ranks bow once more to the knee, a long, steady, courteous salute. The single poi dance is over.

AS this group of dancers file off with dainty precision, there is disclosed a second group of dusky wahines, some dressed in the plain, light-coloured koroai, others in the kahu-kiwi, the sombre, yet valuable kiwi feather mat. They come lightly tripping into line, with three little maids in front to marshal and lead. And these they do right well, with little voices firmly raised in command—they are high-horn damsels and command is natural to them.

The poi is picturesque, as graceful and beautiful as the first, but much more intricate and bewildering. It opens with a quick schottische measure that causes the poi balls to beat and spin and twirl with amazing rapidity.

Every now and then (*Concluded on page 8*).



AS the visitors halt, and stand at ease, expectant, the poi ranks bow to the knee, while the mass of warriors behind, with one stentorian shout, raise their spears and taiahas aloft, then sink crouching to the ground. As the vibrating sounds of the tuku die away, and the soft murmurs of welcome are hushed, the women advance in two ranks to dance the poi, their two leaders, both men, slightly ahead, one on each wing. The right leader opens with a chant, and ere he pauses to take breath, the left leader catches the measure, and so the song alternates, from right to left and back again. Between them the ranks, in perfect time, quickening as the measure hurries on, accompanied the song with the poi, the poi of which the Maoris sing:

*Taku aroha ki te rau o te poi
To putiputi pai e, piri ki te uma i ra!*

*How my heart longs for the poi leaf!
How beautiful a flower it is to grace
Thy breast, my love!*

The poi balls commence to spin, the deft hands twirling them, move up and down, sideways, backward and forward, hovering now over the shoulder, now over and across the knees, the whirling balls appearing to surround, as with a network of gossamer, the bodies of the dancers as they sway from side to side, lifting alternate feet and throwing one across gently forward with a lilting motion, giving the general effect of a waltz step.

The women are handsome and shapely; they wave with grace; they sing soft words of welcome with musical notes in exact accord of time, in a strangely attractive monotone. With flashing teeth and smiling



—Publicity Dept., photos.