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New Pacific Portraits: Voices from the 11th Festival of Pacific Arts

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Introduction

This essay is a montage of reflections and portraits drawing on the work of Pacific Studies students from The Australian National University at the 2012 Festival of Pacific Arts in the Solomon Islands. The festival is a unique quadrennial regional event organised by Pacific peoples *for* Pacific peoples rather than for a tourist or other visitors' market. In 1972 the South Pacific Commission (now Secretariat of the Pacific Community or SPC) established the Festival of Pacific Arts (FOPA) to promote, develop and safeguard indigenous expressions of culture in Oceania. Forty years on the event is still going strong with thousands of local and visiting participants and artists gathering every four years to share a wide range of cultural practices. These include dance, music, painting, carving, tattooing, filmmaking, architecture, healing arts, ceremonial arts, literary arts, navigation and canoeing, culinary arts, fashion design and much more. Since 1996 the event has rotated between a Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian host country and has played a significant role in not just safeguarding but transforming arts and cultural practices across the region.¹

1 Katerina Martina Teaiwa, 2014, 'Culture moves? The Festival of Pacific Arts and Dance Remix in Oceania', *Dance Research Aotearoa* 2: 2–19.

The festival also illustrates the will and agency of participating countries' nations, territories and cultural groups to mobilise economic and cultural resources to support travel for participation, and the capacity of the host country to successfully mount and manage the dynamic and complex two-week event. Meeting the financial costs is usually challenging on both these fronts, and funds are often raised by participating governments with additional support in the form of international aid. Increasingly, the festival has been examined more closely by the Human Development Programme within the SPC for its economic and development potential, particularly in the context of cultural and creative industries.² In the case of the 2012 festival in the Solomon Islands, despite several sceptical news reports that highlighted an alleged lack of preparation, the final organising committee was able to rally resources and inspire the Honiara community to prepare their city for thousands of visitors. This was an impressive achievement that belied the Solomon Islands' regular depiction as a 'failed state', particularly in Australian scholarship and media.³

In spite of allegations of corruption and some dissatisfaction from participating provinces and venues, there was a decided air of Solomon Islands independence and pride before, during and after the two-week event in Honiara. In addition to the satellite venues of Doma (Guadalcanal), Auki (Malaita), Tulagi (Central Province) and Gizo (Western Province), two adjacent sites in Honiara, each almost double the size of a rugby field, were transformed to create a 'Pasifika village', stalls for visiting delegations and also a Solomon Islands village with spaces for each province, a fashion runway and a unique stage surrounded by a massive artificial lake.

Within a report conducted by Joycelin Leahy and colleagues, recommendations were made to consider the foreign tourist potential of the festival but as yet this is not the primary focus. Rather, Pacific governments and those in the culture sector prefer to maintain the

2 See, for example, David Throsby, 1994, 'The production and consumption of the arts: A view of cultural economics', *Journal of Economic Literature* 32(1) March: 1–29; and Katerina Martina Teaiwa, 2007, 'On sinking, swimming, floating, flying and dancing: The potential for cultural industries in the Pacific Islands', *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 22(2): 140–51.

3 See, for example, 'The Solomon Islands: the Pacific's first failed state?' 2003, *Economist*, 13 February, p. 29; 'Australian government celebrates successes in helping Solomon Islands pull back from failed state', 2013, *Australia Network News*, 21 October. Online: www.abc.net.au/news/2013-10-20/an-sols-failed-state/5034182, (accessed 1 February 2014).

event as an opportunity for intra-regional cultural exchange and expressions of pride.⁴ While non-Pacific Islander visitors and tourists were present at the Solomon Islands celebrations in 2012, they were marginal to its production and purpose. Certain venues, however, such as 'VIP stands', became sites of cultural, class and racial distinction that signalled colonial legacies and contemporary geopolitical hierarchies and agendas. While the VIP stands were certainly intended for senior officials representing each of the participating delegations, it was also the case that white tourists and families, and anyone who did not 'look' local, were welcome in these venues, two of which were equipped with refrigerators offering free cold water and other beverages. At the same time, however, the fact that these refreshments were made available to those who presumably represented the most affluent and visibly 'foreign' segment of festival attendees signalled an economic irony that is often apparent throughout the region, especially in tourism industry contexts. Such ironies seemed to contradict the express aims of the event. Free drinks were just one of the many surprising features of this festival in Honiara that many assumed would be challenging for the Solomon Islands government to mount. Even so, as the following student vignettes demonstrate, looking beyond such markers of inequality, the festival's vibrant diversity of expressive arts and performance provided a vital forum for engaging dialogues of culture and identity.

In 2012, Pacific Studies students from The Australian National University, in a course run by Katerina Teaiwa and Nikki Mariner, participated in a project supported by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and FOPA organising committee. This included interviewing participants for a publication commemorating 40 years of the festival. The students came from diverse disciplines and backgrounds and were excited to attend the festival, and to deepen their knowledge of Oceania by engaging with cultural practitioners from the many islands. For its own part, the SPC viewed this collecting

4 See Joycelin Leahy, Joyce Yeap-Holliday and Bill Pennington, 2010, *Evaluation of the Festival of Pacific Arts*, Suva: Secretariat of the Pacific Community; Elise Huffer, 2006, 'Regionalism and cultural identity: Putting the Pacific back into the Plan', in *Globalisation and Governance in the Pacific Islands: State, Society and Governance in Melanesia*, ed. Stewart Firth, pp. 43–55, Canberra: ANU E Press; Teaiwa, 'On sinking, swimming, floating, flying and dancing'; and Katerina M. Teaiwa, 2012, *Implementing, Monitoring and Evaluating Cultural Politics: A Pacific Toolkit*, Suva: Secretariat of the Pacific Community and European Union.

of stories and ideas from participants as key to documenting the festival, especially by highlighting the voices of participants alongside works by academics who regularly write about the iconic event.

The collection of interviews presented here focuses on what scholars might view as minor agents of history or social transformation—everyday peoples who were artists and delegates to the 2012 Festival. The title ‘New Pacific Portraits’ references two historical projects on ‘Pacific Islands Portraits’. *Watriama and Co: Further Pacific Island Portraits* from ANU Press by Hugh Laracy primarily explored the lives and experiences of Europeans in the Pacific, even when focusing on characters such as Kanak William Watriama.⁵ *Pacific Islands Portraits* edited by J.W. Davidson and Deryck Scarr⁶ included more Pacific Islanders, most of whom were male and leaders in their communities. The framework of ‘Pacific portraits’, best describes the brief and yet revealing insights into artists’ lives and inspirations that are often invisible, or seen as less relevant, in a tourism studies or political studies context.

We have gathered some of the portraits created by students that showcase the experiences of artists and other delegation members on the ground in Honiara. The students’ interviews and observations are here presented as written by them with some editing by Teaiwa and Vile. Students’ questions focused on participants’ thoughts on the festival but also on the importance of culture and arts in their respective local and national contexts. Issues of politics, education and history were regularly raised, reinforcing the fact that the arts in Oceania are mutually entangled with and reflective of many dimensions of Pacific life.

The vignettes demonstrate the festival to be an important site of connection and dialogue, one in which interpretations of personal and collective identity—past, present and future—are communicated and explored. At the same time, each shows how the experience of being a touring representative of a national or cultural collective identity, as expressed through the arts, entails a profound sense of emotionally charged moral reflection and responsibility.

5 Hugh Laracy, 2013, *Watriama and Co: Further Pacific Island Portraits*, Canberra: ANU Press.

6 J.W. Davidson and Deryck Scarr (eds), 1970, *Pacific Islands Portraits*, Canberra: The Australian National University Press.

Portraits of artists and participants by ANU students

Nicholas Neo with Francisco ‘Frank’ Rabon
from Guam

Figure 87. Frank and Nicholas at the Festival of Pacific Arts.

Source. Photograph courtesy of Nicholas Neo, July 2012.

Chamorros are the indigenous people of the Mariana Islands, of which Guam is the largest and southernmost of the island chain. The destructive effects of many waves of colonisation, foreign possession and Guam’s current political status has had a huge impact on the loss of cultural practices such as the arts, crafts and those practices originally passed on by men. Through early Spanish colonialism in the sixteenth century, there was also a gradual elimination of Chamorro dances, chants and songs.

Among the Pacific Islanders, the Chamorro people have the worst struggle in terms of protecting their identity and their indigenous heritage (Francisco Rabon).

Francisco 'Frank' Rabon is the founder and director of the Taotao Tano' Cultural Dancers, which is now synonymous with cultural dance practices in Guam. After founding the dance group in 1983, he continued to advance in the field of cultural dance, most notably to research Chamorro history, origins, migration, connection and the reconstruction of indigenous Chamorro dances, chants and songs. He started his research in 1971 after being exposed to indigenous cultural dancing from other parts of the Pacific in 1970. Frank speaks, writes and reads the Chamorro language fluently and is very familiar with Chamorro customs. It is this upbringing that he credits as the source of his fascination with the history of the islands. He emphasises the importance of his ancestral traditions, knowing just how much has been lost through external influences:

I'm not an activist; I'm just a person that tries to make changes in a subtle way.

Despite being a United States territory, Guam has closer connections to the Pacific Islands than to America. The Chamorro people are not alone in trying to protect their land, their language and their culture. The Festival of Pacific Arts serves to put out a message of respect to the indigenous people of the Pacific and also the recognition of who they are as people of Oceania. Through FOPA, every individual has a unique experience, a distinctive destiny and different goal. Rabon said:

It motivates the Pacific Islanders to take hold and cherish and put a value on their indigenous identity and the traditions that makes them unique as Pacific Islanders ... When our world is so hung up on economics, with money being the value of life, then there is no emotion. Arts brings out the emotion, the humanitarian aspect of this world of plenty. Oceania is not a massive land that is glued together, she is a massive land separated by the Pacific Ocean and in many ways the Pacific Islanders are a group of people. The arts in the Pacific is an identity of the people of Oceania. It makes them unique from the other continents.

Arts is the balance, the humanitarian balance with economics.

Frank's work represents historical, indigenous, colonial and contemporary aspects of the Chamorro people. The performances that he creates are a researched and revitalised product of the 400 years of his people's genocide on culture, songs and music. Over the past 40 years, he has re-established and recreated an identity; what he feels is representative of them in this modern world. For many other countries, their cultures have not been interrupted but the same cannot be said for Guam, or the Marianas.

It is not merely a performance; it is a way of life.

Frank was once a dancer searching and looking for his identity and has since moved on. He is now a leader of his people and feels that he must play his role in what they have entrusted to him. He was bestowed the honour of Master of Chamorro Dance and has received the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Guam Council of the Arts and Humanities in recognition of his accomplishments in cultural dance practices of Guam.

As educators, we have to strive to instill a sense of identity to the people of Guam, and the importance of preserving and perpetuating the traditions of our ancestors. We continue on the path that our ancestors have struggled on before us, knowing that we have only started to rekindle the fire that burns within the hearts of our people.

Kelly Xin Zhang with Sinahemana Hekau from Niue

Coming from a small country, it is actually a big thing to be involved in a big event (Sinahemana Hekau).

Sina came to the 11th Festival of the Pacific Arts with the Niue Dance Group. With a deep understanding of her culture, she is also responsible for the choreography of all Niuean dance performances at this festival. Besides her various roles she also actively participates in different forum discussions on legislation, environment and culture. She was one of the speakers addressing the issue of farmers' rights at the cultural rights symposium organised by the SPC. She felt that this festival offered a great platform for her people to showcase who they are to all other cultures and people.

Figure 88. Sinahemana Hekau.

Source. Photographed by Kelly Xin Zhang, July 2012.

Coming from a small country, Sina appreciated the festival invitation and recognition given to Niue. At the same time, she feels that her participation at the festival was a good development opportunity for her. The need to pay closer attention to her own culture and behaviour in order to positively portray her country and culture acts is a motivation for her to constantly improve the way she does things. Besides the cultural diversity in the Pacific, she also appreciates and enjoys the similarities and connections among different island states and territories.

Sina has a strong passion for dancing and singing, which she learnt at her school and from her family when she was young. At that time, she did not really pay attention to the expression of her performance because she learnt it only for fun. As she grew up, she started to develop her own thinking and integrated it into her performance. Dancing became a way for her to express herself. She has also become more particular about the standard of performance as well as the differences existing among different styles of dance. Dance has also

helped her develop self-discipline over the years and she now loves to teach dances to young people. She is happy to see that dance actually helps young people raise their level of confidence in terms of their appearance and self-esteem. She feels that dancing helps her own people to understand their culture and strengthen their identity.

Sina really liked the architecture in the festival village. She was amazed at the traditional styles and concepts of various structures built using natural materials such as bamboo. In particular, the Pasifika Stage, which distinguishes itself from the modern and common architecture of many steel-framed stages, was one of her favourites. She was impressed by the extraordinary amount of effort that the Solomon Islands had dedicated to the construction of the festival sites from scratch. This is her third time participating in the Festival of Pacific Arts and she felt that this has been the best one so far.

I really appreciate all the learning that I am given. It is so culturally enriched. Each of the countries has their own distinct cultures for different groups of people. To me, it is a bonus coming here to Solomon Islands.

Sina felt that her country's participation in this regional arts festival has helped promote both cultural and national identities among its own people that are crucial to nation-building. She thinks that it will be a slow process for her country to actually realise the benefit of this festival because the development of a creative economy where arts and culture are appreciated requires time. On the other hand, she feels that providing a cultural and authentic experience is very important to the tourism development in her country as its relatively small size offers little room for sightseeing.

Sina believes that this arts festival will contribute to the vitality and continued development of her culture. She feels that participation in festivals like this help people understand their culture better because they are given responsibilities to show and share their cultures with others.

Sina finished her primary and secondary education in Niue and has a diverse and interesting background in many fields of work. With her law background from the University of the South Pacific in Vanuatu, Sina has a keen interest in bringing civil society involvement to the process of law making. Upon her graduation, she returned to her home

country to test her knowledge. She has contributed to the legislative development of the Taoga Niue Bill for heritage preservation and use. On the regional level, she represents the interests of small islands and developing states. On the global level, she actively participates in various forums to promote the views of the Pacific region. She has now completed postgraduate study in New Zealand and is looking forward to doing a PhD in the future.

Art keeps us alive. Arts encourages you to be creative. Science will tell you the rules, the limitations and the boundaries, whereas art has no limitation and boundary.

Anna Pavlakis with Aisea Konrote Faustino from Fiji

Fashion permeates the Festival of Pacific Arts with traditional and contemporary costumes both forming crucial aspects of any cultural performance. However, 2012 was only the second time fashion has been included at the festival.

It is not often that you come across an individual with such enthusiasm and spirit as emerging Fijian fashion designer Aisea Konrote Faustino. His contemporary designs have graced the catwalks of Fiji Fashion Week and now at the Festival of Pacific Arts Fashion Show, and are an outstanding display of the contribution of the vibrant, elegant Fijian culture to the Pacific region. Aisea's passion and zeal for fashion is self-evident in his outfits, but of more significance are the defining aspects of his life that are woven and blended into the patterns and threads of each piece.

Aisea's personal story of identity is inextricably linked with culture and the arts, and he exhibits a profound connection with the Festival of Pacific Arts like few others. He attended the very first festival in Suva, Fiji, as a young boy on his ninth birthday in 1972, and he has fond memories of the colours, talent and arts on display. The 2012 festival in Honiara however, is only the second time he has attended the festival. What happened in the 40 years between was a deeply personal journey of identity construction, such that the festival acts as bookends to perhaps the most important chapter of his life; a period of enlightenment and reclamation of personal heritage.

Figure 89. Aisea with some of his designs at the Fijian delegation hut at the 2012 FOPA.

Source. Photographed by Anna Pavlakis, July 2012.

The son of a seamstress, Aisea's passion for fashion began at a young age and flourished with his experience as a model in his youth. Due to this early exposure to the western world, Aisea was lured by its wealth, prosperity and perceived beauty and sought to explore it more. Trained as a flight attendant, he travelled to some of the most famous cities in the world and considered the life he and others led in Fiji as undeveloped and unsophisticated. Fiji, he believed, paled in comparison to the exquisite cultures and arts he expected to experience through travelling abroad.

Aisea admits that at this time in his life, he willingly shunned his Pacific heritage, however, his quest for wonders did not pan out as planned. The West's splendours, he discovered, were not as rich as expected and his self-entitled 'quest for beauty' had not delivered any significant results. Indeed, he realised that he had found nothing abroad that could not be matched, nor beaten by the simplest of Fiji's natural beauty.

I searched for beauty in Hollywood, India, Japan but I couldn't find anything beautiful, I shunned Fiji ... but I found that the beauty was right beneath my nose yet I went searching out of my own island (Aisea Konrote Faustino).

Returning to Fiji, Aisea embraced the offerings of his cultural heritage and displayed his first Fijian inspired collection in 2007. With little money for materials and tools, he relied on his mother's old sewing machine to create the initial outfits, entering them in a local competition where he took out first prize. Using his prize money he purchased his very first sewing machine from Australia and created more designs, winning more competitions, and purchasing more materials. Now the proud owner of six sewing machines and countless outfits, Aisea feels that he has reclaimed his Fijian heritage, and that attending 2012's Festival of Pacific Arts sees him come full circle. He perceives the festival as an emotional period of time for him as it represents the culmination of his psychological journey, and an event that secures his position as a Pacific Islander.

I was lost between the first and current festival ... a lost identity. I was fortunate to have found my identity again and so fortunate to be selected to come over here. I had to go backwards to go forwards.

Fijian fashion has always been a prevalent feature of Fijian livelihoods, with the light and casual clothing designed specifically for the hot, tropical climate. A key traditional item is the sulu, which is considered the trendsetter of Fijian fashion clothing and is worn by both men and women, especially at formal occasions. Only recently, however, has modern Fijian fashion gained respect as a key aspect of Fijian culture. From the late 1990s, interest in contemporary fashion grew until the creation of Fiji's very own Fashion Week in 2008 to the praise of international designers and event chairman Ian Mclean acknowledging that putting fashion into the cultural spotlight has the ability to 'take this country forward'.

Aisea's designs can be described as a fusion of western styles and a Pacific/Fijian style, and he seeks to create contemporary designs that still retain a small aspect of tradition. Nature is his key source of inspiration and whilst it is sometimes not evident in his design's aesthetics, it always plays a large role in the production and thought process of creation as it was this feature of Fiji that drew him back to the islands. Every piece that Aisea creates is a one-of-a-kind as he

never duplicates any of his designs because of a desire for uniqueness. In addition, the importance of family is essential in Aisea's designs, and his recent collection at Fiji Fashion Week was dedicated to his late mother and named Hefrani after his grand niece.

Aisea regards Fiji's natural beauty as not only his source of inspiration but as his source of materials, and he accordingly employs natural resources into his designs where possible. He believes that in order to truly appreciate the beauty of the natural environment, one must ensure that it is protected and not misused. Through encouraging the use of natural renewable resources in his designs, Aisea both reduces his individual environmental impact and advocates the utilisation of materials that do not pose a threat to the environment. For this reason he relates wholeheartedly to the 2012 Festival of Pacific Arts' theme 'Culture in Harmony with Nature'.

The sun, the moon, nature inspires me. All my designs depict the environment from the beginning to the end ... I savour the moment when nature's radiance provides inspiration for a new piece ... Our natural resources in Fiji are an oyster for fashion design and I intend to use that ... My designs are all bold and very provocative ... but not too vulgar. I have to respect the culture we are in. I want to learn and absorb as much as I can [at the festival], because I almost lost my identity and I don't want to go through that again. It is not wrong to be in the western world, but do not forget who you are ... With the rapid influence of the western world it is our duty to make the youth of today realise that respect is good for culture. If everyone was like me growing up, then culture would be diminished. For this reason I want to teach the children of the Pacific the value of your religion, your skin colour, your looks. You need to be proud to be a Pacific Islander.

Athena Rosabelle Abuan with Stillwest Longden and delegates from the Central Province, Solomon Islands

The Central Province is one of the nine provinces of the Solomon Islands that offers unique and diverse art genres, with its own tales of tribes, chiefs, tradition, culture, and its history of headhunting and tribal wars. A significant traditional dance representing victory during the tribal wars is called the *siokole*.

Figure 90. Central Province dancers gathered for the *siokole*.

Source. Photographed by Athena Abuan, July 2012.

To our group, the dance really highlights the theme of the festival—where land and sea are integrated (Stillwest Longden)

The *siokole* is a traditional dance from Gela in the Central Province—performed in front of a chief to honour him and the tribe after a successful battle against tribal enemies. The *siokole* follows a very meticulous process and dance movements—the vocal tune has to be regulated in such a way that it is only audible to the Chief, while the body movements also have to correspond with the song rhythm and wording to emphasise harmony.

The Central Province is made up of four main tribes: the Gaubata, Kakau, Hogokiki and Hogokama. In the past, these four tribes fought against each other for territories and authority over land and ocean. To complete a chiefly kingdom, victory must be achieved in both land and sea, and that is why the elements of land and sea are incorporated into the dance through mimicking the movements of the *sou* (heron), which dominates the sea with a distinctive movement to hunt for its prey, and the *puko* (grasshopper), which represents the land.

The movements show how the warriors battled in different environments and in the case of the *sou*, it is how they moved accordingly in sea battles, how warriors incorporate wit in sensing and dealing with enemies and prey, whereas in the case of the land battles, the *puko* represents happiness and celebration as the battle has been conquered. In other words, these movements represent the significant skills and experiences of warriors behind victories.

The order of performance starts with the *totosi*, which gives a picture of the battlefield and how the fights take place. Next are the *sou* and *puko*, as discussed above, and lastly, the *isubela* where the warriors show alertness and caution upon sensing or knowledge that an enemy is close.

Figure 91. The *totosi*—opening sequence of the *siokole* wherein the Chief and warriors make their entrance while a conch shell is blown to signify the beginning of the dance performed at the Pacific Arts Festival.

Source. Photographed by Athena Abuan, July 2012.

Figure 92. *Na NILAU*—dog's teeth as form of traditional money to signify wealth and power.

Source. Photographed by Athena Abuan, July 2012.

Figure 93. The staff (*totogona*) has faces on both sides to symbolise security and constant vigilance.

Source. Photographed by Athena Abuan, July 2012.

The Chief enters with two warriors on either side of him to offer protection. The front-line warriors enter to symbolise that the fight is over; they serve the Chief during peace and wartime. The Chief's security, chieftaincy and survival depend on their strength, loyalty and skills, as they are bodyguards and act according to his orders, fighters perform leading roles for the *siokole*. The current Chief, Charles Dauasi, hails from the Boli District of Gela in the Central Province. He is the successor of his deceased uncle, the previous Chief, and he will serve his tribe until the day of his death; upon his death, the Chieftainship will be passed to his successor.

The *siokole* highlights and honours the importance and the role of the Chief to a tribe as warriors perform a victory dance upon winning a battle in land and sea to complete the Chief's kingdom. The Chief's clothing and accessories represent his role, power over land and sea, constant vigilance, balance of power, wealth, security, control and status.

The costumes—it's like their [the dancers'] blessing; whenever the dancers wear these costumes they have this kind of feeling that they have the power.

After a difficult selection process, the FOPA committee announced the need to omit a group from the province and said that their group was not eligible to perform. The group performed in front of the committee member who was from Gela province who was able to understand the concept within the dance; hence they were able to participate.

As explained by Stillwest Longden, one of the organisers and coaches of the group: 'people from other islands cannot be part of a group without understanding what they do'. He added that tribal intermarriages kept the blood ties intact within the province; hence, those from Gela will feel the meaning of the dance.

We cannot live without being connected to other people and others should respect our identity ... To represent the Solomon Islands means so much as it is a means to connect to the world—to display their identity, and to showcase to people around the world that the Solomon Islands is made up of a diverse group of communities. Different groups are showcasing their own cultures, but there should be collaboration and integration as a group. The festival allows them to come together as a group of people of diverse cultures but to boost development, unity is required.

Figure 94. Stillwest Longden, delegation coordinator, Central Province.
Source. Photograph by Athena Abuan, July 2012.

Stillwest reiterated that the festival allowed local people to interact with each other and other ethnic groups, and it changes the perceptions of local people and outside friends of the Solomon Islands after the ethnic tensions and social unrests tarnished their reputation. Stillwest further argued that what they showcase (i.e. dance) is a cultural product and he hopes that this perception is shared by the

participants—that they are highlighting what they own, and hopes for a way to market these products to the outside world to boost the economy. But it requires initiatives from the grassroots level—for the government and the region to look at arts as a distinctive product.

Unity is needed—to be ‘one’ to compete economically globally; being one economically and culturally. To participate in this sort of event, we are telling the world that we are together; that is when we will be able to compete ... The festival highlights something; that we are here together as Pacific Islanders, not as a different nation; just as one region.

Figure 95. Stillwest Longden and Central Province performers.

Source. Photographed by Athena Abuan, July 2012.

Felicia Lim with Taiwan delegates

Ku Le Le Damuleng belongs to the Taiwan indigenous Paiwan tribe. This is his first time attending the Pacific Arts Festival and he is excited and very much looking forward to visiting the Solomon Islands, and is particularly keen to know more about the culture, tradition and customs of the Solomon Islanders. He had attended the combined worship service at Maranatha Prayer Hall, where he felt honoured to be representing Taiwan indigenous groups at this regional gathering.

He also added that his family and friends were filled with awe and admiration when they learnt about him attending the festival. In addition, he was present for the official opening ceremony held at the stadium and seeing a large sea of people was an eye-opener for him.

Figure 96. Ku Le Le Damuleng.

Source. Photographed by Felicia Lim, July 2012.

Ku Le Le Damuleng has been a trained dancer since the age of 16, and while he had spent most of his time in the city, he was invited by his teacher to join a group, Ping Dong Dance Troupe, consisting of approximately 20 dance members. The best known dance group is Naruwan, which comprises the majority of the Paiwan tribe and the remaining are Rukai tribe. A major difference between dance groups lies in their costume designs. Due to the possible complexities of the 14 tribes, it is often difficult for the Taiwanese government to provide funding to each different tribe to participate. Indigenous Taiwan peoples have both contemporary and traditional dances, embracing diversity but they continue with traditional dance to preserve their roots and unique heritage. Ku Le Le felt that when comparing traditional and contemporary dances, traditional dance would be able to invoke imagination, whereas contemporary dance might not be able to deliver meaning as clearly.

Ku Le Le felt that the arts play a significant role in the Pacific Islands where there is so much sharing and understanding of each other's culture, in order to preserve traditions. His favourite group were the dancers from Tahiti. He hoped that participating countries saw Taiwan as special guests as it is the only country not part of the Pacific Islands. Ku Le Le was also very appreciative of Solomon Islanders' hospitality and kindness.

Figure 97. Amaya Sayfik and an Amis performer at the festival.

Source. Photographed by Felicia Lim, July 2012.

Amaya Sayfik comes from the Amis indigenous tribe and runs a product design company. He designs most of the handicrafts, indigenous costumes and accessories. His pepper and salt containers are inspired by a dance where designs are made to resemble ancestral eyes. Similar to the Rukai, Bunun and Paiwan tribes, a snake is displayed at the front of their houses, which is a symbol of prosperity and security. It is thought that when a snake rises, it protects the tribe. He strongly agrees that both arts and cultures are important and he finds the worthiness in them and preserving one's roots is essential as western influence is becoming rampant. He recommended a mixture of traditional and contemporary

aspects of culture so that they can be better integrated into one's daily life. He felt that the indigenous Taiwanese culture has evolved to include the element of innovation. He observed their Solomon Islands counterparts as having a strong foundation in their traditional roots. He added that if Solomon Islands takes up modernisation too quickly, then he fears culture would lose its important links.

Reflections

The late Professor Epeli Hau'ofa, founder of the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific, wrote about how what is typically taken for creativity in the Pacific is sometimes viewed as 'the adoption, and occasionally, refinement, of things generated mainly outside Oceania or the unceasing reproduction of the original creations of our forebears in ages past'.⁷ However, the creativity to be found in the arts, he argued, actually reflects Pacific principles of reciprocity, cooperation, openness to community, transmission of knowledge and skills through observation, as well as practical experience. If the modern world of art views the field in terms of individualistic expressions of art, the Pacific 'gives priority to the collective'.⁸

The reflections from artists here, as told to ANU students, demonstrate combinations of both individual and collective concerns and hopes that have been there since Europeans first entered the Pacific, and most certainly since Christianity and colonialism resulted in major structural changes to Pacific societies. Many artists spoke of the importance of the preservation of 'tradition', which for many islanders is a combination of both pre- and post-colonial values and practises. Many of the dances, for example, had direct links to ancient social structures and relations.

That binary of tradition and modernity, as critiqued by various scholars in Pacific Studies, anthropology, cultural studies and elsewhere, may not always be useful for thinking about life and art in Oceania today. Past and present surely exist in a fluid continuum inflecting artistic

7 Epeli Hau'ofa, 2008, *We are the Ocean: Selected Works*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, p. 85.

8 Ibid.

choices and presentations. Even so, articulated within a context of creative dialogue, the portraits presented here suggest how dynamic expressions and engagements of and with identity may be effectively and evocatively articulated even while incorporating the much-critiqued and apparently reifying languages of 'tradition'. Indeed, as expressed by these artists and their student biographers, within the context of Pacific arts, diverse traditions may be intimately entwined through understandings of distance and difference as well as identity. As demonstrated across these portraits, the language that artists and delegates use to talk about art forms still reflects epistemological and ontological aspects of Pacific life whereby things are often articulated in terms of perceived differences and perceived anxieties, rather than fluidity. This may demonstrate the actual effectiveness of FOPA over 40 years, to keep strong the initial ideas shaped by the Pacific community, to preserve and safeguard 'traditional' and place-based Pacific cultures in the face of overwhelming changes. This theme continued strongly in the 2016 festival held in Guam in the Northern Pacific along with a political statement from Chamorro activists and artists to 'decolonize Oceania'.

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