



# *The Festival of Pacific Arts Celebrating 40 Years*



SPC  
Secretariat  
of the Pacific  
Community



*The Festival of Pacific Arts  
Celebrating 40 Years*

By Karen Stevenson

Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC)  
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## Figures

1: Tongan performers at the 1<sup>st</sup> South Pacific Festival of Arts, Fiji, 1972.

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2: Papua New Guinea performers at the 10<sup>th</sup> Festival of Pacific Arts, 2008,

American Samoa. © Secretariat of the Pacific Community

3: Carver at work, 11<sup>th</sup> Festival of Pacific Arts, Solomon Islands, 2011.

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The Festival of Pacific Arts is, this year, celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. What began as a modest idea has become an institution. It has grown from the 1<sup>st</sup> South Pacific Festival of Arts with 1000 participants from 20 countries to this year's 11<sup>th</sup> Festival of Pacific Arts with close to 2500 participants from 24 countries expected.<sup>1</sup> The concept of a regional festival originated in the Fiji Arts Council in 1965. At that time, many Pacific Island nations were beginning to embrace their cultural traditions as symbols of national identity. Fearing that the younger generations may be tempted away from their cultural heritage with the introduction of western technologies and entertainment, it was felt that a festival would help 'preserve and develop various local art forms, as well as providing the occasion for Pacific Islanders to meet, share and celebrate their cultural heritage.'<sup>2</sup> They envisioned a festival put on by and for Pacific peoples; a festival built on the tradition of both sharing and passing cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. Working to facilitate this vision, the Fiji Arts Council and the South Pacific Commission (now the Secretariat of the Pacific Community) combined their resources to host the 1<sup>st</sup> South Pacific Festival of Arts in Fiji, in 1972.

With the belief that the Pacific Region was in danger of losing its traditional art forms, the organising committee was determined to highlight those cultural values inherent and important to Pacific communities. The Festival, a cultural event indigenous to the Pacific, seemed a fitting venue. The organising principles were noted in the souvenir brochure of the first Festival:

*The culture of the South Pacific is a living culture. It shows itself in dance and music, artifacts and handicrafts, in the architecture of their buildings, in their games and in their*



*languages. These are as exciting and as varied as are the islands themselves. In the flurry and the bustle of modern living, where the speed of change has swamped much that was good, the islands remain placid, peaceful oases where lasting values still count. But even in the Pacific change is inevitable, and positive efforts are needed to prevent the age old arts from succumbing to the pervading sense of sameness that exists in much of our society, or being swamped by commercialism, or cheapened to provide facile entertainment for tourists.*

*We hope that this Festival will not only encourage the preservation of the best in Pacific Island culture, but that it will also serve to re-establish much that is in danger of being lost. In particular, we hope that it will re-emphasize the need for the retention of classical art forms, for the best taste, for the highest ideals and dignity. Perhaps it may also enable a recapturing of some of the old chants and dances as they were when they were originally created and in the form they were enjoyed by the peoples of the Pacific long ago.<sup>3</sup>*

The highlights of the first festival were traditional dance, the creation of a village of traditional houses, and the sailing of traditional canoes. The University of the South Pacific was the site for a village of Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvaluan, Solomon Island, New Caledonia, Niue and Fijian houses. The diversity of architectural styles across the region created much discussion about both the similarities and differences in architectural technologies. Similarly, navigational practices were highlighted with traditional canoes from Kiribati, Tuvalu, Niue and Fiji. These events created a precedent for each host nation to develop a theme around which their festival was build (see appendix).



With the success of the first festival, the South Pacific Commission created a mechanism for the event to take place every four years, each hosted by a different island nation.<sup>4</sup> As the organising body, the South Pacific Commission facilitated not only the planning meetings, but the festivals themselves. In 1975 it was agreed that the aims of the festival would be to:

- Encourage the preservation and revival of traditional arts and cultures of the Pacific,
- Encourage new forms of cultural activities suited to the needs of the Pacific,
- Encourage greater awareness of the cultural richness of the Pacific throughout the world,

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- Foster a greater sense of unity throughout the Pacific to promote excellence in arts, and
  - Promote the development and use of ethnic [indigenous] languages.<sup>5</sup>

The following two festivals were hosted by New Zealand and Papua New Guinea, respectively. These first three festivals were called the 'South Pacific Festival of Arts' as those involved were geographically located in the South Pacific, but also because they belonged to the South Pacific Commission. Asserting their presence at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Festival in Papua New Guinea, both the Hawaii and Guam delegations justified the North Pacific's inclusion in the event. As a result, the name was changed to the Festival of Pacific Arts. Taiwan and West Papua sent delegations to Palau in 2004 and after that a policy was created enabling the host country to invite non-Council member countries that fit within the purview of the Council for Pacific Arts, known as the Council of Pacific Arts and Culture since 2010.<sup>6</sup>

The Festival continues to grow as the needs and desires of Pacific peoples change. In 1998 the Council of Pacific Arts adopted the current guiding principles:

We, the indigenous peoples of the Pacific, assert our cultural identity, rights and dignity. We do so, mindful of our spiritual and environmental origins, through our dynamic art forms and artistic history and traditions. As indigenous peoples we share the following objectives:

- Encourage awareness of a collective voice
- Foster the protection of cultural heritage

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- Explore the creation of dynamic new arts
  - Cultivate global awareness and appreciation for Pacific arts and cultures
  - Promote our traditional languages
  - Value the wisdom of our elders
  - Support the aspiration of our youth
  - Advocate a cultural peace through dialogue with the cultures of the Pacific
  - Promote cultural development within the social, economic and political development of our countries
  - Encourage the indigenous peoples of the Pacific to continue their efforts for recognition.<sup>7</sup>

Just as festival guidelines have developed and diversified over the past 40 years, so too have the activities and events of each festival. As stated, it is the host nation that chooses which events they want to highlight. Traditional performance has always dominated the festival, yet a range of activities have become its mainstays. For example, an arts/craft village is at the centre of the festival venue and here one will find artists/artisans involved with weaving; *tapa* making; wood, stone and bone carving; ceramics; and tattooing. In more recent festivals, contemporary artists have joined the mix, as have contemporary music, theatre and film. At the water's edge one will find traditional boat-building and navigational crafts. In addition, costume pageants and fashion shows, traditional medicine and healing arts, culinary arts, philatelic arts, traditional money, oratory arts, story-telling, musical instruments, vernacular architecture, traditional games and sports, symposiums, debates and workshops have all been part of the festival.



Festival activity is firmly rooted in the Pacific past and is, therefore, a perfect vehicle to both ensure and promote a Pacific identity/culture in the future. The concept of festival is very much linked to cultural identity. The importance of forging or creating a cultural identity within the Pacific region has grown exponentially as, over the past 50 years, colonial governments have given way to new nations. Drawing on their cultural heritage, Pacific Island leaders have created national symbols as well as localised symbols of identity. Using these as rallying points, diverse groups and agendas meld together in the creation of a cultural and political identity accomplished through the concept of the Festival of Pacific Arts.

The festival also provides participants with the opportunity to reflect on the strength of their cultural heritage, which, in spite of the impact of colonial history, has remained a vital part of contemporary society. The Council of Pacific Arts and Culture, along with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, has provided governments across the Pacific with the platform from which to speak with an artistic and cultural voice. This, in turn, has aided in the development of unique national identities. Governments, whose fiscal support of the festival is essential, can therefore turn to the festival to promote themselves in an international arena. The themes chosen for the festivals have often demonstrated this convergence of arts and politics. Most importantly, the heritage of the Pacific — traditional dance, music and art, navigational technologies and skills, as well as the visual arts — remains an integral and valuable aspect of contemporary culture.



Another result of the festival's 40 year history is that it has become a goal, a dream for many Pacific Islanders to represent their culture, to demonstrate their art, to participate in a regional forum. It has also stimulated a new sense of cultural pride among Pacific Islanders young and old, generating excitement and promise for the arts and cultures of the region. Participation in the festival bestows honour on the participants and is recognition of the value of their cultural and artistic heritage. Delegations create, choreograph and share their performances with each other. Young contemporary artists and performers express themselves, and their talents help to bridge the gap between



traditional cultural expressions and the aspirations of our youth.

The Festival, since its inception, has also had a following from a small group of academics interested in the myriad issues that have arisen over the past 40 years.<sup>8</sup> They have frequently highlighted and given voice to such debates as: authenticity, tourist art, cultural borrowing, intellectual property rights, and the relationship — sometimes conflict — between the traditional and contemporary arts. These academics, informal delegates in a sense, have participated in many discussions and symposia, and have added to our knowledge about the arts of the Pacific.

The Festival of Pacific Arts is not a tourist festival, but one put on by and for Pacific peoples. Its focus remains on Pacific artists and their arts. The festival has successfully implemented its initial goal to become an important instrument in the preservation and promotion of the performing and visual arts, which represent the broad variety of cultural expressions in the Pacific. Expertise and skills in crafts have been revitalised, while traditional and ceremonial performances have been rediscovered. The festival has also provided the platform for a consolidated political voice and identity. This has aided in the development of cultural and national identities across the Pacific and the globe.

Fulfilling the initial hope of the organisers, we *have* learned from the past. The Festival of Pacific Arts has, over the past forty years, become an important venue for the perpetuation of Pacific arts and cultures. It has developed into a strong entity in which cultural sharing and learning from difference has enhanced our appreciation and knowledge of the region. With the success of the festival, and in particular the themes

that have been their highlights, many traditional arts have seen a resurgence, and for some a 'renaissance'. It has become clear that the issue for the festival is no longer preserving what was in danger of being lost, but how to ensure its preeminent position in the future. The necessity to protect intellectual cultural property while embracing the dynamism of new art forms has both challenged and enlivened the festival. As a venue for cultural sharing and interaction, the festival recognises that the past is firmly embedded in contemporary Pacific culture. It has both encouraged and rejuvenated the arts of the Pacific. As such, the Festival insures the continuity and strength of the Pacific's cultural traditions.

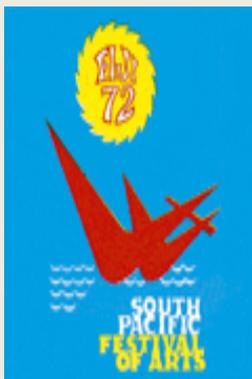


## APPENDIX

This appendix offers some specific details about each Festival; its location, timeframe, number of participants, logo and theme.

### 1972 South Pacific Festival of Arts, Fiji

#### *Preserving Culture*



The first festival, the South Pacific Festival of Arts was held in Suva, Fiji from 6–20 May 1972. More than 1000 participants from 14 countries and territories attended.

All countries in the South Pacific were represented except for Easter Island and French Polynesia. Pitcairn Island, Norfolk Island, Tokelau, and Wallis and Futuna were not able to send delegations, but did send handicrafts, stamps and films.

### 1976 South Pacific Festival Arts, New Zealand

#### *Sharing Culture*

The 2nd South Pacific Festival of Arts was held in Rotorua, New Zealand from 6–13 March 1976. This event drew over 1000 participants from 20 Pacific Island countries and territories. An additional 500 tribal members of Te Arawa and Tuwharetoa presented a strong Maori presence by performing traditional challenges and welcomes at the opening day ceremonies.



## 1980 South Pacific Festival of Pacific Arts, Papua New Guinea

### *A Celebration of Pacific Awareness*

The 3rd South Pacific Festival of Arts was held in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea from 30 June–12 July 1980. This festival had more than 1600 participants from 22 Pacific Island countries and territories. It was the first time peoples from the northern Pacific had participated in the Festival, which would lead to a change in the festival's name.



## 1985 Festival of Pacific Arts, French Polynesia

### *My Pacific Home*

The 4th Festival of Pacific Arts was held in French Polynesia from 29–15 July 1985. Originally scheduled to take place in New Caledonia in 1984, the festival venue was changed and the date delayed due to potential political incidents occurring in New Caledonia. It was a great success, with almost 1200 participants from 21 Pacific Island countries and territories. 500 delegates from Tahiti's Leeward archipelagos; the Tuamotu, Marquesas and Austral Islands also participated.



## 1988 Festival of Pacific Arts, Australia

*To promote the maintenance of indigenous cultures of the Pacific region*



The 5th Festival of Pacific Arts was held in Townsville, Australia from 14–27 August 1988. This Festival coincided with Australia's 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, combining that history with a large Aboriginal presence. Over 1700 participants from 24 Pacific Island countries and territories attended.

## 1992 Festival of Pacific Arts, Cook Islands

*Seafaring Pacific Islanders*

The 6th Festival, held in Rarotonga, Cook Islands from 16–27 October 1992, celebrated the achievements of Pacific Islanders as great ocean voyagers. The focus on navigational technologies was balanced with a symposium focusing on the issues of cultural property rights. It attracted over 1800 participants from 23 Pacific Island countries and territories.





## 1996 Festival of Pacific Arts, Samoa

### *Tala Measina*

Tala Measina is a form of introduction offered by the orator or *tulafale*, just before a big or final presentation is made. It means to unveil treasures. In the context of the festival, it is the unveiling of our culture, arts and traditions. The 7th Festival of Pacific Arts was held in Apia, Samoa from 8–23 September 1996, and was attended by over 1500 participants from 25 Pacific Island countries and territories. This festival saw the introduction of a contemporary art exhibition to its schedule of events.

## 2000 Festival of Pacific Arts, New Caledonia

*Words of Yesterday (Paroles d'hier), Words of Today (Paroles d'aujourd'hui), Words of Tomorrow (Paroles de demain)*

The 8th Festival of Pacific Arts was held in New Caledonia from 23 October–3rd November 2000. Over 2000 participants from 24 Pacific Island countries and territories attended. In an effort to bring local communities and festival participants together, the 8th Festival had many venues in various communes in New Caledonia's three provinces. The issue of the evolution of culture and the impact of modernity on traditional societies was the focus of debates and round-table discussions.



## 2004 Festival of Pacific Arts, Palau



*Oltobed a Malt – Nurture, Regenerate, Celebrate*

The 9th Festival of Pacific Arts was held in Palau from 22–31 July 2004. The theme selected by Palau for this festival was “Oltobed a Malt – Nurture, Regenerate, and Celebrate”. This festival attracted more than 3000 delegates from 27 Pacific Island countries and territories. Each delegation was hosted by a particular village, which facilitated cultural sharing and interaction. This festival also included delegations from Taiwan and West Papua.

## 2008 Festival of Pacific Arts, American Samoa

*Su'iga'ula a le Atuvasa: Threading the Oceania 'Ula*

The 10th Festival of Pacific Arts was held in Pago Pago, American Samoa from 20 July to 2 August 2008 with more than 2700 participants from 23 Pacific Island countries and territories. The theme was *Su'iga'ula a le Atuvasa: Threading the Oceania 'Ula*. The 'ula or necklace is an adornment that is always representative of a celebration and/or festive occasion. This festival demonstrated the importance of using Pacific traditions as a means of cultivating understanding across the region.



## 2012 Festival of Pacific Arts, Solomon Islands



### 11th Festival of Pacific Arts

Solomon Islands 2012

### *Culture in Harmony with Nature*

The 11<sup>th</sup> Festival of Pacific Arts is being held in Honiara and other locations in the Solomon Islands from 1–14 July. It is anticipated there will be 2500 participants from some 24 Pacific Islands countries and territories. The theme 'Culture in Harmony with Nature' highlights the relationship between the cultural and the natural world (wild life, marine life/flora and fauna, traditional medicines, navigation, and tools). Our cultural expressions through dances and various art forms portray a living proof of this important connection. Using the festival as a podium, we call on our Pacific neighbors and the world beyond our shores, to join hands in the fight to preserve our environment from the destructive nature of globalisation, and to maintain our cultural values and heritage as our strength to reconnect ourselves more harmoniously with our natural environment.

## 2016 12<sup>th</sup> Festival of Pacific Arts, Guam

*What we own, what we have, what we share – United Voice of the Pacific*



The 12th Festival of Pacific Arts will be held in Guam in the summer of 2016. The largest island in Micronesia, Guam is honoured to host her brothers and sisters from countries across the Pacific. The theme, What We Own, What We Have, What We Share – United Voices of the



Pacific, was conceived to reinforce the heritage and traditions of our distinctive backgrounds and reunite us to commemorate our customs and arts. Since 1972, when the first Festival was held, the world had already begun to consider methods of sustainability and, since then, our people of the Pacific have been among the first to experience the changing world. The 12<sup>th</sup> Festival of Pacific Arts in 2016 will bring us all together on Guam to celebrate the strength and resilience that has preserved all that we have owned and shared since the beginning of time.

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<sup>1</sup> The member countries include: American Samoa, Australia, Cook Islands, Easter Island, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Hawaii, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Norfolk Island, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Islands, Sāmoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna. Taiwan and West Papua sent delegations of performers and artists to the Festival of Pacific Arts in 2004. The number of countries attending has varied from festival to festival.

<sup>2</sup> Leahy, Yeap-Holiday, and Pennington, Evaluation of the Festival of Pacific Arts. 2010:23.

<sup>3</sup> South Pacific Arts Festival.1972. Souvenir Booklet.

<sup>4</sup> Fiji was the first nation to host a festival, followed by: New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, French Polynesia, Australia, Cook Islands, Samoa, New Caledonia, Palau, and American Samoa. Solomon Islands is the host for the 11<sup>th</sup> festival.

<sup>5</sup> Leahy, Yeap-Holiday, and Pennington, Evaluation of the Festival of Pacific Arts. 2010:24.

<sup>6</sup> Leahy, Yeap-Holiday, and Pennington, Evaluation of the Festival of Pacific Arts. 2010:25.

<sup>7</sup> Leahy, Yeap-Holiday, and Pennington, Evaluation of the Festival of Pacific Arts. 2010:26.

<sup>8</sup> This group includes but is in no way limited to: Barbara Smith, Adrienne Kaeppler, Jane Moulin, Kauraka Kauraka, Faustina K. Rehurer-Marugg, Vincent Diaz, Michael A. Mel, Pam Zeplin, Trish Allen, Hilary Scothorn, Susan Cochrane, Judy Flores, Caroline Yacoe, Jackie Lewis-Harris and Karen Stevenson. There are also many delegates who have attended multiple festivals. Arts and cultural educators and attaches, and photographers have also contributed greatly to the discussions and debates surrounding Pacific Arts Festivals. A special edition of *Pacific Arts* (2002) focused its attention on the Festival.

