

Indigenous Festivals in the Pacific: Cultural Renewal, Decolonization and Nation-building

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Indigenous resurgence, in its most radical form, is nation building, not nation-state building.¹⁾

—Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

Introduction: Festivals as Sites of Cultural Labour

When pro-independence Kanak activist Jean-Marie Tjibaou organized New Caledonia's first indigenous cultural festival in 1975, he could scarcely have imagined the extent to which gatherings of this kind would come to both galvanize and materialize cultural renewal movements among First Nations societies in diverse parts of the world. Staged over five days in Nouméa, the festival was designed to showcase the “depth and breadth of Kanak culture”—a culture that had been rendered largely invisible by French colonization—and thereby to assert the particularity of the Pacific archipelago's Kanak population as an indigenous people with sovereign rights.²⁾ Performance-based arts and activities took pride of place in the festival fare, which included not only ceremonies, dances and songs but also demonstrations of customary games and crafts as well as participatory events such as *bougnas* (traditional feasts) and cultural soirées organized by Kanak groups from different regions to encourage festivalgoers to meet and mingle with their indigenous hosts. The event's title, “Melanesia 2000,” projected Tjibaou's avowed dream that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, Melanesian elements would be just as prevalent in New Caledonia's cultural matrix as European ones.³⁾

Even though some (non-indigenous) commentators criticized this approach for mixing politics with art, the festival was a resounding success. It attracted more than 50,000 attendees, fostered pride in Kanak culture and prompted numerous social and economic initiatives.⁴⁾ Crucially, it also gave impetus to the fledgling independence movement that eventually

¹⁾ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Indigenous Resurgence and Co-resistance,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2016): 22.

²⁾ Tate Augusta LeFevre, “Creating Kanaky: Indigeneity, Youth and the Cultural Politics of the Possible,” (New York University: PhD Thesis, 2013), 85.

³⁾ Philippe Missotte, “Le Festival Mélanésia 2000 — Septembre 1975,” *Journal De La Société Des Océanistes* 100–101 (1995): 67, accessed November 7, 2019, www.persee.fr/doc/jso_0300-953x_1995_num_100_1_1948.

⁴⁾ Michel Levallois, “Mélanésia 2000 — Un Festival Très Politique,” *Journal De La Société Des Océanistes* 100–101 (1995): 127, accessed November 7, 2019, www.persee.fr/doc/jso_0300-953x_1995_num_100_1_1952.

brought about a degree of Kanak autonomy, along with the restitution of local customary authority.⁵⁾ Tjibaou did not live to see whether his dream for the new millennium would come to pass. He was assassinated in 1989 by hard-line separatists who opposed his negotiations with the French government to end more than a decade of violent conflict between pro- and anti-independence factions. By then, the Melanesia 2000 festival had become widely recognized as an emphatic turning point in New Caledonia's history. The site on which it unfolded now hosts the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, which is designed to foster Kanak heritage and contemporary forms of expression. Nevertheless, the monumental nature of this striking architectural landmark is by no means uncontroversial, especially among indigenous Caledonians for whom the territory's independence remains a desired but still elusive goal.⁶⁾

While Melanesia 2000 clearly grew from, and promoted, a specific vision of autochthonous revitalization anchored in its time and place, the event shares common ground with a wide variety of festivals developed over the last few decades as grass-roots indigenous movements have found footholds in many regions and as various national governments, along with supra-national bodies such as the United Nations, have gradually recognized indigenous rights to at least some degree of cultural sovereignty. Cultural festivals have burgeoned in this context, not only across Pacific Island states and territories, where indigenous inhabitants are usually in the majority and often self-governing, but also in nations such as Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada and the United States, where once-autonomous First Peoples, transformed into profoundly marginalized minorities with the pernicious march of European imperialism, are now staging a cultural and political comeback. In many Latin American regions as well, indigenous festivals have gained cultural traction as Andean, Amazonian and other *indígena* groups selectively renew and adapt pre-Columbian festivities to serve twenty-first-century agendas, often in loose coalition with initiatives geared towards socio-political empowerment and sustainable local development.⁷⁾ Film and music festivals have played a part in this broad "festivalization"⁸⁾ of indigenous cultural production, even

⁵⁾ Such authority is overseen by the Customary Senate and implemented through traditional councils of the various Kanak chiefdoms but largely restricted to civil and cultural issues.

⁶⁾ The 2018 referendum on independence resulted in a narrow win for those wanting New Caledonia to remain part of France, but most voters in Kanak communes supported independence. A second referendum will be held in September 2020 following requests by more than a third of the members of the parliamentary congress, as allowed under the Nouméa Accord of 1998.

⁷⁾ While studies such as George Yúdice's book, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003), decry the commoditization of culture inherent in such trends, there is mounting evidence to suggest that indigenous groups exercise considerable agency in instrumentalizing festival performances. In the Latin American context, see, for example, essays by Huarcaya, Córdova Oviedo, Butterworth, Llanes-Ortiz and Roth-Seneff in *Recasting Commodity and Spectacle in the Indigenous Americas*, ed. Helen Gilbert and Charlotte Gleghorn (London: Institute of Latin American Studies, 2014).

⁸⁾ Vicki Ann Cremona outlines what such trends typically involve in "The Festivalising Process," her critical introduction to *Festivalising! Theatrical Events, Politics and Culture*, ed. Temple Hauptfleisch, Shulamith Lev-Aladgem, Jacqueline Martin, Willmar Sauter and Henri Schoenmakers (Amsterdam: Brill/Rodopi, 2007), 5–13.

though the artforms they nurture are often more readily circulated through digital platforms. The many festivals that might be categorized as indigenous across the postcolonial world nevertheless vary greatly in size, location, duration, purpose, character and visibility. Some are locally oriented celebrations staged by and for First Nations communities, while others are international gatherings that function to build cultural and political alliances across different nations. Yet others are remote-area festivals enmeshed in place-making projects, or urban showcases where multicultural arts play primarily to middle-class audiences. Whatever their specific goals might be, indigenous festivals typically work in multiple registers to engage participants from different constituencies, and most depend for their sustainability on the committed energies of community leaders and volunteers, whether or not funding has been secured.

In many respects, the recent and rapid proliferation of indigenous festivals on a global scale may index (and augur) more remarkable shifts in cultural dynamics than the general surge in festivals observed globally of late, notably in contexts of urban regeneration.⁹⁾ Indigenous interest in festival formats as potentially powerful vehicles through which to effect and shape cultural renewal speaks most immediately to common agendas of decolonization driving the broad (if uneven) resurgence of indigenous societies worldwide since the late-twentieth century. Festivals are seen to be productive sites for the embodied labour of decolonization for a number of reasons. Ideally, they provide platforms for enhancing the visibility and perceived value of indigenous cultural production as well as for circulating marginalized stories, artforms and world views. In so far as festivals act as sanctioned spaces for challenging dominant social orders, such platforms lend themselves to critiques of colonialism and performances of cultural sovereignty. As “social works,”¹⁰⁾ festivals also offer occasions for sustained, flexible, indigenous-led collaborations that reach across generations, connect different communities, foster creative and organizational skills, make space for ideas and activities ill-accommodated in other cultural forums and, in some cases, create opportunities for paid employment. Peter Phipps and Lisa Slater discuss these potential benefits in terms of “community wellbeing”¹¹⁾ in their extensive scoping study of indigenous festivals in Australia.¹²⁾ Phipps adds elsewhere that “[c]ultural festivals are one of

⁹⁾ See Bernadette Quinn, “Arts Festivals and the City,” *Urban Studies* 42, no. 5/6 (2005): 927–43; and Monica Sassatelli, “Urban Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere: Cosmopolitanism between Ethics and Aesthetics,” *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, ed. Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli and Gerard Delanty (London: Routledge, 2011), 12–28.

¹⁰⁾ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

¹¹⁾ “Wellbeing” in this instance stresses the social, material and spiritual conditions that enable people to reach their full potential and live “a good life” in terms defined by indigenous communities rather than externally imposed upon them.

¹²⁾ Peter Phipps and Lisa Slater, *Indigenous Cultural Festivals: Evaluating Impact on Community Health and Wellbeing* (Melbourne: Globalism Research Centre, RMIT University, 2010), accessed November 7, 2019, <https://apo.org.au/node/27304>.

the few consistently positive spaces for indigenous communities to forge and assert a more constructive view of themselves both intergenerationally and as part of a drive for recognition and respect as distinct cultures in various local, national, and international contexts.”¹³⁾ Case studies drawn from very different parts of the world support this claim,¹⁴⁾ but the broad characteristics of such events are yet to be mapped on an international scale.

This essay focuses on indigenous festivals in the Pacific in an attempt to draw connections between a dynamic, evolving constellation of cultural events and the conceptual and material labour of nation-building. That instrumental process can be as much about (re)building First Nations communities, sometimes across scattered locales and imposed geo-political borders, as about efforts by sovereign states to fashion a cultural polity. As a vast but interconnected “sea of islands,” as Tongan scholar-artist Epeli Hau‘ofa famously characterized the region,¹⁵⁾ Oceania provides rich terrain for a study of indigenous festivals, not least because its widely dispersed communities have managed to sustain vital inter-archipelagic networks and cultural exchanges amid successive waves of colonization: cultural, political, economic and military. My analysis in this instance attempts neither a history nor a taxonomy of the festivals at issue. The field is too vast, too diverse, too amorphous and too fluid to lend itself to such approaches, especially as performance, itself fundamental to festival activity, so readily becomes the ground on which conflicting ideas of indigeneity play out, as I have argued elsewhere.¹⁶⁾ Moreover, the ecology of indigenous festival production is typically precarious, particularly when subject to the fortunes of public funding, whether to sustain local heritage, diversify offerings in national arts markets, stimulate cultural tourism, foster good relations between settler and indigenous groups or, less often, support innovation for its own sake. What I can offer to a study of this intricate “festivalscape” as a non-indigenous researcher and sometime festivalgoer is thus at best a partial account of the main kinds of cultural and political work indigenous festivals seem to do across broadly similar or interlinked contexts.

The examples discussed in brief below are drawn from a range of different locations

¹³⁾ Peter Phipps, “Performances of Power: Indigenous Cultural Festivals as Globally Engaged Cultural Strategy,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 35, no. 3 (2010): 217.

¹⁴⁾ For examples in Aotearoa New Zealand, Oceania and Scandinavia, respectively, see Parehau Richards and Chris Ryan, “The Aotearoa Traditional Māori Performing Arts Festival 1972–2000,” *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* 2, no. 2 (2004): 94–117; Dan Bendrups, “Pacific Festivals as Dynamic Contact Zones: The Case of Tapati Rapa Nui,” *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* 2, no. 1 (2008): 14–28; and Thomas R. Hilder, “Sámi Festivals and Indigenous Sovereignty,” *The Oxford Handbook of Popular Music in the Nordic Countries*, ed. Fabian Holt and Antti-Ville Kärjä (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 363–78.

¹⁵⁾ Epeli Hau‘ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 147–61. Hau‘ofa explains that “Oceania” is his preferred term for the Pacific because it conceptualizes the region as a totality to which the ocean is as integral as the islands (152–53).

¹⁶⁾ Helen Gilbert, “Introduction: Indigeneity and Performance,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 174.

in order to conjure something of the expansive cultural flows Hau‘ofa emphasizes in his conception of Oceania as a fundamentally relational space. Such flows have seeded distinctive festivals not just in numerous islands and archipelagos but also in Pacific Rim cities where diasporic communities gather to celebrate their indigeneity in creatively contingent ways. In approach and method, the essay heeds Chickasaw scholar Chadwick Allen’s influential model of “trans-indigenous” research, a mode of analytics based on meaningful juxtapositions of indigenous experiences, concepts or practices across different times and/or places.¹⁷⁾ Trans-indigenous analysis, in Allen’s terms, means thinking through connections without homogenizing the cultures at issue. Such research “locates itself firmly in the specificity of the Indigenous local, while remaining always cognizant of the complexity of the relevant Indigenous global.”¹⁸⁾ Accordingly, “indigenous” is used here (sometimes interchangeably with First Nations) as an inclusive, portmanteau term that reaches across specific nations, clans, *iwi*, tribal affiliations or other groupings. To convey the vitality of indigenous festivals as sites of cultural renewal, while keeping pace with their characteristic embrace of many kinds of performances, my discussion encompasses a wide spectrum of embodied artforms and practices. This inclusive focus also acknowledges the genealogies of performance that connect present-day festivals to earlier indigenous festivities, many of which were sanitized, exoticized, banned or otherwise devalued by colonial regimes, but which nevertheless endured to varying degrees, sometimes in clandestine registers.

Mobilizing Heritage: Pacific Festivals and Decolonization

The particular trajectory of the Melanesia 2000 festival as the seedbed for a revolutionary push towards Kanak self-determination may be unusual in many cultural contexts, but the entwinement of festival activities with performances designed to endorse sovereign indigenous nationhood (real or aspirational) is a common occurrence in the (post)colonial world. In Oceania, annual cultural festivals rapidly became key mechanisms by which newly independent—or at least largely autonomous— island nations forged the “unique cultural and political identities” required by that status following the gradual decolonization of much of the region in the 1960s–70s.¹⁹⁾ These independence-oriented festivals range from one-day celebrations in the tiny nations of Tuvalu, Palau and Kiribati, to week-long events such as Te Maeva Nui in the Cook Islands and the Teuila Festival in Samoa. Such festivals have generally been initiated, developed and funded through the apparatus of the state and remain events meant to galvanize indigenous participation in nation-building, though some also attract

¹⁷⁾ Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

¹⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, xix.

¹⁹⁾ Bendrups, “Pacific Festivals as Dynamic Contact Zones,” 18.

tourist audiences. Music, dance, oratory, pageantry and competitive games are typically at the programme core, with the emphasis on forms and styles of performance seen as local to the island archipelagos concerned. Only a few festivals count non-indigenous performances as potentially “local” heritage. One example is Fiji Week, which harnesses Indian as well as native Fijian performing arts to enact the diversity and (somewhat elusive) unity of the nation in a series of festivities culminating in ceremonies to mark the anniversary of independence from Britain in 1970. The creative labour of traditional ceremonial and daily life also features prominently in Oceanic festivals and takes myriad forms, including food preparation, cloth-manufacture, boat making, body marking, carving and the fabrication of clothing and adornments. Short theatrical sketches sometimes complement the offerings, but more complex dramas and dance-works are typically developed through international arts festivals or other showcases in regional metropolitan hubs, notably Auckland, which has a large diasporic Pasifikan community.

Nation-building in this arena relies fundamentally on mobile and contingent triangulations of indigeneity, heritage and tradition, where these constitutive concepts are neither static nor predictable but rather continually negotiated in the crucible of performance. In some cases, the renewal of indigenous traditions has involved creative adaptation of festive forms that fell out of favour with the introduction of Christianity. Seutatia Telesia Solomona explains, for instance, how the clowning traditions popular in the courts of Samoan chiefs now animate a range of events at the Teuila Festival, which was launched as a government initiative in 1992 to boost tourism and quickly became the main arena for national self-fashioning in Samoa. The *faleaitu* (clown) role builds on audiences’ expectations of certain levels of comic play and disruption. It is typically embraced by brass-band conductors and MCs at the festival and also by dancers in competitive forms such as the *aiuli*, a brisk athletic routine performed by young men.²⁰⁾ Other group and solo dances in the festival competition, which has parallels across Oceania, likewise follow indigenous patterns and protocols in composition, structure and choreography, and are usually accompanied by Samoan forms of instrumentation.

Entertainments developed through colonial-era cultural interchanges are equally part of the traditional performance commons. One Teuila Festival highlight of this kind is *kilikiti*, a Samoan version of cricket, which was quickly indigenized—and theatricalized—after its introduction by missionaries in the late 1880s. Matches feature teams of virtually any size and constitution wearing *lavalava* (wrap-around cloths) as uniforms, with game-play punctuated by songs, dances and chants performed by batting sides as well as fielding sides.²¹⁾ Choral singing competitions by church groups at the Teuila Festival similarly stage

²⁰⁾ Seutatia Telesia Solomona, “Teuila: An Ethnography of Samoan Music and Identity,” (University of Otago: MA Thesis, 2009), 80–81.

²¹⁾ Andy Bull, “Cricket in Samoa: It’s Just Not Kilikiti,” *The Guardian*, January 26, 2010, accessed November 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2010/jan/26/the-spin-cricket-in-samoa>.

the eclectic theatricality marking indigenous innovations of colonial Christianity in many parts of the world. In this case, the development of village choirs across Samoa (as elsewhere in the Pacific) has not only localized imposed liturgical forms but also aided the revival of indigenous song practices and languages, which are validated through the festival platform. Collectively, these festival offerings mobilize tradition as both instrument and evidence of indigenous resurgence. In doing so, they practice a version of syncretism akin to that “conscious, programmatic strategy” Christopher Balme has theorized as marking postcolonial theatre movements more broadly.²²⁾

Performative recuperations, adaptations and (re)inventions of indigenous traditions through state-sponsored festivals are likewise evident in Pacific Islands that remain (for now) part of annexed or special territories without political sovereignty. In French Polynesia, for example, *La fête* (celebrating Bastille Day) was transformed across the course of the twentieth century by the gradual infusion of *la culture mā'ohi* (indigenous culture) into its programme. With this process, the festival came to express Tahitian identity, prompting a name change in 1986 to Heiva i Tahiti. Karen Stevenson's detailed account of the festival's history shows how it has played out the archipelago's ambivalent relationship with French colonialism, on the one hand expressly co-opting indigenous performance into a “new cultural tradition” through which all the islands' inhabitants (French *and* Mā'ohi) could see themselves as Polynesian, and on the other hand providing a very visible space for multimodal enactments of indigenous particularity within a French-governed territory.²³⁾ Competitions in traditional song and dance, staged in both professional and amateur categories as the festival's major drawcard, have become the key means through which to express such particularity, supplemented by sporting contests that showcase indigenous knowledges and skills, notably in seafaring and boat craft. At the structural level, this emphasis on competition suggests the Heiva's contiguity with pre-contact festivities in the region, where competitive performance worked as a mechanism for interclan interaction and negotiation.

The festival has also prompted a renaissance of indigenous ceremonial traditions, among them marae rituals and the fire walk, both of which were sacred in precolonial society and open only to select audiences. Subsequent missionary suppression of these performances made them even rarer in practice before they were incorporated (with some artistic licence) into the festival programme as secular re-enactments in the 1950s. *Tatau* (tattoo) is another indigenous custom reinvigorated through the Heiva, which, like most Polynesian festivals, features performances that show the craft, artistry and *mana* (cultural power) attached to this rite-of-passage practice, along with an inventory of new designs. Through all these creative

²²⁾ Christopher Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 2.

²³⁾ Karen Stevenson, “‘Heiva’: Continuity and Change of a Tahitian Celebration,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 2, no. 2 (1990): 264–65.

labours and others of their ilk, the festival circulates and sustains embodied connections to ‘an ancient past’ that effectively work to “counter a colonial present.”²⁴⁾ This process could be seen as fostering indigenous nationhood even while the recuperation of traditional performance forms as shareable heritage remains tethered to France’s vision of the territory’s cultural and economic development.

Tradition, Innovation and Indigenous Empowerment

Across those parts of the Pacific where First Peoples now constitute minority populations in their original homelands, the staging of tradition as an iterative practice of indigenous empowerment can also serve diverse and apparently competing political agendas. In New Zealand, the Aotearoa Traditional Māori Performing Arts Festival, now known as Te Matatini (meaning “many faces”), seems to have thrived on such tensions. Since its launch in 1972 as an itinerant national event building on regional *kapa haka* competitions,²⁵⁾ the festival has become not only a prominent and successful vehicle for the revitalization of Māori language and *tikanga* (customs) but also a dynamic social space in which various *iwi* (tribal units) can assert their distinctiveness within a broader indigenous polity. Te Matatini draws up to 50,000 mostly Māori visitors to its four-day biennial showcase, where elite *kapa haka* teams representing the different *iwi* compete for festival honours. Each group’s thirty-minute performance must include six set pieces—*whakaeke* (entry), *waiata ā-ringa* (action song), *poi* (dance with swinging balls), *mōteatea* (traditional chant), *haka* (men’s dance) and *whakawatea* (exit)—and is judged on its level of physical prowess, language competence and artistry in song and dance.²⁶⁾ Beyond the active transmission of Māori cultural forms honed by the demands of competition, what Te Matatini stages through these cumulative public acts is a visceral call for *tinu rangatiratanga* (self-determination) on a national scale. At one level, this kind of call challenges official approaches to biculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand; yet the festival also visibly participates in that postcolonial nation-building project through its investment in (a particular version of) Māori heritage. The substantial government and corporate sponsorship behind Te Matatini’s expansion since the late 1990s, as well as its promotion by mainstream tourism and media industries, further complicates assessment of its efficacy as a decolonizing tool. A perennial topic of debate in this respect is the festival’s capacity to decide where the limits of tradition should lie. As critics have noted, however, conflicting opinions on this issue reflect wider intertribal and intergenerational debates within

²⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, 270.

²⁵⁾ *Kapa haka* is generally taken to mean traditional Māori performance-based arts, although some critics argue that the concept developed in dynamic relation with colonialism. See Sharon Mazer, “Performing Māori: *Kapa Haka* on the Stage and on the Ground,” *Popular Entertainment Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): 41–53.

²⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, 43.

Māoridom and have long been fundamental to the event's dynamism.²⁷⁾

Whereas Te Matatini mobilizes tradition as a way of claiming Māori (first) nationhood in a country whose cultural matrix is visibly influenced by indigenous migrants from other parts of the Pacific, initiatives such as the Merrie Monarch Festival in Hawai'i and the Tapati Festival in Rapa Nui (Easter Island) work to foreground their Polynesian roots, thereby disavowing—at least in part—the imposed colonial ties that bind their island constituencies to mainland governing states. The Hawaiian festival began in 1964 to honour the legacy of King David Kalākaua (dubbed the Merrie Monarch), who is credited with restoring hula to his kingdom in the 1870s as the fundamental cultural language or “heartbeat” of the people,²⁸⁾ after its suppression by missionaries some decades earlier. Hula, as the festival website stresses, combines “genealogy, mythology, history and religion” in complex, highly coded performative forms, which are practised by both men and women.²⁹⁾ Phipps's nuanced study of the hula competition at the heart of the week-long gathering concludes that its reclamation of “living tradition” through public performance effectively conditions audiences to recognize themselves as subjects of a Hawaiian (rather than American) national culture.³⁰⁾ The multi-layered histories of colonization, militarization and migration shaping Hawai'i as a Pacific archipelago are evident in the regular participation of external *hālau* (hula schools) in the festival, notably from other Polynesian islands, Japan and the Hawaiian diaspora in the USA. In this context, Phipps argues, the festival goes beyond calls for recognition and cultural respect to open a “potent space for intercultural accommodations to be negotiated on largely indigenous terrain.”³¹⁾

A similar, if less subtle, circumvention of western sovereignty models is staged in Tapati Rapa Nui, which follows the broad Polynesian pattern of using competitive performances as modes of both indigenous self-fashioning and communal belonging. Here, with exceptions such as the *koro haka opo* (a sing-off between two ensembles that runs until one team exhausts its repertoire or makes a mistake),³²⁾ the festival programme gives less emphasis to reviving pre-contact forms as such, than to *interpreting* their lore for, and with, Rapa Nui audiences. A case in point is the popular folklore competition, a cornerstone event that features (amid other syncretic fare) “dramatic renditions of ancient legends” and choreographed illustrations of songs from traditional repertoires.³³⁾ The spectacular Tapati physical endurance contests,

²⁷⁾ See Richards and Ryan, “The Aotearoa Traditional Māori Performing Arts Festival,” 114–16.

²⁸⁾ Merrie Monarch Festival website homepage, accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.merriemonarch.com>.

²⁹⁾ “About King Kalākaua” and “History of the Festival,” Merrie Monarch Festival website, accessed January 10, 2020, <https://www.merriemonarch.com/history/> and <https://www.merriemonarch.com/history-of-the-festival/>.

³⁰⁾ Phipps, “Performances of Power,” 222–23.

³¹⁾ *Ibid.*, 218.

³²⁾ Bendrups, “Pacific Festivals as Dynamic Contact Zones,” 23.

³³⁾ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

inspired by the feats of legendary Rapanui figures and promoted on festival tourism websites as “ancestral sports,”³⁴⁾ likewise turn on theatrical interpretations of a distant, heroic past. Even while such ‘inventions of tradition’ (pace Hobsbawm³⁵⁾) index the precariousness of a people decimated by slavery, introduced diseases, theft of their land and ghettoization following contact with Europeans, these performances show indigenous cultural muscle at work in the creative labour of reclaiming ethnic and linguistic ties with other Polynesian societies. In doing so, Tapati draws in participants of all ages to represent (and experience) Rapa Nui as an island community within the Polynesian Triangle, not as a remote outpost annexed by Chile in 1888 and now governed as one of its special territories. To creatively repair colonialism’s cultural ruptures in this way is to trouble the foundation—and continuing sovereign mandate—of the Chilean nation-state. Such geopolitical realignments, however aspirational, suggest that what is at stake in the festival’s entertainments is not just the transmission of ideas, artforms, values and practices salvaged from an indigenous past, but equally the laying of foundations for a Rapanui future with a specifically Oceanic outlook.³⁶⁾

Region-building: The Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture

The trans-indigenous orientation that attends Oceanic thinking has inflected regional cultural policy since at least 1972, when FestPac, the Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture,³⁷⁾ was launched in Fiji as a postcolonial initiative to foster interaction, co-operation and unity among Pacific peoples while helping to preserve and develop their indigenous artforms. This quadrennial festival now brings together up to 3000 performers and artisans from 27 island states and territories in a two-week cultural gala convened on each occasion by a different host nation, including, to date, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tahiti, New Caledonia, Cook Islands, Samoa and Aotearoa New Zealand, among others. Locals and off-island indigenous groups are the main attendees and can number in the tens of thousands, depending on the event’s location. Staged as a non-competitive showcase, FestPac promotes intraregional cultural and artistic exchanges, and with them notions of a pan-Pacific indigeneity that is seen to bridge ethnic, national, political and linguistic differences. One spectacular expression of this identity, and the inter-island reciprocity on which it turns, is the opening day’s dawn welcome,

³⁴⁾ See, among others, the Chile Ministry of Tourism website, accessed January 3, 2019, <https://chile.travel/en/events/tapati>.

³⁵⁾ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1983]), 1–14.

³⁶⁾ In this respect, the festival affirms Rapanui peoples as distinct from the mainland Aymara and Mapuche groups that form the bulk of Chile’s indigenous population, a demographic often homogenized in centralist government policy. See Bendrups, “Pacific Festivals as Dynamic Contact Zones,” 20.

³⁷⁾ Known as the South Pacific Festival of Arts until 2004 when the name was changed to reflect a wider canvass.

when seafarers from different archipelagos arrive to be welcomed in a flotilla of handcrafted *vaka* (canoes) marking the renaissance—and resilience—of indigenous voyaging practices, including instrument-free navigation.³⁸⁾ Numerous other artisanal activities, notably weaving, tattooing and the fabrication of *tapa* (bark cloth), are championed under the banner of Oceanic traditions, alongside a range of song, dance, drama, oratory and storytelling performances.

FestPac also showcases contemporary urban Pasifika culture in syncretic forms such as rap, reggae and wearable art, and has recently added a broad-ranging film strand to its programme. The Auckland-based collective Pacific Sisters paved the way for such inclusions with its controversial 1996 festival offering, *Motu Tangata*,³⁹⁾ an experiment in multimedia fashion activism harnessing *mana wāhine* (women's power) to assert radical indigenous identities through garment making and embodied display. In addition to its artistic fare, each festival runs a series of forum discussions and workshops on region-wide concerns, ranging from urban drift, rising sea levels and marine pollution to public health and social inequality. A regional sensibility likewise guides FestPac's approach to the logistical challenges of staging a roving festival of such magnitude in widely dispersed and unequally resourced locales. Thus, while host nations are expected to take the lead in organizing and funding the event, their efforts are supported by governments of participating countries as well as international bodies such as UNESCO, an arrangement consistent with development strategies in the region and one that ensures high levels of diplomatic interest in the festival, together with due attention to statecraft.

As a long-standing and influential platform not only for transmitting distinct cultural traditions but also for fashioning a consolidated indigenous voice and polity, FestPac has played a vital role in Oceania's (partial) decolonization. At the same time, the event's quasi-ethnographic curation through a festival-village format, where each hut stages a different nation's cultural patrimony, has prompted periodic debates about how best to steward the region's creative arts, in all their variability, amid the challenges and upheavals of the twenty-first century. Papuan playwright and former FestPac selector Michael Mel has argued in this respect that to guard against becoming a nostalgic spectacle, the festival must keep pace with the lived cosmopolitanism of Pacific communities as forged in the transits and confluences set in train (or redirected) by successive waves of colonialism. Cultural agency, he suggests, hinges on a balance between indigenous and exogenous ideas and a willingness to embrace risk and social controversy.⁴⁰⁾ FestPac has been moving in that

³⁸⁾ Susan Cochrane, "Spirit of the Solomons: 11th Festival of Pacific Arts," *Art Monthly Australia* 253 (2012): 6.

³⁹⁾ The show was dropped after complaints from a Māori delegation, but then reinstated, though unfortunately not in time for the planned run. See Iona Gordon-Smith, "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Pacific Sisters at Te Papa," *The Pantograph Punch*, April 18, 2018, accessed March 4, 2019, <https://www.pantograph-punch.com/post/pacific-sisters>.

⁴⁰⁾ Michael A. Mel, "Ples bilong mi: Interfacing Global and Indigenous Knowledge and Vision at Home and Abroad," *Pacific Arts* 25 (2002): 44–45.

direction in recent years while nonetheless honouring the principle of *kastom*, a Melanesian term that appropriates the English word “custom” to encompass adaptive practices grounded in indigenous concepts as well as the deep cultural undercurrents connecting Oceanic peoples and places across time.

The pro-independence protest staged by twelve Chamoru members of the host nation’s delegation at the closing ceremony of FestPac 2016 in Guåhan (Guam) may not be the kind of controversy Mel had in mind, but it does illustrate broadening investment in the festival as a charged site for activism. Guåhan, the oldest continuous colony in the Pacific and now home to US air and naval bases that dominate island life, is a potent symbol of American neo-imperialism. As the Chamoru performers paraded the length of the FestPac stage unfurling a banner emblazoned with “Decolonize Oceania” and “Free Guåhan,” they enacted not only a demand for political autonomy and demilitarization but also a call for solidarity, an appeal to those assembled to *act* on the ethos of “belonging with others” incorporated into the festival theme.⁴¹⁾ Many delegates took up the call to action, donning armbands with similar demands and posting defiant photos and comments on social media.⁴²⁾ FestPac’s next edition in Hawai‘i in 2020 seems set to channel such energies into an artistic campaign for environmental justice anchored in indigenous sovereignty. Its theme, “E kū i ka hoe uli,” which roughly translates as “Steer your own course,” comes from a prophetic chant voiced on the eve of James Cook’s 1778 arrival in Kaua‘i. The chant warns of catastrophic turbulence at the hands of foreigners and urges Hawaiians to “take hold of the steering paddle” to determine their own destiny. The festival logo, a stylized *vaka* with coral polyp patterns on its sails, signals the indigenous knowledge and ingenuity that will guide such a journey. In ecological terms, it also indexes the fragility of Oceanic reef systems affected by global warming.⁴³⁾

As the example of FestPac suggests, indigenous forms of regionalism can give political and artistic heft to festival praxis, in part because they scale up and dynamically connect different nation-building projects under the broad aegis of cultural exchange. In this context, embodied performances of kinship, solidarity and regional cooperation, together with a shared sense of Oceanic stewardship, help to build a trans-indigenous citizenry not readily contained within the borders of the nation-state. Such a citizenry, it could be argued, augments conditions for indigenous sovereignty to be strategically disarticulated from Westphalian statehood. Similar modes of indigenous regionalism undergird First Nations festivals in other parts of the world, notably the Circumpolar North. One case in point is Riddu Riddu, which features artists from the Sámi cultures of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia in an international celebration of indigenous music and culture staged annually in Kåfjord municipality in Norway. Founded in 1991, the festival has been credited with helping not just “to imagine a pan-Sámi

⁴¹⁾ Tiara Na‘aputi and Sylvia Frain, “Decolonize Oceania! Free Guåhan!” *Amerasia Journal* 43, no. 3 (2017): 12–13.

⁴²⁾ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴³⁾ See festival website, accessed November 7, 2019, www.festivalofpacificarts.com/about-festpac-2020.

community” but also “to bring into being the notion of a transnational Sámi ‘nation’—Sápmi”—stretching across the north of the Fennoscandian Peninsula.⁴⁴⁾

Cultural Flows and Diasporic Remittances

Tourism has crosscut the labour of indigenous decolonization in the Pacific in complex and manifold ways, putting pressure on festivals as signature events tasked with materializing—and energizing—local performance cultures, often in tandem with development agendas of some kind. Without doubt, some festival events are shaped with one eye to soliciting tourist interest, and thereby economic benefit for the host community, especially in islands where local economies have been rapidly reoriented by mass tourism, with its voracious appetite for packaged cultural experiences. A case in point is Vanuatu, which has seen a proliferation in cultural festivals over the last few decades since its main towns became popular ports of call on Pacific cruise-ship itineraries. Yet, tourism does not automatically render indigenous performers as powerless objects of a neo-colonial gaze, unable to shape the terms of their (cross)cultural interactions. As Jane Moulin shows with reference to recent trends in Tahitian dance, the “intricate visitor–host convergence” characterizing festival tourism has created spaces of opportunity for building cultural capital responsive to the challenges of modernity and globalization.⁴⁵⁾ Indigenous artists savvily negotiate such spaces. Some strategically commodify aspects of their work to leverage infrastructural support for its development and dissemination. Others perform in broadly accessible registers that call on tourists to bear witness to indigenous struggles and achievements, or to stand in solidarity with local communities on particular issues. In these circumstances, performances developed as festival “products” are often repurposed for local occasions such as a welcome home celebration for dignitaries or a school fundraiser,⁴⁶⁾ and may also be integrated into artistic productions staged in regional or international venues.

Indigenous tourism, a prominent factor in shaping most Oceanic festivals, further complicates ready assumptions about what kinds of cultural work such gatherings are primed to do. While high levels of outmigration from the smaller archipelagos direct cultural flows across vast expanses to urban centres, notably in Pacific Rim countries, island festivals regularly draw Pasifikan migrants (and new generations) back to their ancestral territories to renew familial and place-based connections and immerse themselves in indigenous cultures.

⁴⁴⁾ Hilder, “Sámi Festivals and Indigenous Sovereignty,” 369.

⁴⁵⁾ Jane Freeman Moulin, “Touristic Encounters: Imag(in)ing Tahiti and Its Performing Arts,” *A Distinctive Voice in the Antipodes: Essays in Honour of Stephen A. Wild*, ed. Kirsty Gillespie, Sally Treloyn and Don Niles (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), 268.

⁴⁶⁾ John Taylor and Kalissa Alexeyeff, “Departures and Arrivals in Touring Pacific Cultures,” *Touring Pacific Cultures*, ed. Kalissa Alexeyeff and John Taylor (Canberra: ANU Press 2016), 20.

For performance-makers based outside their island communities, such return visits are occasions to refresh and expand indigenous body-based vocabularies and repertoires, whether through workshops, competitions or other activities. In turn, these insider guests bring home new ideas, techniques and experiences to share, and are sometimes able to broker local artists' access to international venues. Island festivals thus foster reciprocal flows of cultural capital or what Diana Looser has explored as "cultural remittances" in reference to recent theatrical productions from the Samoan diaspora. Exchanges of this kind, she notes, route the concept of remittances away from "associations with island economic dependency" and "towards productive questions of cultural maintenance and transition."⁴⁷⁾

In diasporic nodes of this exchange circuit, events such as Auckland's annual Pasifika Festival, which attracts approximately 60,000 visitors, along with smaller gatherings in Wellington, Brisbane, Honolulu, Los Angeles and other urban centres, similarly provide spaces for performers to develop "polycultural capital" that speaks to the needs and interests of different indigenous constituencies.⁴⁸⁾ What emerges from these multidirectional cultural flows, considered in terms of the nexus between nation-building and decolonization as it concerns me here, is the material expression of mobile, trans-indigenous and *cosmopolitan* spaces of solidarity and attachment. Such spaces are not only in flux as populations mix and move, but also in tune with traditional indigenous ocean-based cartographies conceptualizing the Pacific as "a shared and fluid environment and heritage."⁴⁹⁾ A sense of national belonging is not inimical to this regionalist conception of indigeneity, but rather one mode of contingent affiliation among many possible others.

Embodied arts rooted in Oceanic forms and philosophies also circulate in festivals further afield, often as part of broadly configured showcases designed to bring indigenous works and perspectives to (largely) non-indigenous publics. A key example is the Origins Festival in London, launched in 2009 by maverick intercultural company Border Crossings as a biennial celebration of the arts and cultures of the world's First Nations. Contributions by Māori and Pacific Islanders regularly feature at this two-week event, not only in the theatre, film and exhibition strands, but also, and crucially, in ceremonial performances that anchor the festival in time and place, paying due regard to the politics of its location in the erstwhile centre of British imperialism. These ceremonies, intended to guide and nourish the creative labour at the heart of the festival, draw from indigenous traditions and protocols to fashion appropriate, site-specific forms of welcome, blessing, reconciliation and cultural exchange. They are normally devised and led by performance-makers from London's sizeable Pacific

⁴⁷⁾ Diana Looser, "Moving Islands: Mapping the Samoan Diaspora in Contemporary Transnational Theatre from the South Pacific," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 4 (2012): 466.

⁴⁸⁾ Jared Mackley-Crump, *The Pacific Festivals of Aotearoa New Zealand: Negotiating Place and Identity in a New Homeland* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 8–9.

⁴⁹⁾ Diana Looser, "Oceanic Imaginaries and Waterworlds: *Vaka Moana* on the Sea and Stage," *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 3 (2015): 465.

diaspora, notably members of Ngāti Rānana London Māori Club, a cultural group formed in the late 1950s, and Gafa Arts Collective, which was launched in 2012 to foster contemporary transmission and innovation of Samoan art forms. By assuming the role of festival co-hosts, the local Māori and Pacific Island communities effectively (re)claim the “right of embassy,”⁵⁰⁾ the diplomatic right to officially represent their nations in cross-cultural affairs. In essence, through performance, they also assert their status, symbolically and instrumentally, as native to London as well as Oceania. These expressions of cultural sovereignty can be understood as potentially extending the patterns of indigenous nation-building and region-building traced in this essay. More broadly, the Origins Festival provides a visible platform for nation-to-nation congress among its indigenous participants, helping to foster robust international circuits of artistic production and experiment.

Conclusion

The festivals considered above, and numerous others like them, have played significant and sustained, if sometimes subtle, roles in channelling modernization, decolonization and globalization in Pacific societies. For the most part, such gatherings explicitly aim to renew indigenous societies through contingent and accessible expressions of their heritage, itself understood as a repertoire of adaptable practices dynamically anchored to Oceanic lifeways. In this context, traditions can readily morph into experimental and syncretic forms, even against the pull of nostalgia. By harnessing the vital energies of performance to foster pride in local, regional and diasporic arts—as well as solidarity across cultures, kinship groups and generations—Pacific festivals have provided potent platforms for the assertion of indigenous nationhood in many and varied iterations. This cultural revitalization has both bolstered and benefitted from movements towards self-determination and, in some island archipelagos, it has fortified the attainment of political statehood. Yet, as the epigraph to my essay suggests, the more radical aspect of indigenous cultural resurgence may lie in its potential to (re)build First Nations polities that are not nation states.⁵¹⁾ The festivals I have examined amply demonstrate that this nation-building process can be as much about cultural realignments as about political independence as such. That is not to argue that these gatherings are somehow impervious to the incorporating effects of neoliberal state agendas or multinational regimes of capital—there is ample evidence that government support and tourist patronage, among other vested interests, can be a scourge as well as a boon—but instead to give due political weight to the immense

⁵⁰⁾ This concept is elaborated in Costas Constantinou and James Der Derian, “Introduction: Sustaining Global Hope: Sovereignty, Power and the Transformation of Diplomacy,” *Sustainable Diplomacies: Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations*, ed. Costas Constantinou and James Der Derian (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 10.

⁵¹⁾ Simpson, “Indigenous Resurgence and Co-resistance,” 22.

creativity and versatility with which indigenous leaders, curators, artists, cultural custodians and festivalgoers have strategically crafted the events at issue.

The idea that indigenous nation-building finds material form in the embodied labour of festival activities is consonant with Cherokee scholar Jeff Cornassel's argument that "[t]he decolonization process operates at multiple levels and necessitates moving from an awareness of being in struggle, to actively engaging in everyday practices of resurgence."⁵²⁾ Underpinning this view is a critical reformulation of the ways in which cultural praxis and self-determination intertwine:

This shift means rejecting the performativity of a rights discourse geared toward state affirmation and recognition, and embracing a daily existence conditioned by place-based cultural practices. How one engages in daily processes of truth-telling and resistance to colonial encroachments is just as important as the overall outcome of these struggles to reclaim, restore, and regenerate homeland relationships.⁵³⁾

By definition, festivals themselves are never everyday events, but, as fashioned by Oceanic societies, they do condition how participants experience and express their indigeneity and, by extension, how they might harness place-based practices to tackle the quotidian challenges of decolonization.

⁵²⁾ Jeff Cornassel, "Re-envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-determination," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 89.

⁵³⁾ *Ibid.*, 4.