Not quite Paradise: Management fallout at the VIII Festival of Pacific Arts

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Abstract The paper seeks to examine, within a broader historical context, administrative aspects of the 2000 VIIIth Festival of Pacific Arts in New Caledonia. This quadrennial Festival of indigenous arts is crucial as a major international opportunity to express Pacific solidarity and to celebrate the region’s diverse and dynamic cultural identities. However, its most recent (and more affluent) manifestation departed from the usual Pasefika way of doing things, influenced by its location in a former French colony-cum-tourist resort. Drawing upon the experiential perspective of a western cultural tourist and arts critic, the paper charts some examples of unnecessarily obstructive bureaucracy and their effects upon participants and audiences. Notwithstanding organisational adversity - and at some cost - the artists eventually triumphed over what may be considered a parallel and sometimes entertaining universe of ‘theatrical’ débâcles. The Festival will once more take place in 2004 but the administration saga continues …

Biography Pamela Zeplin is a writer and artist based in Adelaide, a Senior Lecturer at the University of South Australia and is currently completing a PhD at the University of New South Wales on Australian art in the Asia-Pacific region.

Acknowledgments The paper has its genesis in a long-standing ‘affaire’ with Pacific cultures, despite dangers lurking in the thorny thickets of critical theory with its attendant snares of exoticism, othering and (untheorised) desire. Because the spectacle of thousands of enchanted westerners (including myself) at a Pacific festival is difficult to take too seriously in conventional theoretical terms, I have attempted a more informal and personal approach to this topic. I acknowledge the South Australian School of Art and the University of South Australia for permission to attend both the XIIth and XIIIth Festivals of Pacific Arts.

Diary Date: March - July 2003, Adelaide

What follows are reflections on the diary entries of a participating visitor, comparing differences between this administrative regime and that of the previous VIIth Festival of Pacific Arts in (formerly Western) Samoa, with some recommendations towards the next Festival in Palau (Belau) in 2004

Diary Date: October 23-November 3 2000, 8th Festival of Pacific Arts, Noumea, New Caledonia

For two hundred and ten weeks this date had been indelibly marked in my diary, ever since attending the previous Festival in (former Western) Samoa in September...
1996. I was left weak with pleasure, awash with astonishment and my "senses upright and saluting" (Ackermann 1988: 8). How could other festivals, or indeed other experiences, possibly measure up? This time however, as an earnest academic, I hoped for something other than Paradise. Paradise is much too difficult to write about; it gets in the way of responsible theoretical discourse and makes it even more difficult to return, especially to Adelaide’s arid environment of “gridded rectitude” (Morrell 2000). Besides, no one would believe me, least of all those postcolonial scholars who have never dipped a toe in the Pacific - which incidentally, is warm as well as wet.

Now, of course, day to day life in this region is not quite the Paradise experienced by Festival visitors and even the most relentless of western hedonists visiting Samoa soon became aware of the reality of tainted political and economic Pacific specifics. Nuclear explosions, foreign debt, chronic corruption, metallic mountains of sub-standard tinned food (the food the west rejects) and diabetes were palpably evident, even if the tribulations of youth suicide and AIDS were less so. Despite such a burden of blight, juxtaposed with the spectacle of astonishingly affluent churches flourishing amongst a population in poverty, a robust and sensuous physicality nevertheless prevailed. It triumphed over the constrictions of imposed puritan religion, even on Persil-white Sundays, when everyone - even pith-helmeted local policemen in lava lava - was garbed in white and looking like inhabitants of heaven. Fragrant leis and music abounded, with robust voices in four-part harmony overflowing churches which looked out across turquoise lagoons fringed with palm trees, bougainvillea and frangipani; here vitality, vigour and passion had long usurped the stiffness of western ways of worship. And then there was the ubiquity of laughter, of dance – everywhere - and looming in the background, always the constant thumping of drums. For weeks after returning, any urgings of critical consciousness were drowned by these rhythms pulsing through my veins and enticing me back to the moist corporeality of all things Pacific - or at least to the next Pacific Festival of Arts.

Since the inaugural 1972 Festival in Fiji, this has been an experience common to hundreds of thousands of people; the event enjoys significant performative pulling power. As "the most important meeting place for ... indigenous communities of the Pacific who come together to celebrate their shared cultural and historical ties" (Australia Council 1996), the Festival equally presents astounding differences between and within over thirty Pacific nations. Comparable to an arts Olympiad, this quadrennial event functions to bring together a rich diversity of cultures, histories, politics, races, ethnicities, religions and social structures through a dazzling array of dance, music, poetry, crafts, theatre, literature, film video, and since 1996, contemporary forms of visual art.

Unlike the separation between Western art forms and their classification into ‘high’ arts and popular culture, these distinctions tend to be blurred in the Pacific. Equally important in an Oceanic context are the arts of ceremony, oratory, story telling, tivaevae quilting, cuisine, maritime construction and navigation. And then there’s the dimension between these activities - what happens in the interstices and intervals; here one seriously practices the arts of criticism, conversation and gossip. Habitually neutralised within the domain of conventional western arts organisation, these discourses remain unremarked and incidental to the main event. In the Pacific, however, they occupy a vital layer of cultural, political and economic communication as well as a space for participation; in this way New Caledonia’s Festival rumour mill proved even more critical in providing essential information.

**Diary Date: March-October 20, 2000**

By early 2000 I was beginning to feel apprehensive about what might await us in Noumea. Unlike the small town of Apia in strongly traditional Samoa, this event was to be held in what had been essentially a French colony (Nouvelle-Calédonie to
the French; Kanaky to indigenous people and both/either to native-born Caledoche. In 1984 the Festival had been scheduled to take place here but violence and civil unrest resulted in last minute postponement to French Polynesia the following year. By 1998 New Caledonia had achieved architectural prominence with the opening of Renzo Piano’s breathtakingly expensive Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre. Named after the assassinated Kanak independence leader, this magnificent building stands proudly and elegantly as the Pompidou of the Pacific. A year later the country achieved “enhanced autonomy” under the French constitution, subsequent to the 1998 Noumea Accord, where “New Caledonia is no longer a French Overseas Territory but has its own special status within the French constitution…” (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2002: 4).

The capital, Noumea is a chic, South Seas tourist resort, a cosmopolitan image that sat uneasily with my repeatedly failed attempts - between March and October 2000 - to obtain basic Festival information. On the other hand, New Caledonia’s Tourist Bureau proved extremely efficient with more practical inquiries. Surely, I rationalised, the Festival would be organised by the French and after all, weren’t they the people who brought us bureaucracy? So I suppressed any habitual academic information anxiety and set the clock to ‘Pacific Time’; as it was explained to me in Apia: “If it’s urgent, maybe we can do it tomorrow, if not, why bother?”

Diary Date: October 21 2000 (A.M.), Adelaide – Noumea

At last it was time to slip on a cheerful sarong, slap on an eye mask and board the five a.m. flight ex-Adelaide, reassuring myself it would all ‘just happen’ - as things did in the Pacific. Nevertheless, try as I might, the image of a mushroom shaped cloud - that other legacy of France to the Pacific - continued to hover above my in-flight reverie. And then the nightmare began: my Adelaide-based colleague from the Australian delegation missed her (impossibly scheduled) connection from Sydney to Tontouta Airport and with it her essential pre-Festival preparation and briefing. In terms of the Australian end of Festival organisation, this would not be an isolated incident.

Diary Date: October 21 2000 (P.M.), Noumea

Well before opening day (October 23) the Festival’s organisational spectre had become clouded by widespread intrigue and speculation. Where was the program? Where would the events be staged? Advance publicity (using every paradisiacal cliché under the sun) announced that the Festival would be “decentralised” beyond the capital, Noumea to the North and Loyalty Islands - but exactly which towns - and when? Was the opening ceremony really sold out before visitors arrived? Speculation reigned but in the town, all the charming Place des Cocotiers tourist bureau staff could do was shrug sympathetically - and ever so Frenchly – explaining: “We ‘ave nozing to do wiz ze .C.O.F.A.P.” (Comité Organisateur du Festival des Arts du Pacifique, the Festival committee); this would be a mantra they were condemned to repeat thousands of times over the next twelve days.
Diary Date: October 22 2000, (C.O.F.A.P.)

With the help of some tourist naïveté and a little bluff, a visit to (the off limits) C.O.F.A.P. office - out of town, in the magnificent grounds of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre - was arranged for me. Although a fascinating trans-cultural experience, my worst fears were nevertheless realised. Pandemonium is, of course, de rigueur at any festival office on the brink of a major event but this spectacle was truly spellbinding. Outside on Tina Peninsula, palms swayed and pines shivered, while inside was a complete contrast; high tech equipment flashed, tapped and pinged everywhere, amidst a cacophony of ringing mobile phones and state-of-the art, ID badge-making apparatus. In a comfortable reception corner were 'the visitors', sprawled listlessly over commodious bamboo divans or anxiously occupying (deeply symbolic) deck chairs. Some had made multiple visits here and were now pacing up and down. The scene before me was one of snarling tourists, angry press journalists, frustrated photographers, confused artists and dazed delegation representatives, all trying to come to terms with the vision before them. If it wasn't for (very loud) American voices of (very repetitive) disbelief ("I just don't believe this!") the scene might have been mistaken for a backstage green room, full of displaced, over-acting extras, between film sets of South Pacific and Titanic. Alternatively, we might have wandered onto the set of the satirical Australian mini series, The Games. Eventually I gave up, exhausted, and returned to the Vallée des Colons and my room in (you guessed it) the Paradise Park Motel!

Diary Date: October 23 2000 (C.O.F.A.P. – again!)

With a bit of rest and some applied Buddhism, day two at the (C.O.F.A.P.) office now presented itself as highly entertaining and not unlike a scene from a Jacques Tati movie. To their credit, the staff were doing their best – or more precisely, looking their best. A smaller number of exhausted women, including Flavie and Nathalie, were multi-tasking like mad and graciously attempting to placate and assist us all, in turn, under impossible circumstances. Surrounding these staff – who would continue to put a human and efficient face on many Festival blunders - were a larger number of nonchalant operatifs, obviously employed to be décoratifs. Stage left: an elegant young gamine insouciantly tapping cigarettes into a waste paper basket, while crossing and re-crossing her slender legs and tossing her head in animated laughter. Centre stage: a somewhat maturing clerk, fresh off The Love Boat, in tight, immaculately white trousers and loafers, is striking poses of studied bewilderment. Upstage: a pencil-moustachioed second (or third) manager - avec toupee and resembling Monsieur Hulot – is scurrying back and forth, mediating between his (male) superintendent behind a mysterious screen (stage right) and the office underlings. Off stage: the Executive Manager (also male) is installed apart, in the luxurious sanctuary of the Tjibaou Centre next door.

Then suddenly Monsieur Toupee began waving his hands about and declaring the cancellation of that evening's opening event. I couldn't understand whether this was because of the weather or because the Australian delegation had threatened a boycott in support of protesting Kanak artists, who had been ignored in planning and were boycotting the Festival. Anyway, organisationally, this was as good as it got. In the confusion, however, I was mistakenly registered as a photographer and issued with an official badge. Any shots I took, it was explained, would be subject to hefty copyright fees, payable to C.O.F.A.P.. All I needed was a camera.

Diary Date: October 24 2000 (Opening? and security)

8 a.m. Still no program available but rumours abound that a huge crowd will assemble on Anse Vata Beach, awaiting the arrival of early morning pirogues from Aotearoa, the ‘Cooks’, Wallis and Futuna and the Isle of Pines. Garlanded with video
camera, Kodak instamatic, and my I.D. badge officiale, I find, among tens of thousands here, many similarly adorned with recording devices - as well as leis. We mingled with massed choirs and troupes of dancers, marveling once again at the spectacle of throbbing drums, swirling hips, fragrant air and rolling surf. With or without official documents, the VIII Festival of Pacific Arts was already happening.

In a parade of ceremonial pomp and circumstance, each nation represented then entered the Artists’ Village, the ‘heart’ of the event, which, within twenty-four hours, was brimming with Pacific arts, crafts, and freshly tattooed flesh. The Australian delegation however, was the only group without uniforms, a decision, according to at least two disappointed indigenous delegates, taken by the Australia Council to resist “homogenisation”. As a result, my colleague from Adelaide was left feeling “compromised and embarrassed”. Notwithstanding fashionable bureaucratic policy, tight budgets and traditional Australian contempt for formality, the delegation looked out of step with their thirty-two Pacific neighbours. On the heels of the Australian Olympic Games’ profile - especially in terms of the celebrated indigenous component - such contrast was telling. A non-participant colleague handed me some relevant Australia Council literature acknowledging the significance of this timing:

Usually held in September, the festival has been moved to October 2000 to capitalise on the possibility of leveraging a major media focus following the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. (Australia Council 2000)

The most resplendent and diverse uniforms, however, were worn by police. Creating a staggeringly unprecedented (and mostly pale-skinned) presence, swarms of impressively garbed constabulary appeared everywhere, ubiquitously positioned in groups of three. With not a (Samoan) lava lava in sight, they included heavily armed gendarmes, militaires, regional police, state police, Special Forces, private security thugs and vigilants. At such a friendly event, this show of authoritarian force seemed extraordinarily expensive and inappropriate, even though uniformed behaviour was generally polite. Performers were faced with stiff competition from this on-street spectacle, which held lingering reminders of the 1984 coup, suggesting that all was not pacifique in the French South Seas. Maori visitor, Patricia Wallace found this “unpleasant”, explaining: “I think that every Maori there must have experienced some sense of relief that it was the British who had actually colonised Aotearoa, rather than the French” (Wallace 2000). And then there was the enigma of those curiously large, exposed metal zips on the trouser flies of French military uniforms. Whatever was being signified here, I never did discover.

Diary Date: October 25 2000 (Pressroom, local artists, Oz delegation)

Festival programs are still not forthcoming, so ten thousand or so scurry around seeking information or wait, with bated breath, to see what will happen, which performances will occur, where, at what time and at what price. Some visitors complain that without the event schedule, they are unable to arrange travel to regionally situated performances, widely advertised as a major Festival feature. Desperately seeking enlightenment, we visit C.O.F.A.P.’s pressroom in the lush, shady grounds of the South Pacific Secretariat Headquarters (SPC). The facility is cool, comfortable and superbly equipped, and houses a large number of disgruntled foreign journalists reporting less salutary stories than those of the local press, which have been confined to clichés of hand-holding Pacific brotherhood and oceans of good will. We sift through masses of glossy Festival P.R and glean a few snippets about forthcoming events, information unavailable at the Artists’ Village. A mountain of brochures and folders boast a C.O.F.A.P. budget of over four hundred million French Pacific Francs (with over fifty percent of income from French and European sources) managed by (an almost entirely male) committee, star-studded with political dignitaries taking four years to organise the event. Given these resources, one might expect more than fanfare. At this point, however, we couldn’t have guessed such organisational scandales would continue and become the hottest and most
entertaining topic in town.

Outside in the glaring sun, we stumbled across a playfully interactive, even eccentric sculptural installation. Dechexpo was constructed from recycled objets trouvées by members of a local art group. La Maison des Artistes. Already, it was becoming obvious (from pressroom gossip and the net) that it would be virtually impossible to meet local Kanak artists because they were boycotting the event “over a lack of recognition in their own country” (Pacific Islands Report 2000: 1). This chance meeting provided a rare opportunity to confirm local arts information not included in C.O.F.A.P.’s press kit. Onsite, the collaborative artists, Hélène Janet, Florence Giuliani and Didier Defolie-Noulin explained the dire state of support for local contemporary art – in the very country boasting M. Piano’s splendiferous “grand maison” and its internationally prestigious Biennale d’Art Contemporain, Nouméa.

Even internationally renowned New Caledonian sculptor, Rene Boutin, had been ignored in Festival planning.

On to the Bernheim Library’s formal opening of Nakkondi/Look, a sensitively observed photographic exhibition of Australian indigenous portraits by Nicci Cumpston and Andrew Dunbar, followed by a visit to the Artists’ Village. Despite a variety of indigenous Australian art and performance at the Festival, here was a significant gap in planning. Except for a few palm-weaving workshops by Eastern Torres Strait Islanders, the Australian fare (grass pavillion) was the only unoccupied hut in the village. For virtually two weeks it would remain this way, even though delighted visitors had stampeded the Australian home base fale at the Artists’ Village in Samoa. Not so in Noumea. Australian delegates have expressed intense disappointment at not being advised by the Australia Council/administrators to bring paintings, artifacts or craft materials and thus provide a point of contact, information and dialogue for thousands of curious (and now disappointed) visitors - not to mention a means of income generation for artists. Even more incongruous, an Art Monthly columnist would later reveal the commercial sub-leasing of this hut to those promoting "the world's smallest kite" (Autry 2000).

Australian promotional literature was minimal and only available at the pressroom, yet confidently stated the Festival of Pacific Arts as an Australia Council priority. I was surprised to read:

The multi-disciplinary delegation will involve senior and younger artists to fulfil (sic) a major objective of the festival – the creation of an environment in which cultural exchanges between traditional and contemporary forms and practices across generations can occur. (Australia Council 2000)

For distribution were piles of stapled ‘booklets’ - four pages of black and white, photocopied A4 sheets, referring the reader to a further publication, Australian Indigenous Arts, available via telephone/email request from Media personnel. At the other end, however, people skills were not always evident in exhausted and terse responses.

An Australian colleague observed that there seemed to be little knowledge by Australian organisers and curators of the previous Festival in Apia, where Aboriginal and Islander presence was constant, as well as diverse and dazzling. Does the wheel really need to be re-invented every four years, at the expense of continuity, relationship building - and commercial opportunity?

Lack of access to Australian artists on site and their wares did not seriously dampen the overall Australian delegation’s reception at the Festival. Curator of the Australian delegation’s artistic program was celebrated visual artist, Rea, who, as well as participating in selection of the Biennale d’Art Contemporain, Nouméa at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, brought together a diverse and exciting program. This embraced traditional and contemporary dance (Eastern Islands of the Torres Strait, Doonooch Dance Company, Elemental Ensemble), drama (Ochre & Dust), contemporary music,
including rock, hip hop and country genres (Coloured Stone, Stiff Gins, Ebony Williams & Guests) and visual art. Rachel Perkins curated Native Title, a dynamic program of film and video at various venues. Enthusiastic crowds couldn’t get enough.

Australian indigenous performance at Noumea proved not only popular but immensely formidable, as well. If Pacific audiences found Australian narrative ‘stagecraft’ perplexing in the superbly moving “performance in installation”, Ochre and Dust, they were transfixed by the Mangkaja Arts mob from Fitzroy Crossing dancing their canvas ground painting into the Biennale’s opening ceremony, and were even more enthralled by the hauling of acrylic dot paintings onto performers' shoulders during a rain dance on the Artists Village stage. This remarkable spectacle was only fully appreciated the next day when the heavens opened and drenched the town with inexplicable and unseasonable torrential rain. A reminder, perhaps, of the power of indigenous Pasifika. Pity the French colonialist/Eurocentric approach to Festival programming wasn’t more culturally savvy, at least meteorologically speaking. Otherwise, the official opening might have taken place on time, instead of three days later!

Promoted as the festival’s most ‘sophisticated’ event, this evening’s opening of the fourth Biennale d’Art Contemporain, Nouméa beffited its image of a glitttering, western-style showcase of ‘now’ art. I was nevertheless astonished that, given its uniquely gorgeous natural setting and architecture, the entire exhibition was confined indoors!

Diary Date: October 26 2000
(Biennale Symposium (SPC), Artists’ Village, ‘Opening’)

Today was the beginning of a two-day Symposium on the Biennale, an event staged parallel with outdoor performances. In contrast to its opulent opening only a few hours before, the Biennale aroused widespread resentment in this audience. Curatorial representation of many smaller countries is noticeably missing from the exhibition art map and the subsequent talkfest continued this atmosphere of neo-colonisation by Australia and New Zealand. Other Pacific Island representatives, who offered alternative means of communication and problem solving, accused both groups - strpy Australians seemingly unaware of Pacific protocols and New Zealanders with more than enough attitude – of dominating tactics. Discourse was focused on whether this major regional exhibition should be more shaped by a Pacific Festival ethos rather than the current internationalist model of what Marian Pastor Roces has termed “Expo Art” (Pastor Roces 1999). Anticipating a foregone conclusion for the Biennale's future, many of us succumbed to the pounding of Kanaky drums outside and gratefully stepped back into Pacific daylight.

Here, bathed in the performative dazzle of awesome Maori warriors gazumping everyone else, the hypnotic sexuality of Rapa Nui ‘opera’ and the enthralling tinsel and beribboned costumes from Tokelau (could this be the ‘real’ Christmas Island?), we were reminded of how the Festival continues to enchant, sustain and renew pride in living cultural heritage.

Printed Festival programs are now available but mean little; after all, this is the Pacific and much is happening on many fronts. Although Apia’s 1996 program was considerably more reliable regarding choice of performances and venues, the relentless rhythm of this Festival has immersed us all. Personal contact has allowed me full access to Australian events but chance has determined other cultural experiences; I continually stumble across Maori and American Samoan dance and choirs, while hotly pursuing Rapa Nui and Kanak performances others are raving about; friends collide with other unexpected combinations. However, most audiences don't see much at all at the Artists' Village because of
inappropriate, western-style design in the main performance venue; its rock concert stage is frontal and covered in, not constructed in the round, nor surrounded by grass as the modest main stage had been in Apia. Here an extended dirt and concrete apron (why not sand?) on which dancers perform turns to slush following rain and offers almost no seating or shade for the audience. Discomfort notwithstanding, audiences are resilient; they bask in the sun, moon and music, are captivated by the performances and/or just hang out, hell bent on immersing themselves in this once-in-a-lifetime spectacle.

There is glamour, glamour everywhere. These are the most glamorous audiences I have ever encountered and New Caledonian people, in all their diversity, wholeheartedly embrace the event and the visitors (estimated at two thousand five hundred artists and audiences in the tens of thousands) with warmth, enthusiasm and hospitality. The Festival of Pacific Arts is, as usual, truly magnificent.

This evening a spectacular Opening Ceremony, rumoured to have cost seven million francs, was created by indigenous Australian choreographer, Raymond Blanco and featured the usual throngs of massed performers and school children, with day-glo props. Unlike the traditional Olympic Games style openings, however, this designer took a political position and blew up a ‘volcano’ of tin and fireworks, representing shantytowns on Noumea’s outskirts. The people’s voice was also heard in less well-lit sections of the stadium, jeering and shouting down local politicians’ long speeches. Unfortunately, Blanco’s frontal design had privileged viewing for those occupying official boxes and the press, and various others wearing I.D. badges!

Returning home from Magenta Stadium proved a fiasco. By 6.30 p.m. public transport – used mainly by Kanaks and tourists – ceases, while performance programs continue well into the night. Access to private cars or taxis seems to be assumed. My fitness is improving.

Diary Date: October 27 2000  (Tahitian Spectacular)

In each Festival, there’s always some tourist kitsch to perversely look forward to and in Noumea the French didn’t disappoint; in fact, they ruthlessly promoted an over-priced ($AUD40) French Polynesian, multi-media extravaganza of dance à la Las Vegas, featuring pale-skinned, anorexic young women and muscle-bound male super heroes, dripping in South Seas clichés. The Festivals’ past (and current) strengths have long been the celebration of dynamic processes of indigenous cultural renewal, through appropriation and innovation but C.O.F.A.P.’s priorities have privileged and indeed imposed, a strongly Eurocentric and commercial vision, typified by this tourist attraction. Tahitian Spectacular’s presentation facilities ignored traditional audience/performer ‘participation’ to present the Pacific on stage – full frontally - as a ‘museum’ of cultural (and eroticised) exotica. I arrived early, with time to muse over the inspirational but ironic words of Festival Director, Octave Togna:

For the mere sake of being ‘modern’, must we stand by and watch our beliefs, our myths, our songs and our legends be relegated to the status of casual entertainment items when they are the very foundations of our societies?
(Togna 2000: 1)

Apparently so!

Diary Date: October 28 2000 (SPC Fashion Parade)

As well as non-stop performance and exhibitions of island art and crafts, this evening the SPC featured a remarkable Pacific fashion parade, which compensated for last night’s ‘plastique fantastique du Pacifique’. This event presented a complex overlay of design virtuosity, humour, politics and religion. When Fijian models appeared,
representing their multicultural communities (which had been so recently torn apart by a violent coup) and wearing outrageously iconoclastic and glamorous garments, the crowd went wild with solidarity; Lapita met Las Vegas. Where else could you find a buxom matron in full white missionary attire sashaying down a ‘catwalk’ avec bible?

A complementary exhibition, Clothing in the Pacific, has been professionally assembled by Martine Boulanger (despite very little lead time) at the Musée de Nouvelle Calédonie, where cutting edge design seriously and innovatively challenges current South Seas stereotypes of grass skirt, lap lap and muu muu, as well as the creeping US ‘home boy’ fashion.

Diary Date: October 29 2000 (Accommodation atrocities)

We skipped this evening’s multi-denominational church service at the Village and caught up with some of the Australian delegation, who up-dated us on accommodation scandals. They were looking healthier since artists’ facilities had been improved. Last week, relatively remote primary and secondary schools had been compulsorily emptied (during term time) and delegations totalling over two thousand artists bussed in. (Most administrative staffs were lodged in 4-5 star premises at Anse Vata beach). In Samoa this dormitory arrangement had been a remarkably successful way of integrating artists with local communities but in Noumea, the arrangement was institutionalised to the point of insensitivity. To the consternation of indigenous Australians, Mary and Lora Savage, there were no proper cooking or cleaning facilities (e.g. mixed showers ignored indigenous protocols) and no pillows. In the case of the Palau delegation, there were no beds. Neither was there crockery or cutlery except for bowls and serviettes. Instead, artists were serviced by privatised contractors providing western-styled, pre-packaged food delivered daily and consisting of baguettes (bread sticks), hot water and individual, airline-inspired serving trays of food; routinely, slices of pate and cheese. Reports of food poisoning outbreaks (suppressed by the local press) led to cancelled performances. In the opinion of Australian visitor, Jenny Martens, for “athletes performing three shows a day”, this meals-on-wheels type service was pitifully inadequate. Duncan Kentish summed up C.O.F.A.P.’s approach to hospitality as “let them eat bananas”. It seems the Samoans, legendary for their appetite and hospitality, as well as their rugby prowess, agreed and according to their Artistic Manager ‘J.R.’, this delegation tackled the organisers head on to obtain better provisions. Eventually, all national delegates received an apology - in a meeting that was closed to the press. Despite C.O.F.A.P.’s projected expenditure breakdown (VIIIth Festival of Pacific Arts 2000, 3), it is not clear where the money actually goes, apart from P.R., high tech equipment and ostentatious cocktail receptions; it’s certainly not spent on the artists.

Diary Date: October 30 2000 (SPC & Aotearoa)

(Non-Australian) working artists based at the Artists' Village and the SPC venue are still constantly accessible to visitors and do not appear ‘homogenised’ by either their parade uniforms or their daily presence here. The diversity and quality of art and craft displays and demonstrations by Maori and Pacific Island New Zealanders at both venues add significant weight to cultural and professionalism to both national and ethnic esteem. At the SPC all this is situated next to a bountiful supply of cheap food. This ensures a dynamic interchange of skill sharing, social activity and commercial enterprise; for example, even one of Aotearoa’s most senior Maori weavers, Katarina Waiai, based here, appreciates the chance to incorporate new techniques. She confided: “Those Island women have got the tricks”.

An inexhaustible array of fine textiles was still on show today – and for purchase - including exquisitely innovative body adornments by Niki Hastings-McFall and Sofia Tekela-Smith. Fortunately some fabulous plastic leis and ketes woven from
indestructible packing tape - and suggestive of funky design by Pacific Sisters– were still available.

It's been amazing to witness the promotional endeavours of a small country like Aotearoa-New Zealand. Its arts council, Creative New Zealand, continuously supplies a range of free, glossy and impressively illustrated brochures about Maori and Pacific Island art – some with CD ROMs (Pacific Arts Committee of Creative New Zealand, 2000, Nga Taonga o Aotearoa: treasures of New Zealand Maori Art at the 8th Festival of Pacific Arts in Kanaky). In contrast to Australia's miserly effort, no further "request" is required.

Clothing in the Pacific Exhibition, (Musee de ivouelle caledonie) Festival of Pacific Arts, 2000 by Duncan Kentish Photo: Pamela Zeplin

Diary Date: October 31 - 2000 November 1 2000 (The press breaks through)

We continue to scour newspapers for mention of daily C.O.F.A.P disasters; these, it seems, are suppressed by the local press, even though the real drama has turned out to be backstage, with the organisation itself. Notwithstanding its success, this Festival has been different and difficult but in a way no one could have anticipated. At last we come across the satirical journal, Le Chien Bleu, which has broken through diplomatic embargoes to report this inept Festival administration with headlines proclaiming: "Malheureusement, l'organisation n'est pas à la hauteur", "Une organisation débordée" and "Pas de bus" (Le Chien Bleu 2000). Responsibility for these fiascos becomes a media game, where French-dominated arts bureaucracy hand-balls blame to Kanaky factions, who then slam the ball back into the French court. No-one wins.

Diary Date: November 3 2000 (Closing 'spectacular')

With not a little sadness, today, we followed the Great Closing Parade to the farewell pilou at Rocher-à-la-voile. As at the 1996 event, the Samoans have been formidable. Relieved of host courtesies and revived by improved diet, they had turned the (considerably delayed) Opening Ceremony to their advantage by mercilessly upstaging their rival neighbours, the bombastic American Samoans, physically expropriating their space and upstaging their acts with louder drums and excessive fire. At this closing concert, they again stole the show in a machismo display of 'kung fu' style action by fearless young fire dancers. Not content with twirling torches and audacious acrobatics, the drum rhythms accelerated to a frenzy and these young athletes finally set fire to the stage, dancing down the flames in pyromaniacal ecstasy. A vision of Paradise perhaps, for grass skirt enthusiasts, but not one necessarily condoned by the Church.
Diary Date: November 4 2000 (Departure)

Tontouta Airport. When we boarded the flight home, quel domage! - it was Qantas instead of Aircalin. Mid air, our cultural detumescence (Festival de-briefing) was brutally interrupted by commands being barked from the rear of the aircraft by irritable and matronly flight attendants. “Old bag!” snorted my sensitive companion, instantly snapping to attention. Yes, it was time for a reality check; welcome home.

Diary Date: November 4 2000 – March 14 2002, Adelaide

With the Festival’s magic - and its malfunctions - now slipping into the realm of memory, I try to reflect on its positive aspects in an article for Object magazine (Zeplin 2001) and organise copyright fees for photographer, Vincent Talbot.

Diary Date: March 15 2002 - May 5 2003 (Re-considering the Festival)

A letter arrives from M. Octave Togna, Directeur, Comité Organisateur pour le VIIIe Festival des Arts du Pacifique (C.O.F.A.P. 2000), in English, requesting “copies of any written, graphic or audiovisual material which you may have produced on this subject, so that we may complete our collection and inform the Pacific Council of the Arts”. I oblige with a copy of my published article, anticipating this request (with some dread) as a polite overture to late collection of C.O.F.A.P ‘copyright fees’.

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This renewed contact catalyses my memories and I begin to reconsider my ‘positive’ perspective on the Festival. While delighting in orgies of sensation, other visitors like myself had been alarmed as well as entertained by underlying administrative issues. Patricia Wallace also experienced “quite mixed emotions about the Festival, which was disappointing when compared to that in Samoa ...” (Wallace 2000).

Beyond local incompetence; it was disappointing to see lost opportunities and inadequate PR for Australian delegates. If New Caledonia’s bureaucratic structures rivaled Gilbert and Sullivan, suggested David Broker, Australian fiascos would make a brilliant cultural postscript to the satirical television series, The Games. Meanwhile, arts ‘actors’/ athletes in these dramas suffered vastly inferior treatment to what Samoa had provided, despite the inevitable stuff ups. That participants managed to achieve so much and to maintain such astonishing presence testifies to the strength of their professionalism and their commitment to withstand and triumph over blundering ineptitude.

The issues were not so much about efficiency; there was more than enough corporatist MBA logic at work in New Caledonia. What was missing was attention to human needs, effective communication and respect for indigenous Pacific solutions and scale, despite the gargantuan nature of the event. These qualities had been carefully considered in the much less affluent country of Samoa at a fraction of the cost - and pompous organisational apparatus never took centre stage.

Miraculously, in spite of sometimes crippling adversity, Pacific artists once again provided excitement, solidarity and challenge to vast and delighted audiences from all over the region and beyond. But that story is one already told by other entranced visitors; meanwhile, this cautionary tale also bears telling. Administration doesn’t
have to be this way; artists deserve much better.

For this writer however, there were some perverse consolations. Thankfully, four years after Samoa, and as I had hoped, the VIIIth Festival of Pacific Arts in Pacific France wasn’t quite Paradise after all. This was due to the theatrical scale and frequency of débâcles within a pretentiously colonialist – and operatic – administrative system, created by a committee from Hell. For me therefore, any sense of excessive pleasure and residual puritan guilt or was allayed until perhaps the next Festival. Indeed, for audiences if not performers, the same managerial divertissements, in their own way, proved diabolically entertaining.

Aotearoa Crafts at SPC (South Pacific Centre)
Festival of Pacific Arts, 2000
Photo: Pamela Zeplin


Preparations are underway for The IXth Festival of Pacific Arts, to be held a year hence in the Republic of Palau, a small archipelago in Micronesia and “constitutional democracy in free association with the United States” (U.S. Department of State 2003). Although precise dates are yet to be published on its comprehensive website - although Creative New Zealand’s website suggests 22-31 July 2004 - extensive Festival information is already up and running and in marked contrast to C.O.F.A.P.’s difficult-to-obtain advance publicity. Moreover there is no romantic, nationalistic or commercial rhetoric here. The site projects a ‘no frills’ image of ethical pragmatism, with detailed and useful information on each past Festival’s specific history, the event’s significance, its philosophy and whom, in particular, it should benefit. Astonishingly, it includes up-to-date information on wide ranging accommodation and rumour suggests a ship may be moored offshore to house visitors.

While foregrounding the “major, cultural, technical and economic challenge” each Festival presents, the Palau committee insists that “(e)ntries to all artistic events are gratis to the public (Republic of Palau 2003). The small, gender balanced committee has already been assigned specific responsibilities within a transparent organisational structure, setting limits and demanding cooperation. This includes a “realistic maximum number of participants in each delegation” and final deadlines five months ahead of the event. Significantly, plans indicate more respect for artists’ comfort and cultural sensitivities than was evident in New Caledonia; a list “of how delegates are to behave” in their country is being developed, requiring detailed information about delegates’ essential requirements. Not surprisingly, after sub-standard accommodation in Noumea, “pillows” and “sheets” rank highly on Palau’s published list of host priorities!

Despite Palau’s U.S. State Department warnings of “Disaster Preparedness” for that small country, I am, like thousands of others, already saving for the airfare to Babelthaup Island via Guam. There is something particularly appealing in Palau’s subtle shift in vocabulary; words such as “dignity”, “rights”, “wisdom” and “spirituality”, as well as other-yet-untranslated Palauan affirmations are already circulating through this next Festival’s digital aether. The only thing missing is any mention of Paradise. I expect that might come later.
References


URL http://travel.state.gov/palau.html

