

## **Pacific Dance at Home and in the Diaspora**

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The late scholar, Minoru Hokari, wrote this of the indigenous Australian Gurindji understanding of creation:

“In the beginning was the Movement, and the Movement was with the Dreaming, and the Movement was Dreaming... Through the Movement all things were made; without Movement nothing was made that has been made.”

The Dreaming is a term used to describe Aboriginal Australian cosmology. The Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for over 40,000 years and the Dreaming connects people, concepts, values, laws, plants and animals, place or "country," to an integrated understanding of the past, present and future. In this context, silence is often valued and learning is best achieved by sitting still, listening, watching and then moving. Indigenous Australian dance often reflects a relationship to land or "country" but "land" does not have to be limited to the outback or "bush". Today many indigenous Australians live in cities and suburbs and sing or dance stories of who they are, where they come from and how they have struggled, using many kinds of movements and choreographies. The work of [Bangarra Dance Theatre](#) illustrates this contemporary context for indigenous Australian and Torres-Strait Islander artists well.

In this essay we reflect upon what kinds of dances emerge from the relationship to a place or landscape and how this changes when cultures migrate to new places. The Diaspora is a term used to describe the migration or relocation of people from their homelands to new lands or countries. They usually maintain strong ties with their homelands and still identify themselves as specific ethnic communities such as Tongan, Samoan, I-Kiribati, Ni-Vanuatu or Fijian. In the Pacific Diaspora, indigenous islanders have to learn to adapt and survive in contexts in which they are no longer the majority population. The impact of this move is usually great and adjusts the ways in which they practice their cultures. In the Diaspora, there is also more inter-marriage between groups and so new communities emerge with people who belong to more than one ethnic group.

A central component of Pacific culture is the practice of dance. All Pacific peoples have some form of dance and music that represents their identity and history. Traditionally dance in the Pacific is about relations between people and the land and sea, everyday practices such as fishing or hunting, and relationships between members of the community. In Kiribati dance, for example, the actions will directly reference the flight of a frigate bird, the movement of a crab, the crew of a canoe, or a special technique for catching a fish.

Dance also honors the ancestors and traditional gods, reflects how societies are organized, illustrates the role of men and women, and tells stories of love, revenge, war, plants and animals, food or voyaging. In many Pacific Island communities dance still forms part of a larger ritual process which may involve feasts, births or deaths, marriage, greeting or bidding farewell to visitors, challenging another group, competing or showing off, and making fun of chiefs or elders. For millennia, dance was rarely a separate or distinct artistic activity divorced from the wider community or place.

All over the world, cultures dance. In the United State and some western countries, dance is often viewed as an abstract art form that bears no specific relationship to land or place. Indigenous American communities, however, maintain dances that are very much about their relations to their histories, ancestors, landscapes and the environment. This is the case for many cultures across the globe. All dance forms, however, involve some element of abstraction so that body movements cannot always be decoded as meaning something specific without having background knowledge. Dance literacy involves the ability to decode and understand the many layers of meaning that exist behind genres of dance such as ballet, the waltz, popping and locking, Samoan siva, or classical Indian bharata natyam.

In New Zealand hip hop dance styles such as breaking, popping and locking are very popular. Many of the original male dancers of Black Grace, the featured group on this site, began their dance journey inspired by hip hop dance. In the Pacific Diaspora in New Zealand, young Pacific Islanders actively engage hip hop and this often inspires second and third generation migrants to then learn and perform their traditional cultural dances. Hip hop inspires young islanders in the Diaspora because it is popular, connects people to a global community, and instills a sense of confidence in the dancer. In the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, islanders were also inspired by seeing other black people on television and in movies who displayed dance skills that gained them respect with others.

Today Pacific peoples often excel at the arts because the oral, visual and performative modes of communicating have been part of their cultures for millennia. Their ancestors did not record events or ideas in writing but carved, painted, danced, chanted or sang about their histories, important events, heroes and heroines, and epic journeys. In this sense, dance was not an activity separate from everyday family, political or economic relations and practices. The whole community participated in producing costumes, dressing dancers, singing, and sometimes joking or playing with the performers. In many Pacific societies there are still very high standards for assessing good dance and performance. While anyone may dance, not everyone is a great dancer and ideas about virtuosity, or great skill and technique, are prevalent throughout Oceania.

Samoans are the largest Pacific group in New Zealand and there are many popular public and school festivals, which allow them and other Pacific groups to show off their skills in dance. Many events give participants the opportunities to compete for prizes. Competition in dance and music is

one of the main driving forces in the islands and Diaspora for maintaining and transforming Pacific dance practices. The [ASB Polyfest](#) held for Secondary Schools in Auckland, New Zealand, annually is now one of the largest festivals of Maori (indigenous New Zealand) and Pacific Island performance in the world.

While many Pacific Islanders have moved beyond their islands, dancing and moving confidently in a new land allows them to grow new roots while still honoring their ancestral homes and communities.