The Festival of Pacific Arts
Celebrating over 40 years of Cultural Heritage

Edited by Karen Stevenson
with Katerina Teaiwa
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USP
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC
THE FESTIVAL OF PACIFIC ARTS
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Entangled Traditions: Beth Dean and Victor Carell and the 1972 South Pacific festival of Arts

Kalissa Alexeyeff

In 1970 Victor Carell, an Australian producer and former opera singer, was asked by the Government of Fiji to act as executive director of the inaugural South Pacific Festival of Arts. The South Pacific Commission and a number of Pacific leaders envisaged a festival that would bring nations of the region together and promote the value of cultural traditions. In Carell’s words this would enable each participating country, ‘to have pride in their culture and retain their own cultures. They were worried about the international influence of film, television and radio and young people thinking their own culture was rubbish.” Carell and his wife Beth Dean, a classically trained dancer and choreographer, worked in Fiji for two years to develop and organize the inaugural festival whose aim they felt:

...was a thoroughly worthy one and a most opportune way in which to attempt the rescue of the vibrant cultures of this area of the world from the danger of extinction. If we could help to preserve this Pacific way of life – this last bastion of joy and cheerfulness in a dreary and sad world – it would be worth it all.²

This extract from their joint autobiography Twin Journey, published in 1983, gives a clear sense of Dean’s and Carell’s almost missionary-like zeal about issues of cultural preservation and authenticity of non-western cultural production. Armed with their ‘rescue mission’ jars and contemporary ideas about cultural autonomy informed by critiques of imperialism, it is therefore not surprising that the work of Dean and Carell has been relegated to a footnote in the history of the festival and dismissed as very ‘unfashionable’ in the academic history of Australian and Pacific performing arts (as one academic suggested to me). In this essay I argue that their work in the Pacific requires reassessment and that it is too easily dismissed as an awkward legacy produced on the cusp of late colonial and early independence history in the Pacific. Here, I examine them, and particularly their role in the South Pacific Festival of Arts, as a product of this ‘entangled history’ of European colonialism.³ The festival arose out of a context where regional and national Pacific movements moved indigenous creative practices to the foreground as an act of independence from their colonial pasts and white audiences were simultaneously re-valuing indigenous cultural production as ‘art’ or at least culture-with-value. In this neo-colonial context westerners often played key roles as ‘agents of legitimation’⁴ of these forms, classifying and codifying what counted as traditional and culturally appropriate.

As we shall see, Dean and Carell certainly played a central part in both championing Pacific arts and in evaluating the artistic merit of indigenous cultural production. It is this dual role that has generated a largely ambivalent response across academia, the media and amongst Pacific performers. On one hand, their contribution to dance research and training across many Pacific nations from the 1950s and continuing into the 1980s is significant, and they are also recognized for their contribution to an important dance archive through their film, dance notation and writing.⁵ On the other hand, their strong views about the value of Pacific artistic traditions were controversial at a time when mainstream audiences, as well as many critics, questioned the aesthetic value of indigenous creative practice. Today, the pair are controversial for the opposite reason; their views are considered largely ‘out of step,’ trapping non-western artists within restrictive definitions of tradition that are at odds with notions of cultural dynamism and local agency. Despite this sidelining, I suggest that this problematic legacy needs further exploration as their evaluations of artistic legitimacy have held traction throughout the history of the Festival of Pacific Arts and into the present day. Many of their notions about authenticity, tradition
and cultural loss still have currency in the festival organization and reception, and amongst both Pacific participants and non-Pacific commentators. In order to open up the field for a wider range of views on cultural authenticity and artistic practice, this history needs to be untangled.

Performing pioneers

I interviewed Dean and Carell at their house in Sydney on 25th May 1998. I had just returned from fieldwork in Cook Islands on dance and was keen to meet Dean and Carell, as I had heard much about them from Cook Islanders who belonged to the national arts theatre that they had helped to establish. Dean greeted me at her front door, wearing a brown pantsuit and her hair in plaits arranged over the crown of her head. She was tiny, vibrant and had just celebrated her 80th birthday but still did her classical barre exercises every morning. Born in Denver, Colorado, she moved to France to study classical dance, eventually performing in Paris, London and the United States. She was also a concert dancer in theatre productions and met Victor when they both performed in the operetta The Waltz King and married in 1944. They toured Australia and New Zealand from 1947 with a production of Annie Get Your Gun, subsequently settling in Sydney. They were both charming and highly theatrical hosts. It was if they had a stock set of stories in which both had their well laid down parts. Dean did most of the talking but Carell came in – as if on cue – to deliver his part of the story (and also to serve tea and lunch).

Dance was very clearly Dean’s and Carell’s life passion. The interview lasted six hours and was interspersed with enthusiastic song and dance through the medium of television, festivals and tours of Australian schools and country towns in the early 1950s. Dean was also a dance critic for the Sydney Morning Herald and wrote for several international dance publications during her lifetime.

Their interest in indigenous dance flourished during the tours of Annie Get Your Gun in Australia and New Zealand from 1947 and led to a number of research projects, public lectures and indigenous-themed performances in Australia and throughout the Pacific. Dean’s first, and now most controversial piece, was the choreography to John Anthill’s Coroboree (1953), a full-length ballet based on indigenous male initiation rites. It was developed after an eight-month research trip through central and northern Australia (through which Dean performed concerts, including demonstrations of Maori and other ‘ethnic’ dance). Over the course of their working lives they filmed dance around the world, including Bali, Spain, Ireland, Native America, Mexico, Polynesia (Tahiti and Cook Islands) and Melanesia (Fiji and Papua New Guinea). Dean wrote the book The Many Worlds of Dance (1966), which documented these dance forms in relation to classical ballet. Dean and Carell also recorded and notated Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Cook Islands Maori dances for the book Three Dances of Oceania (1976) and Dean represented Australia in the 1968 Cultural Olympics in Mexico City with an indigenous-themed ballet Kukaitcha.

In 1968, Dean and Carell met Albert Henry (Cook Islands’ first premier, post independence) aboard the ship the Mariposa on their return from Mexico. He asked them to help establish a Cook Islands National Arts Theatre (CINAT) and in 1969 they spent six months there, identifying dances to include in the repertoire and conducting dance rehearsals. CINAT toured Australia in 1970 for the Captain Cook bicentenary celebrations, performing with Aboriginal artists under the name The Ballet of the South Pacific. They returned to perform at the opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973.

As I have discussed previously, Cook Islanders are extremely proud of CINAT and its achievements, especially their role in representing their newly formed nation abroad. Older generations of Cook Islanders view CINAT as the pinnacle of performing arts and their dance numbers are considered the traditional and most authentic dance forms. They admire the new skills Dean and Carell taught them, which they described as disciplined and professional, and they thought the theatrical performance styles suitable for
for the stage and outside audiences. One dancer commented to me: ‘Before CINAT you would just practise for a couple of hours, then perform. But Beth would make us do warm-up exercises and weeks and weeks of practice’. Ota Joseph, the company leader, commented that the experience taught him how to perform:

Beth taught us how to make theatre. She would say to me ‘what is this action?’ I would tell her that it is a bird and she would say ‘do it like this’ [he adopted a more balletic pose] and she would say: ‘It would look better to the audience like that’.

Joseph’s views about Dean and Carell were highly ambivalent. He felt that as performers they learnt ‘theatricality’, a way of performing to large and non-local audiences. CINAT also enabled performers to travel and perform at places like the Sydney Opera House, a personal highlight of Joseph’s performing career. Like Dean and Carell he also saw CINAT as a way of protecting dance traditions from imminent threats of erosion from westernisation. But at the same time, he felt Dean and Carell were part of this erosion that altered the ‘heart’ of Cook Islands dance, making it theatre for outsiders rather than entertainment for a local audience.  

In 1969, local ambivalence toward Dean and Carell was framed differently. Some Cook Islanders felt that rather than restoring local performance traditions they were replacing them with western ones. Carell recalled: ‘All these people around the island were talking: “They are teaching our people ballet dancing”, all sorts of nonsense. They didn’t have a clue what we were doing really’. In contrast, Dean and Carell viewed themselves as ballet masters, instilling the discipline required for a professional dance company:

Victor: We rehearsed every night, in fruit sheds, we had no lights and only a few lamps, that was all we had. And they [the dancers] worked very very hard and very well. And we eventually developed a program.
Beth: We had to work on costumes too! In those days they were all wearing skirts out of raffia! And plastic! We told them to ‘go back to basics’.

Because of the concerns raised by Cook Islanders about the changes being made to their dance traditions during CINAT, Dean and Carell decided to put on a performance so Cook Islanders could see what they had been working on. According to Carell, ‘People came in droves to see it...and we got letters from all sorts, they breathed a sigh of relief because their culture had come back to them. This is the real thing and it is the first time they had seen it’.

The language of rescue is uncomfortable to present day audiences, precisely because it ignores political context of the time, particularly the role of colonialism in prohibiting the ‘real thing’ in the first place. Comparing Carell’s and Joseph’s recollections of the formation of CINAT demonstrates how entangled and often contradictory ideas about modernity, tradition and authenticity are employed. For Joseph and other Cook Islanders, CINAT was both a means of preservation and alteration of the ‘feeling’ of their dance traditions. Dean and Carell, however, felt they were providing enlightenment to Cook Islanders by demonstrating the true nature of the traditions that had been obscured by the trappings of modernity (such as the use of plastic and other western materials in costumes).

However, Dean and Carell undoubtedly contributed significantly to the translation of indigenous performance genres to larger non-local audiences and into more theatrical rather than participatory genres. Their influence can be seen not only in the national arts theatres in Cook Islands and Fiji but also in the Festival of Pacific Arts. Part of what is admirable about them is that they were both practitioners who expressed a genuine appreciation for movement and music wherever they found it, an attitude that was not widely held at the time. Their work facilitated the recognition of indigenous forms of art to an outside audience. In 1970 for example, The Ballet of the South Pacific, which included CINAT as well as an indigenous
performance group, sparked a brief newspaper debate about whether the performances constituted art. The verdict of the art critic at the time was, 'No, not really,' suggesting that they had been divorced from their 'original purpose.' To which anthropologist A. P. Elkin penned a letter arguing that despite the changed context – a wooden stage rather than the earth, entertainment instead of ritual, – these performances still expressed 'the soul of man.' A letter from Ota Joseph and Percy Henderson (CINAT's manager) asserted that their dancing was art (albeit different to western art). Similarly Dean, on numerous occasions, wrote 'in defence of Pacific classicism' arguing that these were classical traditions and legitimate art forms.

Concurrently, this perception of dance as a universal language also relied on colonial ideas about race. While showing me footage of an Aboriginal dancer Willy Gallana Martin performing, Dean cried, 'Look at that ballon! (a seemingly light and effortless jump). It is absolute perfection!' Clearly for Dean, classical dance provided a lens through which to evaluate other dance forms. She certainly believed Aboriginal and other non-western dance forms were significant as high 'art', and certain individuals were considered very talented performers. But this reclassification of non-western movement did not remove classical dance from being the pinnacle on an evolutionary scale of human movement. Non-western cultures may have classical forms in Dean's schema but these needed to be translated up into the most complex of classical forms, western classical dance.

This overview of the work of Beth Dean and Victor Carell offers a preview to the issues that surrounded the first South Pacific Festival of Arts. As the main organizers of the first festival, they became arbiters of the kinds of cultural production that could and should be displayed. The value they placed on traditional arts as well as their classification of certain forms as authentic and inauthentic played a significant role in the history the festival.

The South Pacific Festival of Arts 1972
From its inception, the goal of the South Pacific Festival of Arts was cultural preservation. In Twin Journeys, Dean and Carell describe the origin of the festival as:

...born from the concern Pacific leaders held at the accelerating erosion of their cultures. They hoped that by bringing together the different countries, each showing the very best of its own indigenous culture in dance, song, music, carving, visual arts, and even aged artifacts and handicrafts, the Oceanic peoples would be helped to renew and to re-establish their pride in themselves, in the cultures, and in their origins.

Victor Carell accepted a two-year contract to take on the role of Executive Director for the inaugural festival in 1972 and Dean adopted the role of Associate Director. In both my interview and in their autobiography they discussed how hard they worked and the numerous obstacles faced in 'selling' the festival. Pacific countries 'had to be awakened, enthused and stirred to re-evaluate the rare beauty of their own potential in world art'. Only a few Pacific leaders had 'the imagination' to commit fully to the festival (they singled out Albert Henry, Michael Somare and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara) and this widespread lack of 'vision' made it difficult to get local support and the administrative assistance required to run the festival as they planned.

Part of selling the festival meant visiting each participant country to discuss what was required and to evaluate their performances in terms of the criteria developed by Carell. He had created a blueprint that ran for ten pages. It focused on dance and music 'insisting on the need for strong disciplines and an adherence to traditional styles and ideas.' The blueprint also included art and handicrafts, canoe making and island architecture, story-telling, carving and tattooing. A range of other 'craft' activities was detailed: cooking, children's art, a sports day and a kite festival. Modern art and craft such as theatre, poetry and literature were also included but it was stipulated that these
innovations must build on earlier traditions. As Carell later wrote: ‘We must never lose sight of the reason for the festival. It was conceived to preserve and safeguard the beauty of each country’s traditional culture, with artistic growth and innovations kept within the true style of its people’.18

Fifteen days of performance and exhibitions, and over 1000 performers from twenty countries were included in the first South Pacific Festival of Arts. Despite all the difficulties leading up to the festival it was, in Dean’s and Carell’s account, a huge success. The opening ceremony, held in Albert Park, Suva, brought together all the performing groups in one place. As Carell said: ‘No one had seen such performances. We had lighting and amplified sound’. This technology enabled large audiences to watch ‘history, stylised yet true’ and at the same time, ‘the festival demonstrated the nobility of uncorrupted ancient arts’.19 There is no doubt that this display would have been an exciting historic event that fostered national pride and regional exchange in ways that moved under and beyond the criteria laid down by legitimating agents like Dean and Carell. As will now be amply clear, the value attributed to Pacific arts by the couple lay in the exhibition of ‘pristine’ traditions. In their opinion, these were rapidly being ‘corrupted’ by external influences and Dean and Carell were inspired to preserve and revitalize what remained. From this perspective, retaining cultural integrity was thus vital. During visits to participating countries to advise on their performances, they took the message of the importance of displaying traditional arts and crafts with ‘no mixing with other cultures ... this is what we preached to people all the time’.

In other words they acted as arbiters of cultural value and worth, a role evident in their views on what constituted authentic tradition. For example, Dean and Carell singled out both the New Zealand delegation to the South Pacific Festival of Arts in 1972 as being particularly ‘inauthentic’. The New Zealand group had been ‘poorly advised to produce a modern show’ which included ‘European songs and cowboy songs’. During the interview, Carell said that Solomon Islands wanted him to see their performance before the festival, his assessment was this:

It was very good, well rehearsed. It was a history of Solomons. They had a wonderful section about Japanese occupation in World War Two, they comically acted Japanese soldiers, this was very good. The audience loved it. But then they threw in some popular items and they tried to do a Tahitian tamure and it was ludicrous. I advised them to take this out, which they did.

Borrowing performance genres from cultures within the Pacific region like the tamure was considered problematic although far less so than the appropriation of western forms. Western popular culture was particularly singled out for their rancour. Their autobiography Twin Journeys contains many eloquently strident examples along these lines:

We continue our own unending struggle against the sad scourge of the South Pacific, that dismal sameness of sound pollution, pop music; the strident, explosive blasting of the Rock Bands; adenoidal noise with a malevolent beat.20

In Dean and Carell’s evaluation of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art, the theatrical production Solomon Islands presented was considered appropriate precisely because it was a ‘high’ form. ‘Theatre was a new tradition in the Solomon’s, it was perfect!’ recalled Dean, who also felt that choral music and opera could be effectively developed by Pacific artists.21

A particular logic of what might be termed ‘colonial appropriation’ is at work here, one that reveals how colonial inequality is embedded in the aesthetic field as much as it is in the fields of politics, economics and religion. While Pacific traditions needed to be kept ‘pristine’ or else they would lose their ‘dignity’, it was acceptable for them to develop new forms that mirrored western high art. This entrapment in the past and the realm of tradition is a form of temporal distancing that reveals the evolutionary bias
that underwrites discourses of race, it renders non-westerners 'out of time,' unable to develop or innovate without being subject to hegemonic western evaluations. Western art forms in contrast can appropriate widely without damaging their authenticity. Indeed it is a sign of sophistication and complexity to be able to translate other cultural performances into western ones. Dean’s choreography of the Corroboree (1954) based on Aboriginal male initiation rites is an example of this logic at work.

Unsurprisingly, the role of people like Dean and Carell generates disquiet among Pacific and non-Pacific commentators. It is relatively easy to dismiss their ideas and work as part of a broader movement of ‘modern primitivism’ that viewed the non-western as sources of inspiration for contemporary western art. For this ‘borrowing’ to occur, non-western art needed to meet certain criteria: it needed to be seemingly endangered and adhere to restrictive outsider definitions of authenticity. In addition, Dean’s and Carell’s dismissal of popular culture appears antiquated to post-modern western generations, where division between high and low art is no longer considered inviolable. This high/low division was perhaps also irrelevant to Pacific Islanders, who regularly utilize other cultural forms from outside for fun, humour or delight in new creative forms as the Solomon Islanders and New Zealand Māori performances detailed above would suggest. It appears to be a Pacific aesthetic tradition to ‘remix’ pan-Pacific and other influences into performances as Teaiwa has argued.

However, to dismiss Dean’s and Carell’s work as straightforwardly exploitative, superficial and ‘of another time’ ignores the influence their legacy has had on indigenous understandings of artistic value. For many Cook Islanders, and presumably other Pacific people, Dean and Carell created opportunities that enabled them to perform ‘traditions’ in novel ways. They were seen as teaching new skills, especially that of ‘making theatre,’ which included performing on stage, rehearsing and presenting songs, dance and music and stories in ways that would speak to an outside audience. This in turn provided the opportunity to perform at festivals throughout the world, including the Festival of Pacific Arts.

Furthermore, the ideas they promulgated were also central to Pacific independence movements during the 1960s and 1970s. Undoubtedly, Dean’s and Carell’s views were formed in dialogue with Pacific actors from this era. While Dean and Carell were key ‘agents of legitimisation’ in regional and national arts festivals in the Pacific, they were not alone in their valorisation of tradition and assessment of what constitutes authenticity. In the wake of widespread colonial prohibition of ‘traditional’ culture, the formation of independent nation-states throughout much of the Pacific witnessed an increasing importance placed on forms understood to be pre-colonial. People of the Pacific have used the ‘arts’, as a resource to display their traditions and historical past, in order to consolidate their political and cultural identities in the present, and the Festival of Pacific Arts is one such example.

The importance placed on the maintenance of cultural heritage in the Pacific has led to what Karen Stevenson has identified as the trend towards institutionalisation of culture – the creation of arts schools, museums and festivals which aim to classify and standardise aspects of ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’ national culture. These views are still very much in circulation today in national discourse, and in debates about the deleterious impact of tourism throughout the Pacific.

**Entangled Histories: A Conclusion**

The Festival of Pacific Arts is an important regional forum for the presentation of art, objects and performances that inspire national cultural pride and regional unity. It is also an important vehicle for the perpetuation of Pacific arts potentially in multiple forms that encompass traditional and contemporary components. However, as others have argued, the Festival of Pacific Arts is enshrined in the notions of preservation of the cultural past, despite attempts to encourage performances that move beyond dichotomous definitions of tradition and innovation.
In her work on the Festival of Pacific Arts, Stevenson (2002: 36) asks ‘How do innovation and creativity merge with notions of the tradition?’ One way to approach this question is to pay attention to the way Pacific performers respond to these issues. For some, the ‘entangledness’ of their practices with other places and histories is an important source of innovation and inspiration. There are many examples, ranging from music and, increasingly, rap music and culture as forms of Pacific story-telling to visual arts and graphic design, which blend old and new, traditions and history. But I will conclude with an example that references Dean and Carell and their particular concerns with authenticity.

During my interview both Dean and Carell singled out drums made from kerosene and biscuit tins, along with the ukulele and guitar, as objectionable objects. These drums are rectangular tins and when hit with drumsticks produce a higher and more ‘jangly’ sound than wooden drums. When Cook Islanders first played their drums to Dean and Carell they used the tin drum, and Dean said ‘I told them to throw them into the sea’. In Twin Journeys Dean and Carell elaborate:

Now, in many of the Cook Islands, that ‘garbage item’, the ubiquitous biscuit tin, had all but disappeared, leaving in its rightful place the mellow-toned instrument of the arts in the Islands – the fine wooden slat gongdrum...These are holding a line against being flooded, drowned and destroyed by the artificial over-sell, the hard-sell of pop music that is engulfing the world.31

But rather than disappear, the tini, as it is called in the Cook Islands, has had a major resurgence, especially in the early 2000s. Some drummers, now in their fifties and sixties, recall using the tini (as well as upturned boats on the beach) because local drums were prohibited during the colonial era. Later they combined the tini with wooden drums because they liked the combination of sounds and its ‘jangly’ timbre. Both drummers and dancers say that it adds to the ‘excitement’ of dancing. The tini is often talked about as a ‘northern group’ style of drumming, ‘from the old days’ and it has gained the status of ‘tradition,’ able to be used in dance competitions and national festivals (not without some consternation from an older generation minority).

This example demonstrates the entangled history of found objects, the impact of colonial rule and a far broader and more flexible definition of what may constitute tradition and cultural authenticity. What matters, at least to the performers themselves, is that the drumming is exciting: a combination of timbre, rhythm and emotion. This affective aesthetic is the marker of cultural continuity, and tradition is not necessarily determined by whether a sound is produced by a ‘western’ or a ‘Pacific’ object.

Pacific people have actively created new performance styles and utilized contexts such as the Festival of Pacific Arts to continue their artistic traditions. A way of further enabling this creativity and innovation to occur is to untangle the way categories of tradition and authenticity operate in past festivals. The 1972 South Pacific Festival is most obviously a product of Pacific-European encounters in a neo-colonial era and Dean and Carell occupy an awkward but significant position in this history. While indigenous creativity and vision have come to the fore in the Festival of Pacific Arts, the ideas and involvement of Dean and Carell need analysis precisely because they have ongoing effects on the production and reception of Pacific cultural production today.

This essay has argued that it is necessary to examine this history in order to understand how early ‘agents of legitimation’ like Beth Dean and Victor Carell played a pivotal role in setting the terms for evaluating ‘traditional’ art forms. Pacific peoples have adequate and ample reason to be ambivalent about outsiders passing judgments about the authenticity of their cultural production. But as I have also wanted to show, it is not simply western art critics and academics that utilise the oppositional categories of modern/traditional and authentic/inauthentic. These divisions still have widespread, if contested, currency among both Pacific and non-Pacific people,31 which makes it particularly important
to tackle the problematic, entangled history of cultural festivals such as the Festival of Pacific Arts. Only then will it be possible to truly problematise definitions of cultural authenticity and who gets to decide what counts as culturally legitimate.
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