

Pacific Islands Museums Association

Working together, preserving, celebrating, and nurturing the heritage of the peoples of the Pacific Islands

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Young ni-Vanuatu girl trying out a sand drawing activity at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in Port Vila (Photo by Tarisi Vunidilo)



Discussion among members of PIMA (Photo by ICHCAP/B. Cha)

The Pacific Islands Museums Association (PIMA) is a regional, non-governmental organisation that assists museums, cultural centres, national trusts, cultural departments and ministries, cultural associations, and arts councils. PIMA acknowledges the richness of the Pacific's ICH and has undertaken some successful initiatives to support ICH safeguarding.

PIMA was established in 1994 as a regional forum where heritage professionals could exchange their views and work towards improving the quality of service provided to the public. It is the first and only regional, multilingual, multicultural, non-profit organisation that assists museums, cultural centres, and people to preserve Pacific heritage.

PIMA develops community participation in heritage management and brings together over forty-five museums and cultural centres in the Pacific to develop their capacity to identify research, manage, interpret, and nurture cultural and natural heritage. PIMA advocates the development of regional cultural resource management policies and practices, facilitates training, and provides a forum to exchange ideas and skills. It provides and encourages regional and global linkages to support heritage safeguarding. In this article, PIMA highlights a case study on initiatives that PIMA fully supported in Vanuatu as one of its ICH safeguarding activities.

The Malampa Regional Sand Drawing Festival, held in Sesivi, West Ambrym, from 11 to 15 May 2008, was a significant cultural event not only

for Vanuatu, but for the whole world. Sponsored by UNESCO/Japan Funds-in-Trust for intangible heritage, the festival demonstrated that this unique ni-Vanuatu tradition is still alive and may indeed be undergoing a revival of interest, given the convergence of around 400 participants.

Aesthetically, the sand drawings are very beautiful, and it was a privilege to witness the great skill and knowledge of the practitioners from all over Vanuatu's islands, as they ritually drew complex designs on the flat black volcanic sands and recited the stories and songs to go with them. However, it is necessary to realize that sand drawings are much more than just pretty geometric patterns or pictures. They are a complex artistic ritual where art, story, and traditional knowledge are interwoven to form a language of memory, place, and community. Sand drawings uniquely express the deep ni-Vanuatu connection to and understanding of the land, conveying a sense of community, identity, and interaction with nature and history that has evolved out of the spirit of the land and the hearts and minds of the people.

To keep this cultural knowledge alive, it is not enough to preserve the outward forms of sand drawings, but rather to continue to regenerate their deeper significance—the stories, rituals, and the symbolic meanings that express the richness of ni-Vanuatu culture and community relations.

Much of the success of the festival was in seeing innovative sand drawings evolve, such as the depictions of Air Vanuatu and the Statue

of Liberty, right alongside older traditional forms such as the *laplap* form from Pentecost. Of particular importance is that so many young people took part in the festival, witnessing and learning from the custodians of this living cultural heritage. For without this intergenerational transmission of knowledge, the future of unique cultural expressions such as sand drawing would indeed be under threat.

While there are plans to incorporate sand drawing as part of the national school curriculum in Vanuatu, to convey a true sense of the richness and breadth of cultural context, festivals such as the one in Ambrym are essential. Locals, participants, and visitors are enriched by the opportunity to make new friends, exchange information and artistic inspiration, renew family connections, and learn new customs, dances, art forms, stories, and music—experiences no classroom can convey.

In this age of intolerance, global conflict, and the stifling of creative diversity by huge multinational corporations and powerful political interests, the need to raise awareness of cultural heritage's value is crucial to bring people closer together in mutual respect and understanding. We need to do everything we can to promote and encourage the rich cultural diversity of humanity, and the continued practice of the arts and culture of Vanuatu gives life to a language that may otherwise be forgotten or undervalued in the headlong rush toward 'modern life' and the age of the mobile phone.