

# In COVID-free Vanuatu, this marathon cultural festival has brought thousands of people together

Pacific Beat / By Prianka Srinivasan

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Hundreds of dancers perform from nightfall to sunrise, swapping in and out like a sporting team. *(Supplied: Arlene Bax)*

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Despite being one of the Pacific's biggest cultural festivals, there is no specific date for Nekowiar, a

spectacular event of colour and culture that is a true test of one's endurance.

Bringing together thousands of people from some of the most remote villages on the Vanuatu island of Tanna, not even COVID-19 could stop the four-day festival from taking place earlier this month.

It helped that the Pacific Island nation is one of just a handful of countries yet to confirm even one official case of coronavirus.

Nekowiar, which takes months to prepare, is traditionally held every few years, but it has been eight years since the last one in 2012.

No-one knows when or where the next celebration will happen.

This isn't an event for tourists though.

Nekowiar has been called a royal ordination ceremony, a peace-building exercise between warring clans, and an opportunity for families to arrange marriages.

At this year's festival, hundreds of women and girls kicked off the event by singing in harmony, and dancing a traditional Napen Napen from nightfall to sunrise.

They only took breaks when they are too tired to continue, swapping in and out like a sporting team.

They had trained for months for this.

The movements were so powerful that dust erupted from the dancers' feet, which cast a brown haze across the entire performance.

The women pounded woven bags with their hands for hours on end, which drove the beat of their dance.

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## Key points:

It has been eight years since the last festival

Song and dance event helps tribes settle disputes

It's also seen as a chance to arrange marriages

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Vanuatu's Nekowiar festival is a way for Tanna people to celebrate their culture in a fast-changing world. (Supplied: Arlene Bax)



Woven baskets are stuffed with leaves and beat like drums during the Napen Napen in 2012. (ABC News: Cat Graue)

"The women weave bags using pandanus leaves, and then they fill the basket with green leaves," Pricilla Noel, from the village of White Sands, said.

"It's these leaves that they smack together to make a noise during the Napen Napen."

Most of the dancers paint their faces in bright colourful designs that hold special significance to their tribal community, or nakamal.

In the early hours of the third day, the men, teenagers and even young boys had their turn in a dance called Toka.

It involved waving long hooks carved from wood as they jumped from side to side in time with the rhythm.



Vanuatu's Nekowiar festival has taken on modern twists, from tinsel to social media. *(Supplied: Arlene Bax)*

Jimmy Kawiell performed the dance for the first time this year.

"You need more energy for Toka," Mr Kawiell said.

"We've been practising for five to six months.

"It is a very significant thing for us, especially when things are developing so fast and we tend to lose our culture.

"For Tanna people, this is our identity."

## **A peace-building exercise between warring clans**

Nekowiar is believed to date back centuries — but history is passed down orally on the island of Tanna, so there are few written records.

Jean Pascal Wahe, from the Tafea Cultural Centre on

Tanna, said the spectacle was first held as a reconciliation event between warring clans.

"Earlier, the tribes used to fight each other, they used to argue over who is the customary authority," Mr Wahe said.

"So, all the different communities came together to find a solution to stop all these disputes, and they decided to host a Nekowiar to bring peace back to their tribes."

Despite the modern twists of a Nekowiar held in 2020 — from colourful tinsel worn by the women, to photos and videos being shared almost instantaneously on social media — it serves that purpose to this day.

Toka dancer Jimmy Kawiell said his community had recently had disputes over land with the people of Lavna community, which hosted this year's Nekowiar.

"The tribe that hosted the Nekowiar asked us to take part, that's why we took part in Toka," Mr Kawiell said.

"That's how we strengthen back our relationship, through the Nekowiar."



The centuries-old practice still helps tribes resolve disputes today. (Supplied: Arlene Bax)

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A pig killing ceremony marks the end of festivities, with the pigs' blood washing away any wrongs committed by participants. (ABC News: Cat Graue)

Mr Wahe said the event also serves to establish who is the villages' paramount chief, or yeremwanu.

"The yeremwanu is the biggest chief, a bit like a king, and we identify him through a Nekowiar ceremony," he said.

Clans on the island of Tanna have their own chiefly governance systems and each person within the clan has a specific activity to fulfil and outfits that they wear, during the ceremony.

"The Nekowiar shows everyone who is chief. He's the one who wears the long feather of the bird that comes out in the early morning," Mr Wahe said.

### **'The customary dance makes everything allowed'**

As a major cultural reunion event, the Nekowiar also provides an opportunity to arrange marriages between boys and girls from different villages across the island.

"If a boy likes a girl and wants to bring her home, he doesn't have to pay [a bride price] for her, like we usually do on Tanna. If he finds her during the Nekowiar, then it's free," Pricilla Noel said.



While adultery does happen during Nekowiar, it isn't the event's objective. *(Supplied: Arlene Bax)*

She said Nekowiar also allows men and women to spend time together without having to follow the island's other customary protocols.

"If they are dancing and a boy or a girl trespasses into the dance and grabs a hold of them, then they can take the dancer for themselves. The customary dance makes everything allowed," Ms Noel said.

The event had previously been described by some tour operators as permitting "consenting adults ... to indulge in their sexual pursuits".

Mr Wahe said that while adultery does happen during Nekowiar, it isn't the event's objective.

"It's not true. If you commit adultery or anything else, the Nekowiar washes that away, because it's a time for forgiveness and reconciliation," Mr Wahe said.

"But it's not a time where you simply do something bad because it's Nekowiar."



Vanuatu's Nekowiar festival is one of the biggest cultural events held in the Pacific. *(Supplied: Arlene Bax)*

But he said the pig killing ceremony that marks an end of festivities does play an important role.

"Once the pigs are killed, you can't do anything bad anymore," Mr Wahe said.

"The blood of the pig washes us of the wrongs we may have committed."

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