

# Cultural Practices & Protocols

Engagement that is meaningful is about respecting cultural practices and protocols. Pacific values common to all Pacific cultures should always be considered when observing any customs. However, among the different Pacific countries there are distinct differences in cultural practices, roles of family members, traditional dress and power structures.

If you're asked to attend a Pacific event or ceremony, it's anticipated that you be accompanied and/or advised by Pacific people who can help guide you.

## Advice may be about:

- Formal ceremonies and knowing who and how to address people and their roles in the appropriate manner.
- Use of Pacific languages and translation by non-English speakers.
- Acknowledging and allowing time for elders to contribute.
- Taking time to observe protocols which uphold spirituality through prayers.

**Note** - A full list of basic greetings can be found at [mpp.govt.nz/publications-resources/resources/pacific-language-cards/](http://mpp.govt.nz/publications-resources/resources/pacific-language-cards/)

Having a general understanding and knowing how to behave in these situations shows Pacific communities respect and is a step in the right direction for building good relationships. Below are a few examples which demonstrate how practices vary. This is by no means an exhaustive list but is merely intended to give you a basic introduction. If you somehow forget everything you read here, just remember to act respectfully and that it's okay to ask if you don't understand.

## Pan-Pacific

### Role of spirituality in meetings

Pacific meetings or events usually begin and close with a prayer, and food is blessed before being served. If preparing for a fono, invite a church minister or an elder to open the programme with prayer.

### Walking in front of people

Walking in front of people during a meeting or event is considered bad-mannered. It's polite to slightly bow your head and say 'tulou' which means 'excuse me'.

### Kava ceremonies

Tonga, Fiji and Samoa are the only Pacific countries that are commonly known for kava ceremony practices.

## Cook Islands

### Haircutting ceremony (pakoti rouru)

The hair cutting ceremony is a rite of passage for young boys. It celebrates their entry into manhood and is celebrated with a big gathering. The young boy's hair is left to grow from birth up until their special haircutting ceremony, usually at age 13. The boy is seated at the front of event, with his hair separated into small ponytails or plaits, and family are invited up to cut a piece of hair. In exchange, they give an atinga (donation) to go towards the young boy's life. This custom serves to maintain reciprocal ties within the extended family and community.

### Welcome ceremony for special guests (turou)

The turou is a formal performance to welcome chiefs, important dignitaries or high ranking officials. This is a loud but respectful greeting involving ura (dance), pona / kaakau (colourful clothing), ei katu, ei kaki and rauti (flowers) and imene (song/hymn).

### Appropriate dress attire

For women, traditional dress such as mu'umu'u and more modern designs inspired by the Pacific sit comfortably together in most settings. However, it's still appropriate to cover up out of respect for the older Kūki 'Āirani generation. For men, the pona tane (island shirt) is the staple piece of clothing worn with trousers.

### Head dress

The Cook Islands are renowned for their distinctive beautiful head and neck dress pieces. The giving of ei kaki or ratui is always followed by a kia orana (may you live long, may you live well!) and then a kiss on the cheek (oki ra, moko).

Don't be offended if Kuki (Cook Island) women smell you when this exchange happens. It's common for Kuki women to ongi (literal translation is to smell) kiss the person and is a way of connecting.

- **Ei katu** head dress/crown of your tipuna/ancestors on your head made with fresh or fake flowers
- **'Ei kaki** neck dress/ei made with fresh flowers or greenery such as leaves
- **Rauti** usually made out of a green shrub/cordylone fructose. This is a significant head piece usually reserved for ariki (chiefs) or very special guests. Sometimes made and woven with coconut oil and flowers.

### Language and culture

Reo (language) connects the people of the Cook Islands to their peu Māori (culture/cultural customs), mana, and the vaerua (soul) of who they are. Whether through 'imene (song), 'ura (dance), pe'e (chants), uapou (forums to discuss Biblical topics), or family and community gatherings, the use of reo helps them to connect as tangata Māori Kūki 'Āirani (Cook Islands people), and to their ta'onga (treasures) and peu Māori.

### Chanting, singing and dance

Cook Island singing is very distinct with different levels and sounds including pe'e (chants) and imene (hymns). They are imene apii sabati, imene tuki and imene reo metua (hymn of the parent/ancestor). It's considered impolite to decline or refuse to dance (ura) when asked to partake in any ceremonial events.

## Tokelau

### Sharing system

Tokelau has a unique sharing system called inati where every member of society has responsibilities and equal rights in the community. The system ensures that all households in the village have food to eat. The customary system refers to the sharing of fish. The aumanga (men of the village) go out fishing in groups and bring their collective catch to a common distribution place while the women prepare tea and food. The catch is then shared equally amongst the villages by the pulenuku (village mayor), ensuring that every family is given enough fish depending on the number of family members. Notions of sharing and community are valued in Tokelauan culture, so it's important to recognise and acknowledge this before participating in an event.

### Appropriate dress attire

While most people in Tokelau these days wear Western-style, casual clothing, Tokelau's strong Christian heritage means it is appropriate to dress conservatively. For women, it includes covering arms and legs, and wearing a skirt or long dress to covering arms and legs.

### Spirituality and beliefs

Fuaikupu mai te Tuhi Paia - spiritual beliefs and values are an integral part of the lives of Tokelau people. Gagana Tokelau is celebrated in communities through alofa (love), faka-te-agaga (spirituality) and fakatuatua (faith). Whether through traditional beliefs and values, exploring legends or celebrating and coming together as communities in churches, their beliefs and values help them to learn more about their language, culture and identity. So, it's important if you are engaging the Tokelauan community, you acknowledge and incorporate these values.

## Niue

### Welcoming ceremony and dance

Takalo was traditionally performed before going to war. Women were also forbidden from performing the takalo but nowadays this can vary depending on which village you come from. Nowadays, it's performed at formal welcoming occasions and usually led by a male who leads the hea (calling out) throughout the takalo. Males are at the forefront with females standing side by side in support. There are two types of takalo. The ceremonial takalo is usually performed for dignitaries with a pierced green coconut presented to the visiting dignitary to consume.

This symbolises acceptance and welcome onto the land by the Niuean community. The takalo dance performance is usually performed at events and celebrations such as Polyfest, a festival featuring secondary schools competing in traditional music, dance, costume and speech.

### Clothing and hat-making

Clothing is mostly casual, cool and comfortable but women usually cover their shoulders and men wear long trousers.

A lavalava is referred to as sleepwear in Niuean culture. Weaving and hat-making is an indigenous art-form to Niuean culture and is a skilled practice. The distinctive pulou, is a hat woven together using different materials including the traditional pandanus leaves (lau fa) and can usually be seen on women in church.

### Coming of age ceremonies

Niueans take pride in their many traditions handed down from generation to generation as a 'living entity'. They believe it's more important to give than to receive something in return, and this is referred to as fakaalofa – giving from the heart. Two significant traditions include:

#### Haircutting ceremony for boys

It's customary for boys to grow their hair until they are a young teenager and then have it cut in a special ceremony. Guests and families are invited to cut an individual braid and then contribute to a monetary fund which goes to the boy once ceremony costs are paid for. This is followed by a large feast.

#### Ear piercing ceremony for girls

It's customary for girls to have an ear-piercing ceremony. Girls get their ears pierced by a representative from each side of the girl's parent family. These gatherings are usually held on a Saturday in private homes. The girl is adorned with gifts and well wishes for the future, followed by a large feast.

## Samoa

### 'Ava ceremony

The 'ava, or kava ceremony, is one of Samoa's most important chiefly customs. Sharing the ceremonial 'ava drink marks important milestones in Samoan society and is a very formal tradition. If you're asked to take part in an 'ava ceremony remember to:

- Dress conservatively. For women it includes covering arms and legs, and wearing a skirt or long dress.
- There's an order of how the ipu (cup) is passed around from the highest-ranking chief of the visitors and a way in which you drink.
- When you're handed the ipu, take it with your right hand to drink. It's customary to spill a few drops on the ground to give thanks before raising the ipu and saying 'ia manuia' which can be translated as 'be well and prosper'. You will then drink and hand the cup back to the tautu'ava (the server).

### Appropriate dress attire

For women, traditional wear such as the puletasi is worn at most semi-formal to formal events. The puletasi is usually a Pacific-patterned matching tunic and skirt. For men, traditional clothing includes the ie faitaga (formal lavalava that only men wear) and a buttoned-up aloha shirt. The lavalava is always worn when doing everyday household chores (fe'au), attending a family or community meeting, or different ceremonies.

### Funerals

Appropriate dress for funerals is a lavalava, white shirt, tie, jacket and leather sandals for men, and a white puletasi or mu'umu'u for women (however, the colour is dependent on what the aiga (family) would like).

### Using the correct matai (chiefly) titles

It's important in Samoan culture to understand the matai titles of their extended families as integral to tracing familial ties to villages, places of origin, and other names associated with families.

An individual matai title signifies the hierarchal status, roles and responsibilities of that title within the village, district, country and extended families:

- **Ali'i** 'sitting chief', the highest title that can be bestowed onto someone, usually a high chief of the village and family.
- **Tulafale** 'speaking chief/orator' who speaks on behalf of the village, family. When engaging Samoan communities, the group will normally appoint someone who has the highest status in the group to speak.

### Tatau (tattoo)

The tradition of applying tatau by hand has hardly changed for over two thousand years, with its techniques often being passed down from father to son.

### Ceremonial attire

The taualuga (traditional Samoan dance) is usually performed by the first born son (manaia) or daughter (taupou) of a chief. The traditional regalia for the taualuga includes:

- **le toga** a traditional finely woven mat, decorated with prized feathers of the 'sega', which is wrapped around the body.
- **Vala/fusi** the tapa sash that secures the mat.
- **Uga laumei/uga fonu** anklets and armbands traditionally made of ti leaves, turtle shell, coconut shell or boar's tusks.
- **Ulalei/ulanifo** necklace traditionally made of whale's teeth or boar's tusks, but nowadays are replicas made of plastic pipe, coconut shell or carved animal bone.
- **Tuiga** the traditional headdress of the taupou or manaia, traditionally made of coconut midribs (tuaniu) wrapped with strips of tapa cloth and secured to a faceplate (lave) made of turtle shell.

The artwork and designs represent community, power, status, respect, honour and is a mark of pride. It's performed by the tufuga (tattoo artist) and only descendants of a tufuga can continue the practice of tatau. Samoan males who receive a pe'a/malofie are called soga'imiti and are respected for their courage. The pe'a covers the body from waist to their knees and can take many weeks to complete.

Malu is the traditional tattoo for Samoan women and can refer to notions of sheltering and protection.

Their patterns are typically smaller and covers the legs from just below the knee to the upper thighs. Women usually only display their malu during the traditional siva dance or when performing certain protocols.

It's very rare for non-Samoans to receive a traditional tattoo. It has stirred much controversy amongst the community, so it's important to understand the true meaning of the pe'a and malu, and consult and seek advice from elders in the Samoan community if you are thinking of receiving one.

# Tonga

## Sitting and standing etiquette

Dignitaries, VIPs and faifekau (religious ministers) are usually seated in the front of any event. If you're an official visitor, expect to be seated at the front. Don't be shy to ask for help on where to be seated or if you need help with translating what is being said. When walking in front of people during a meeting or an event, it's polite to slightly bow your head and say 'tulou'.

## Role of the mehekitanga at events

In Tongan custom, the female in the family holds the highest rank. The father's sister is referred to as mehekitanga (the matriarch of the family) and her children and grandchildren are referred to as fahu.

They are given the same status and will often receive the best of everything.

When the mehekitanga dies, her eldest daughter's children will sit at the head of her body. This symbolises that her status has now been passed onto the daughter. Other family members honour the fahu by laying kahoā (floral leis) on them, symbolising strong family relationships. A hair cutting ceremony is performed for the daughters of the deceased, and the liongi (lower rank family members) by the fahu.

## Weddings, graduations, significant birthdays

The mehekitanga will sit at the centre of the table next to the bride/groom/birthday girl/boy or graduate. The mehekitanga is considered the most important person on the day and will usually be wearing the most decorative kahoā.



# Rotuma

## Ceremonies

During an auspicious event, the chief guest and dignitaries may be accorded a traditional ceremony known as the sik fonu during which guests are:

- seated on the pāega (ceremonial seat) comprising layers of folded fine mats, adorned with tēfui (garlands) and perfume.
- traditional food is also ceremonially presented and then served to guests on low lying tables known as 'umefe.
- a ceremonial drink of kava root and water is then prepared in a tano'a (ceremonial kava bowl) and served to guests in ipu (coconut shell cups).

The ceremony is interlaced with traditional oratory referred to as he'āk ne koua and poetic chants known as fakpeje and may be followed by a traditional communal dance called a tautoga or other such festivities and merry making.

Things to note during the ceremonial meal - sik fonu:

**Chief guest** - feel free to eat at a more leisurely pace than you may be accustomed to in order to allow other participants to eat their fill. In either case, if you are not sated during the ceremonial meal, you may partake of the spread prepared at the communal table for all the guests.

**Other dignitaries/guests** seated on the pāega - keep an eye on the chief guest while you eat. Once he or she finishes eating, the meal will be concluded for all the participants.



## Household

When serving drinks and food to people in a meeting-type setting, it's always appropriate for women to cover their legs with a lavalava or long skirt because you may need to walk past elders and men (this is called faka'apa'apa or respect).

## Semi-formal occasions

Traditional Tongan attire is modest and conservative. For women, a puletaha (matching tunic and skirt) and a kiekie (ornamental girdle worn around the waist for semi-formal occasions). For men, a tupenu (cloth wrap skirt) or pants, and button-up shirt. It is common to wear this attire to semi-formal events such as church, opening ceremonies and meetings.

## Formal events

The ta'ovala is a traditional woven mat wrapped around the waist worn by men and women over their tupenu or puletaha at all formal occasions. It is usually made from pandanus leaves, hibiscus bast fibre or plastic, and tied with the kafa, a braided rope worn like a belt.

## Funerals

If attending a Tongan funeral, it is customary for men and women to wear conservative black clothing as a sign of mourning, and a ta'ovala as a sign of respect. If you don't have one, a long skirt for women or black tupenu (long black pants for men) is fine. The type of ta'ovala worn depends on the relationship to the deceased. For example, the liongi (children of the fa'e tangata or mother's brother) wear old, coarse torn mats, meaning they have more 'servile' duties during the funeral such as cleaning and preparing the food.

Rotuman culture emphasises modesty, moderation and restraint; values that are encapsulated in the cultural ideal of 'atmāi and reflected in ideas on appropriate attire.

## For women:

- a dress or skirt that is at least knee-length and a tunic or top that covers the upper arms is considered appropriate.
- traditional settings and events - an ankle-length hā' fāli (sarong) tied in place with an 'oro (sash or scarf) may be worn over the skirt/dress.
- when participating in a dance, fara (traditional merrymaking) or ceremony, the hā' fāli and 'oro can be worn along with an appropriate tunic or top.
- Pants and trousers are generally considered inappropriate.

## For men:

- a hā' fāli ma 'on taga - a cloth wrap-around with pockets known in Fiji as a sulu vakataga - or trousers with an Aloha shirt is appropriate for semi formal occasions.
- for more formal, or religious settings, a buttoned up collared shirt, with an optional necktie, would be more suitable.
- when participating in a dance, fara or ceremony, a hā' fāli (sarong) worn to below knee length and held in place by a leather belt with tucked in collared shirt or t-shirt is appropriate.

## How to greet and address appropriately

The Tongan language reflects Tonga's social structure and certain words should only be used with each group. Using the appropriate vocabulary is considered a mark of respect, whether in everyday conversation or speaking to an audience which spans Tongan society which includes ha'a tu'i (royalty), hou'eiki nōpele (nobility) and ha'a me'avale/ha'a tu'a (commoner).

- **Tongan royal family** greet with a handshake and head bowed, and not with a kiss on the cheek.
- **For the rest of the community** greet with a handshake and a smile. Don't greet with a kiss if you do not know each other, as a person's face is considered sacred.

## Gifts of tapa and fine mats

At gatherings you will see the exchange and gifting of beautifully handmade fine mats and ngatu (tapa cloth). If you are fortunate to be gifted one, then it's for you to keep and hold until you gift it to someone else.

## Cultural performances

Ta'olunga or cultural performances often involve family and friends placing dollar notes on performers. It's useful to have some monetary notes so you can participate and contribute to the costs of the event.

## Kava circles

Kava circles or faikava take place in homes and garages most weekends. This is where men, young and old, congregate to partake in the drink but more importantly to socialise and talk with each other. If you are male and invited to take part, then it's important you greet everyone by starting with the person at the top of the circle (opposite the kava bowl). Shake hands with the individual and continue greeting those on the right hand side. Return to the top of the circle and repeat the greetings down the left hand side. Greet the person serving the kava last. This is done as sign of respect and to be welcomed into the circle to share in talanoa.

## Posture and movement

In traditional settings and during ceremonies, it is appropriate to sit on mats on the floor, unless chairs are provided for this purpose.

## Do's:

- men sit with their legs crossed and feet tucked underneath the opposite knee (*pāe fak Toag*).
- women sit with both legs folded at the knee and to one side with their feet pointed away from people and partially tucked under their thighs (*pāe fak hān*).

## Dont's:

- sit with your legs stretched out in front of you and pointed towards people.
- lie down or recline in front of people in a traditional setting or event.

Avoid walking in front of people, but if you need to do so, walk with your head bowed and back slightly lowered while saying *turo'* (excuse me) as you pass by.

## Food etiquette

- Sit down while you eat, whether that be at a table or on a mat on the floor. It is considered bad mannered, among most districts, to stand while eating.
- When invited to a Rotuman home for a meal, it is polite to bring a small contribution of food or drink, even when the host says not to - Consider bringing a dessert, drinks or seasonal fruit. For community events where a potluck has not been specified, this expectation would not apply.

## Conversational etiquette

When greeting people, a handshake with your right hand and a smile is generally sufficient. Though hugs and kisses on the cheek are not uncommon nor necessarily considered inappropriate, it is advisable to take your cue from the person you are greeting. In traditional settings quietness is maintained and loud sounds and noise are avoided.

# Fiji

# Tuvalu

# Kiribati

Traditional ceremonies and protocols

### Welcoming ceremony

Veiqaravi vakavanua is the traditional way to welcome an honoured guest and accompanying visitors. It is the embodiment of Fijian cultural identity and heritage. The solemn event is performed and observed in silence as a sign of dignity and respect. If you are asked to take part in such a ceremony, remember:

- The matanivanua (chief guest’s herald or spokesman) will sit on the ground close to the chief guest and makes the formal speeches, receives and acknowledges the presentation on the chief guest’s behalf.
- As the chief guest enters the venue, they will be greeted by the tama (an acclamation) by the assembled chiefs or group performing the ceremony. The matanivanua will respond. Apart from the sound of the tama, it’s considered disrespectful to be loud and noisy, and strict silence is observed.
- The ceremony will always include the presentation of ceremonial items that hold significance acknowledging how far visitors have come; the yaqona (kava ceremony), speeches and ends with a celebratory feast.

### Traditional welcome and respect

The fatele is traditional Tuvaluan song and dance performed during special occasions such as the welcoming of special guests, weddings and at community gatherings. While the fatele differs amongst the eight Tuvaluan Islands, it is similar in its characteristics.

In acknowledging leaders during a formal gathering, church leaders and elders will rank higher than the island group leader. Reciprocity is shown by exchange of information, knowledge and strengthening relationships.



### Te Maneaba

In Kiribati, the maneaba is similar to a marae that is central to all Kiribati villages, and to I-Kiribati social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual life. It is a meeting space for all, and a place for the village unimwane (eldest man/leader) to preside over all matters related to maintaining peace and the wellbeing of the families in the village. The maneaba is also a place of learning, where skills of construction and renovation of the maneaba, roofing, thatching, weaving, making te kora (coconut fibre lashing) are practiced and taught. Along with these skills, the maneaba also provides opportunities for young people to learn many other aspects of Kiribati culture and indigenous knowledge. The place of the maneaba is core to Kiribati health and wellbeing, reflected in the old Kiribati saying ‘Te Mauri, Te Raoi ao Te Tabomoa (Health, Peace and Prosperity).

### Aotearoa New Zealand Context

The traditional maneaba system in Kiribati is patriarchal. However, to adapt to an Aotearoa context, it now includes women elders, women leaders, and young leaders, sharing responsibility for the health and wellbeing of community members. All members including women and young people take part in decision making. This shift in culture demonstrates an intergenerational practice of leadership that supports the tenets of ‘Te Mauri, Te Raoi ao Te Tabomoa.’

Do’s and don’ts of dress etiquette

### Being respectful

In Fiji, there are multiple gestures and things a person does in order to show respect. For example, footwear is to be removed and placed outside the house before entering as shoes are considered dirty and show disregard for the house-owner. It’s disrespectful to touch the head of a Fijian. Attire is usually associated with different positions of authority, such as chiefly attire and someone of status in the community. Wearing the appropriate attire demonstrates you are showing vakarokoroko (respect).



### Traditional wear and head dress

Te fou ote tamafine means the garland of a young woman. Fou (garland or flower crown) is an important feature of Tuvaluan traditional wear and is made of flowers and leaves woven together in a pattern. It’s usually made by a mother and gifted to her daughter, wishing her courage for her journey but can also be gifted to non-Tuvaluans. During traditional performances you may observe people wearing the following:

- **Fou/fau/mae** head garland made from flowers and leaves that have a beautiful fragrance
- **Malele** neck garland made from shells, leaves and the Tuvaluan Puka tree seeds
- **Lakei** upper arm band made from leaves, paper, shells
- **Togiga fatele** dancing top for the women made from leaves
- **Titi tao** decorative skirt that goes over the titi lama made from dyed pandanus leaves
- **Titi lama** dancing skirt made from pandanus leaves.

### Dress etiquette

- Girls and women must wear a long dress/skirt or a te bee (lavalava) during formal cultural events.
- Women wearing skirts are expected to cover their legs with te bee when they sit.
- Men must wear a te bee (lavalava) in cultural settings and formal cultural events.



Other cultural practices and protocols

### Multiculturalism across Fiji

Fijian communities are very multicultural across ethnic groups, religion and language. It’s important to understand that dialects vary across the different provinces of Fiji and that the nation’s multiculturalism influences their protocols and customs. For example, in the Lauan Groups (Eastern Fiji), customs and protocols are strongly influenced by their linkages to their Tongan ancestry.



### Tuvalu’s nine distinct islands

Tuvalu comprises nine separate islands with Funafiti being the capital. Tuvaluans will identify more closely with their particular island and the rest of the group includes Nanumaga, Nanumea, Niutao, Nui, Niulakita (grouped up with Niutao to be one island), Nukufetau, Nukulaelae and Vaitupu.

It’s important to connect with the appropriate leaders in Tuvaluan communities. Church leaders are regarded as having higher status than island specific leaders, but it’s also important that these elders are acknowledged too.



### Welcoming Protocols

All invited guests arrive and the host representative will guide them to the seating area provided. The ceremony is officially opened with a prayer by church minister or a priest. Then, te unimwane (eldest man) or unaine (eldest woman) or a community leader says a welcome speech, bestowing words of blessings followed with the presentation of te bau (head garlands) by girls/women to show respect. The welcoming ceremony is performed through dancing and singing, providing food and other hospitable entertainment. Guests show appreciation and joy for the dances by spraying the dancers with perfume or talcum powder. The church minister or priest is asked to bless the food. Guests are also invited to speak during the formal ceremony.

### First birthdays and hair cutting ceremony

Celebrating a child’s first birthday is a significant milestone. Traditionally, it is time for all the families and people from the same village to celebrate the important achievement as they believe that the child has the highest risk of illness before turning one. The hair cutting ceremony is part of marking the milestone of a child’s first birthday. It symbolises hope that the new growth of the child’s hair will be stronger and healthier, as will the child.