

# VOU FIJI

Performing arts for the socio-economic integration of women and youth



VOU Halloween

With support from the ACP-EU Culture Programme in the Pacific, the VOU Dance Conservatory has been able to set up a 'training to employment' project for youth and women from disadvantaged Fijian communities.



Sachiko and Eddie Soro, Founders of the Conservatory

In Fiji, the vibrant performances of the VOU dance company reflect the extraordinary richness of the traditions inherited from the Melanesian and Indian cultures of the archipelago. They are also part of its tourist circuit, notably thanks to a partnership signed by the company with the Shangri-La and Sofitel hotels. But this cultural institution, a pioneer in the field of performing arts, is much more than a dance company. In addition to creating, producing and presenting shows,

VOU – which means «new» in the Fijian language – has a dance conservatory that offers a training programme affiliated with postgraduate studies at the university. A first in the country.

This double-hatted ecosystem allowed the small cultural enterprise to be eligible for the ACP-EU Culture Programme aimed at strengthening the sustainability of cultural and creative industries in African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries.



## Arts and culture as drivers of economic growth

With this grant, Sachiko and Eddie Soro - founders of VOU Fiji - will be able to make their dream come true: to see their discipline recognised as a real profession and a vehicle for supporting Fiji's productivity.

This programme will make a difference for around 100 young people and women who want to pursue a career in the performing arts. Firstly, it will enable 60 students from the conservatoire to benefit from high-level dance training, supported by a scholarship. The teaching offers a wide range of styles - from jazz and ballet to traditional and urban dance and contemporary dance.

At the end of the two-year course, a diploma will give them access to the postgraduate level recognised by the Fiji Higher Education Commission. Finally, students will have the opportunity to move on to a professional career with the company at the end of their training. A further 40 positions will be available in administration and cultural project management.

A mobilisation campaign, spread over three rounds, has already resulted in the selection of 20 dancers in 2022. The second and third waves will take place this January and in early 2024, respectively. In this context, the dance troupe will perform on stage and awareness-raising workshops will be organised in various towns and villages in the archipelago.

### **Navitalai Waqavotuwale, choreographer and artistic director: key figure in the project.**

Senior Instructor at the VOU Dance Conservatory, he is responsible for enriching and optimising the company's six performances, which are the main sources of income for the community. A Fijian national, he graduated from the dance department of the University of Auckland in New Zealand and has already created works in over 35 countries.

Hiring someone from abroad was never an option for Sachiko Soro. «To be able to build a consistent and sustainable project, it was essential to hire a highly qualified person who was well versed in the local culture, so as to enhance and modernise the traditional dance techniques - including Meke - brought by the dancers and to collaborate effectively with the troupe's technicians, such as the sound and light engineer or the costume designer.

Navitalai's contribution to improving the quality of the shows is already visible on the sets. This is one of the main focuses of the project. One of the shows, inspired by ancient legends of ghosts and cannibals, features mutant bodies, dressed up to the point of extravagance, in a frightening scenography subtly embellished with humour and film references. Another successful choreographic experiment, 'Island Adventurers', aimed at young audiences, has become a television programme in Fiji.



*Navitalai Waqavotuwale*

## Promoting, protecting and enhancing Fiji's heritage and arts

In 2022, the Fijian government is committed to promoting the cultural and artistic heritage of the archipelago as well as the professionalization of the creative sector. However, there is still much to be done. «The arts are not part of the school curriculum. We want to contribute to the structuring and maturation of the industry, and influence government policies to create more employment opportunities in the creative sector,» explains Sachiko.

Concerned with the preservation and enhancement of the archipelago's traditional arts and identities, VOU has set up a research programme. Through study trips, students discover and reappropriate the stories, rituals, dances and other traditional songs with which they imbue their art.

The aim is to foster intergenerational links in rural and remote communities. Many young people feel disconnected from their roots. Facilitating the transmission between elders and

young people has led to some very creative projects. For example, Ratu, a 24-year-old student, was able to explore the role of the «daunivodou» - traditionally the creator of songs and music - who is the only person who can pass on the rituals and ceremonies inherent to each village. There are only 10 of them left in the country today.

«It is essential to ensure the safeguarding of cultural practices and traditions and to support innovation among future generations,» confirms Frances Vaka'uta, Head of Culture at the Pacific Community, in charge of the ACP-EU Culture Hub for the Pacific. «These federative projects giving access to professions in the field of art and culture are unique levers to contribute in a significant and inclusive way to the economy of the countries of the region.

In addition to strengthening bilateral cooperation between the EU and Fiji in the field of arts and culture, this programme could have a multiplier effect in the Pacific region. As a first step, Sachiko Soro sees the possibility of extending the training programme to dancers from neighbouring islands.



*Student dancers*