

Vernice Wineera Pere Wins International Acclaim

A Ngati Toa woman from Hawaii winning international acclaim in Papua New Guinea ... it may sound a little confusing, but it's not. The occasion was last year's South Pacific Festival of Arts. The woman was Vernice Wineera Pere, originally from Porirua but now living in Hawaii. And the acclaim came from her winning entry in the Festival's literary competition. She won first prize in the poetry section.

The Festival is held every four years, and hosted by a different Pacific nation each time. It offers dance, music, drama, art and other expressions of the Pacific cultures — including canoe and house building, food and costume, contemporary art and sculpture and oral traditions.

Big Event

It's a big event for Maoridom. In 1976 the Festival was held in Roturua, and a strong Maori contingent attended the 1980 venue, the Papua New Guinea capital Port Moresby. Prominent among the participants were carvers Tuti Tukaokao and Rangi Hetet, weavers Digger Te Kanawa and Erenora Hetet, artists Arnold Wilson, Cliff Whiting and Katarina Mataira, Waihirere cultural group, all led by an impressive group of elders including Henare Tuwhangai, George Tait, Ngoi Pewhairangi and Rangi Dewes.

Yet one of the most prominent Maori participants was not one of the official New Zealand party. Though she was brought up at Takapuwahia Pa, Porirua, Vernice Pere has lived in Hawaii since 1960. She graduated B.A. in English from Brigham Young University, edited the university magazine and later taught there.

Published poet

Now the mother of seven children, Vernice works as cultural researcher and writer at the Polynesian Culture Center, a cultural and educational activity of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints based at Laie, Oahu. Her poetry has been published not only in Hawaii and the United States, but also in New Zealand (readers may remember her contributions to *Marae* and *Te Ao Hou*). As well as two books of her own called

Mahanga and *Ka Po'e o La'ie*, her work is also included in *Into the World of Light*, a forthcoming anthology of Maori writing edited by Witi Ihimaera and Donald Long.

She is also a visual artist, and her time is divided between writing and her work in pen and ink and woodcuts. Talking of her art and poetry, she says:

"My maoritanga and Polynesian heritage is the vital element in my work. I see the Pacific as an extended marae that is rich in culture and I try to express this in poetry

and art that reveal the universals in human experience."

Cultural change

With this viewpoint, the theme of the Festival — "Pacific Awareness" — was clearly one to which she had already devoted much thought and concern, and her winning series of poems, called "Walking on Water", reflects her views of Pacific life and culture. Each of her eighteen poems reflects some aspect of Pacific life whether past, present or future, and ranges from traditional features of Maori life to a warning against present-day nuclear activity in her beloved Pacific. She writes too of the cultural change and adjustment which Pacific Islanders share.

Space doesn't permit us to print the whole of "Walking on Water", but here is one extract.

Take the sharpened pipi shell,
piece of paua, bird-bone,
razor-blade if you like.
Carve upon my face the marks
of maoritanga. Let the blood spurt
and dribble down my chin
like the moko of the old women
wrapped in blankets round the cooking-fire.
Rub the juices in the wounds,
charcoal, vegetable dye, India Ink.
Make beautiful the design, like
the young fern curled across the moon,
or the kiwi feathers in grandfaster's proud cloak.
Seek the patterns of the paua's inner shell,
the curl of kumara vine.
Trace the call of the karanga across the marae,
the nose-flute in the night.
Slice the flesh like the teko-teko's stare.
The soft flesh, lip, membrane, skin.
Cut statistics on my face:
Name, age, place of birth, race,
village, tribe, canoe.
Carve deeply, erase doubt
as to who
I am.
Use the sharpened pipi shell,
bird-bone, razor-blade.
Use them harshly, lacerate
my legacy upon me
where all who can read
will perceive that I am
taking my place
on this vast marae
that is the Pacific
we call home.

Vernice Wineera Pere.