



How would you explain Germany to people of the Pacific?

Tok Stori | Geschichten-Austausch is a digital storytelling space that invites German people to share their individual and collective understanding of German culture and identity through questions based upon key Pacific cultural ways of understanding.

By Lisa Hilli, shi Blank, Abhay Adhikari & Übersee-Museum Bremen CC BY-SA 4.0

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Between November 2021 and February 2022, a Papua New Guinean artist and three German historians began a dialogue to explore the concept – How would you explain Germany to the Pacific? What followed were difficult and illuminating conversations, that opened a space of empathy, which led to questions of curiosity and understanding.

So why would Pacific people, especially from former German colonies want to know about Germany?

That's up to Pacific people to decide.

One intended aim of Tok Stori | Geschichten-Austausch (as a prototype) is to give Pacific people the choice of what they would like to know about Germany by appealing to Pacific people's cultural values and ways of understanding. The other aim is to get as many German citizens as possible to share stories publicly about their unique and shared German identity, culture, and history, so that both German and Pacific people can learn about each other.

Tok Stori is a Melanesian concept that means

spending time and connecting with someone through a conversation, a dialogue or storytelling and actively listening and relating. It implies a mutual or reciprocal relationship in sharing. We want to encourage Geschichten-Austausch among German people.

As part of the NEO Collections project, Tok Stori | Geschichten-Austausch is the result of a collaborative digital residency that engaged artists from the Pacific Islands region to develop a prototype for an online exhibition on the Pacific hosted by the Übersee Museum.

Prototype collaborators for Tok Stori | Geschichten-Austausch are Lisa Hilli, Etta Grotian, Lisa Korge, Tobias Goebel and shi Blank.

Family Question 1

Who do you classify as people in your family?



Cowrie shells,
Samoa, before 1906

Pacific families are often centred around clans and villages, as well as your immediate family.

Thomas

The people I live with: my girl friend, my daughter and my room-mate. And the family I come from: parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, nephews. A lot of people ...

Family Question 2

What are important moments for your family to gather?



Pandanus mat, Samoa,
before 1906

Many Pacific people and families gather and sit on woven mats to socialise. They are also used to sleep on especially after a big meal or to just pass the time.

Dagmar

Mostly birthdays (of my parents).

Family Question 3

How far back can you trace your ancestry?

Parents, Grandparents, Great grandparents,
Several generations



Rebbilib, Marshall Islands

An important device used to help memorise and assist Marshall Islanders in ocean navigation. Similarly, Pacific people often recall their ancestry by memory.

Frank

Someone once took the trouble to look into this. They got pretty far, so far beyond the great-grandparents.

Family Question 4

Has your family always lived in Germany?

If not, where did they migrate from?



Drua, Fiji

One of the largest seafaring vessels for travelling vast distances across the Pacific Ocean, with the iconic crab claw sail. Made entirely of natural materials and not a nail to be found.

Anonymous

Does anyone have an answer to this?

Family Question 5

Who is someone in your family that is important to you and why?



Lei Nehi Palaoa, Hawaii

Finely plaited human hair is often used or gifted by family members to make important body adornments such as this Necklace worn by nobility of the Hawaiian Kingdom.

Karla

My nieces are important to me because I have known them since they were little, because they are so special and because they came into my life like an extra precious gift without me having to do anything for it.

Spirituality Question 1

Do you have a family tradition of religion or spirituality practice?

Explain why or why not?



Coconut ladle with cross, Papua New Guinea

It's common to see Western symbology incorporated within Indigenous designs from the Pacific.

Franziska

My parents go to church on Sundays, all their children have been baptized. But none of the children go to church. Regardless, they all celebrate Christmas ...

Spirituality Question 2

I feel a sense of connection to the spiritual or a greater power when I ...?



Bilas, Papua New Guinea

Bird feathers worn on the head in some Papua New Guinean cultures can symbolise a spiritual connection to higher and intangible beings.

Nadine

... I am grateful that something went well.

Spirituality Question 3

What type of spiritual beliefs did German's have pre-Christian times?



Lunet / Livika, Papua New Guinea

The haunting sound of this friction drum representing a bird call was believed to be the nexus between the physical and the spiritual world.

Anna

The Christian Church became influential when Germany did not actually exist.

Spirituality Question 4

Can you think of any physical or intangible things that are considered sacred to German folks?



Max

Phew, maybe it's the car washing ...

Spirituality Question 5

What are your thoughts about German missionaries travelling to the Pacific to share their ideas of spirituality?



Church hat, Cook Islands

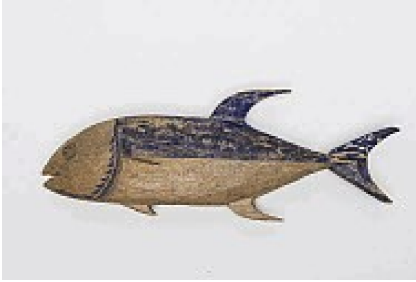
Worn specifically by women in Kūki Āirani (Cook Islands), especially if you're attending church on Sunday.

Vera

I think religion was often just part of the unshakable conviction that one was feeling superior in everything.

Culture Question 1

Is Oktoberfest a cultural event for German's or tourists?



Tuna Fish carving, Papua New Guinea

Sometimes Pacific art made specifically for sale can be misinterpreted as being authentic and end up in museum collections.

Filine

It is an event for tourists from abroad and for tourists within Germany. Drinking is, I think, the most important thing about it.

Culture Question 2

What is your favorite German expression or idiom?

Explain what this means?



Fue, Fiji

A regal item carried by Samoan tulafale (talking chief) during ceremonial speeches.

Sven

“Schnörkellos”. That means without ornaments and elaborations, but mostly in the figurative sense: direct and blunt.

Culture Question 3

Do you have a strong connection to a particular place in Germany?

Describe where this is and why?



Obsidian, Papua New Guinea

Much of the obsidian collected on Manus Island was traded from elsewhere, particularly areas where volcanoes are active.

Marika

I can always get quiet and switch off at the seaside, for example at the North Sea.

Spirituality Question 4

What are some typical German musical instruments?



Garamut, Papua New Guinea

Large slit gong drums are played with a wooden striker and used across the northern parts of Papua New Guinea part of a dance or in duet with another garamut to sonically communicate a message.

Barbara

To me, the harmonica seems very German. But maybe that's because many use it for folk music.

Spirituality Question 5

Are there any specific German rituals or customs related to birth or death?



Pan Pipes, Papua New Guinea

Made from bamboo, the serenading sound of pan pipes in the Solomon Islands customarily ushered in a birth or death.

Manuela

In the cemetery, at a funeral, everyone goes to the open grave and throws in soil and often a flower. For the birth there are very different rituals, especially a lot of socks are knitted.

Food Question 1

Explain why pretzels are important to Germany?



Fishing box,
Aotearoa

Tokelauan
significance of
fishing by able
bodied men to feed
families.

Anna

I guess pretzels are supposed to represent praying hands, but I think most people think the taste is great.

Food Question 2

What is the origin of beer in Germany?

Does it have an origin story?



Lutz

Interestingly, people in the Middle Ages drank beer for breakfast. The alcohol probably also served as a disinfectant. In this respect, beer varieties that still exist today were brewed in many places early on. Monks in particular brewed beer.

Food Question 3

Are there certain foods or drinks that are used for special or ceremonial purposes?



Kava bowl, Fiji

An important item used in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga for the preparation, drinking of Kava, served by a coconut shell cup.

Tom

At Christmas, many families eat roast goose, others eat bockwurst.

Nora

A specific bread is baked for Shabbat: the challah. Many dishes are prepared on certain days in Judaism.

Charlotte

A wafer is served for communion in the Christian church. In the Catholic Church, this is "consecrated" beforehand - and therefore may not be used for anything else.

Food Question 4

Is there a specific type of utensil you would only find in a German kitchen?



Coconut scraper, Papua New Guinea

An essential item found across most Pacific Islands, used to grate the coconut flesh to create coconut milk for cooking.

Frieder

In southern Germany there is a "spaetzle shaker", this is what it looks like: <https://www.jmberlin.de/heimatkunde/heimatobjekte/spaetzleshaker.jpg>

Luisa

Perhaps the waffle maker with the heart waffles is something that exists mainly in German kitchens.

Food Question 5

A favorite meal from my childhood is ...?



Women's Fishing Basket, Papua New Guinea

Simon

I love everything with potatoes, potato pancakes (cookies made from grated potatoes baked in the pan) are my favorite. But it wasn't until I was an adult that I learned that you can make this from real potatoes and not just from a bag.