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Opening of Samoan Heritage Festivities Unites Communities in Celebration



The American Samoa Government commenced the 2024 Samoan Heritage Festival with an opening ceremony at Keehi Lagoon Park on Saturday, June 15, 2024.

The pre-ceremonial performance was led by the U.S. Marine Corps Forces Pacific Band, followed by a welcoming introduction from the Master of Ceremony, Tofa To'oto'o Tauese V. K. Sunia. He formally greeted distinguished guests and commenced the official opening of the Samoan Heritage Festival.

The ceremony began with a Pass In Review led by the U.S. Marine Corps Forces Pacific Band. This year, a total of thirty-nine organizations marched, including the 13th Festival of Pacific Arts & Culture delegations from American Samoa and Tokelau. The parade featured the 25th Infantry Division Haka Team, religious organizations, male and female cricket teams, private sector groups, and nonprofit organizations. Each diverse group of Samoan descent showcased their pride and commitment to their shared heritage.

The invocation was delivered by *Afioga Sea Koneferenisi* Nuusa, leader of the Samoan Methodist Church Synod in Hawaii who set the stage for a spiritually enriching event, seeking blessings for unity and cultural preservation throughout the celebrations. The sermon highlighted an excerpt from the book of 1 Samuel 8, where the people desired a king that could be seen and admired, instead of the unseen King who required faith to know. The sermon further explored the analogy structure of the Va'a, delving into the origins of certain Samoan words and proverbs. The Va'a of Samoa sails kings across the Pacific to convene and establish agreements. Upon their gathering, the phrase "Ua fetaui fola o Sa" signifies unity and consensus. Through this tradition, the unity of Sa is affirmed, and the foundation of the nation is solidified.

The sermon then ties the verse from the Bible with the analogy of the Va'a structure to emphasize the *Apileuli* - an outstanding leader who arises in difficult times. The captain leads as the ship begins its voyage or ventures into new territories. It is essential to guide the ship until it reaches its destination, particularly when encountering obstacles.

Honorable Naomi Mataafa, Prime Minister of the Independent State of Samoa graced the occasion with her presence and delivered special remarks that deeply resonated in the audience. She stated: "This annual celebration of the Samoan heritage week by the American Samoa Government for all the Samoans in Hawaii, resonates the importance of our cultural preservation and inculcating in our young generations, the essence of identity and determination. Heritage week is a key platform for all Samoans living in Hawaii to maintain connections with their homelands and continue sharing the practices with their children because without these dedicated practices, our faasamoa will gradually pale into obscurity and submerge between the rising tides of foreign social norms that are not always in line with our Samoan values and ancestry."

During the ceremony, two young individuals took the Oath of Enlistment to join the Hawaii National Guard. On behalf of the Hawaii National Guard Commander, Brigadier General Stephen F. Logan, 1st Class Sergeant Pili Faoa expressed gratitude to the Honorable Governor Lemanu P. S. Mauga and the American Samoa Government for including the short ceremony

during Heritage Week Opening to conduct the Oath of Enlistment for a Son and Daughter of American Samoa. The Oath of Enlistment was led by Captain Candyce Tsunayoshi. The enlistees were Private First Class Sio from Tafuna High School and Private First Class Tanielu from Samoana High School.

A traditional Ava ceremony, led by *Sinoti Metotisi*, took place to signify community bonding and reverence. This was followed by the *Aso O Tupulaga* program, featuring eight performance groups, including the American Samoa Delegation for the 13th Festival of Pacific Arts & Culture.

As the Samoan Heritage Festivities continue, participants and visitors can look forward to cultural competitions and games, interactive traditional workshops, car shows, and engaging performances that reflect the vibrant spirit of Samoa.

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