

**Creating Kastom:
Contemporary Art in Port Vila, Vanuatu**

Lisa Ann McDonald

**Doctor of Philosophy
University of East Anglia
Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the relationship between contemporary art and *kastom* in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Since the mid-1980s indigenous paintings, drawings, tapestries and sculptures have become prominent features of the urban visual landscape. By way of ethnological survey, this thesis examines current modes of production, circulation and reception to reveal the changing socio-cultural capital of these objects. Based on two periods of extended fieldwork, this research relies on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, studio and exhibition visits, written surveys and informal discussions for its primary data.

Focusing on a core group of practicing artists who primarily belong to either the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association or the Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association, this thesis highlights the influences of island affiliation, kin networks and social relations upon the structure of the local artworld. Within the pluralistic matrix of town, artists adopt *kastom* as thematic content for their work. Representations of the chiefly body, dance routines, marriage ceremonies and traditional stories highlight the means by which makers creatively assert their cultural identity. Similarly, depictions that incorporate stylised icons and codified motifs convey the knowledge, status and entitlement held by different artists. When presented to local audiences, these visual cues are regarded as prideful celebrations of the unique characteristics of the nation.

This thesis concludes that just as *kastom* is not a static entity, nor is the category of contemporary art. In Port Vila, a space of rapid social change, deeply embedded values and beliefs intertwine with the forces of modernity to redefine notions of indigenous heritage. Within this framework, artists in the capital interrogate the realities of their lived experiences to present images and forms that reflect the ever-evolving circumstances particular to their corpus and careers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	2
List of Figures	5
List of Tables	8
Preface	9
Acknowledgments	10
Introduction	12
Research Context	14
International Framework	22
Methodology	26
Thesis Outline	31
Chapter 1: Contextualising Contemporary Art	35
Colonial Encounters	35
Independence	42
Kastom	45
National Symbols	50
Contemporary Art	53
Conclusion	62
Chapter 2: The Contemporary Artworld	64
Port Vila	64
Art Associations	67
Art Education	88
Art Distribution	93
Conclusion	96
Chapter 3: Kastom as Subject Matter	98
Chiefs	101
Dance	104
Marriage	110

Stories	117
Conclusion	124
Chapter 4: Kastom as Iconography	126
Land Diving	129
Sand Drawing	135
Carvings	139
Turtles and Fish	141
Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000	143
Mount Benlow, Ambrym	148
Conclusion	151
Chapter 5: Aesthetic Experiences	153
National Library and Archives of Vanuatu	154
Inaugural Exhibition	156
Survey Methodology	158
Data Set	162
Questionnaire and Responses	163
Conclusion	183
Conclusion	185
Figures	193
Bibliography	260
Appendix 1	298
Appendix 2	301

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1	Map of Vanuatu	193
Fig. 2	Flag of Vanuatu	194
Fig. 3	Coat of Arms of Vanuatu	195
Fig. 4	Workshop of Nicolai Michoutouchkine and Aloï Pilioko	196
Fig. 5	Exhibition of the art of Emmanuel Watt, 1978	197
Fig. 6	Exhibition of the art of Emmanuel Watt, 1978	197
Fig. 7	Juliette Pita, <i>Women at the Market</i> , wool tapestry, 1979	198
Fig. 8	Joseph John, <i>Man with Pipe</i> , acrylic on board, 1979	199
Fig. 9	Independence mural, 1979	200
Fig. 10	Independence club, 1979	201
Fig. 11	Independence club (detail), 1979	201
Fig. 12	Logo of the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association	202
Fig. 13	Alvaro Kuautonga, stencil made from x-ray film, 2013	203
Fig. 14	Taitu Kuautonga, kava cups, acrylic on coconut shell, 2013	204
Fig. 15	Andrew Ulus, <i>Turtle</i> , kava on paper, 2011	205
Fig. 16	Logo of the Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association	206
Fig. 17	Andrew Tovovur, mural on utility shed (detail)	207
Fig. 18	Andrew Tovovur, mural in restaurant (detail)	207
Fig. 19	Andrew Tovovur, mural for guesthouse	208
Fig. 20	Francois Yoringmal, <i>Malekula Treasure I</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2012	209
Fig. 21	Francois Yoringmal, <i>Untitled</i> , watercolour, 2012	210
Fig. 22	Philimon Natato, <i>Graphic 2</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2012	211
Fig. 23	Vatahe Ian, <i>Mosaic Flowers</i> , tiles on board, 2012	212
Fig. 24	Joseph John, <i>The Village Forum: The Chief and His People</i> , oil on canvas, 1993	213
Fig. 25	Jobo Lovo, public mural, date unknown	213
Fig. 26	Juliette Pita, <i>Mothers</i> , acrylic on paper, 2012	214
Fig. 27	Juliette Pita, <i>Untitled</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2012	215

Fig. 28	Juliette Pita, <i>Kastom Danis blong Erromango</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2013	216
Fig. 29	Amelia Lovo, <i>Napennapen</i> , acrylic on paper, 2013	217
Fig. 30	Amelia Lovo, <i>Toka</i> , acrylic on paper, 2013	218
Fig. 31	Toka dance, Tanna, 2010	219
Fig. 32	Toka dance, Tanna, 2010	220
Fig. 33	David Ambong, Fest' Napuan logo, 2007	221
Fig. 34	David Ambong, Fest' Napuan logo, 2012	222
Fig. 35	David Ambong with Fest' Napuan stage backdrop, 2013	223
Fig. 36	David Ambong, <i>Nalawan Danis</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2012	224
Fig. 37	Andrew Tovovur, <i>A Traditional Marriage</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2012	225
Fig. 38	Jean-Claude Touré, <i>A Traditional Ambae Marriage</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2012	226
Fig. 39	Eric Natuoivi, <i>Rescue Mission</i> , woodblock print, 2010	227
Fig. 40	Eric Natuoivi, <i>Bunga, Sina and their Twin Sons</i> , mixed media, 2012	228
Fig. 41	Eric Natuoivi, <i>Bunga, Sina and their Twin Sons</i> (side view), mixed media, 2012	228
Fig. 42	Matthew Abbock, handmade canvas	229
Fig. 43	Matthew Abbock, <i>Stori blong Paama</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2013	230
Fig. 44	Cyrus Nivwo, <i>Pis blong Erromango</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2012	231
Fig. 45	John Simpson, <i>The Spirit of Man</i> , mixed media, 1995	232
Fig. 46	Land diving, Pentecost, 2010	233
Fig. 47	Land diving, Pentecost, 2010	234
Fig. 48	Joseph John, <i>Traditional Knowledge</i> , watercolour, 1999	235
Fig. 49	Edgar Hinge, sand drawing, 2012	236
Fig. 50	<i>Natundong</i> , sand drawing design	237
Fig. 51	<i>Vatangele</i> , sand drawing design	237
Fig. 52	<i>Nevul</i> , sand drawing design	237
Fig. 53	Tony Bruce, natangora nut carving, 2012	238

Fig. 54	Tony Bruce, natangora nut carving with Indian ink, 2012	238
Fig. 55	Tony Bruce, <i>Maten</i> (detail), natangora nut, 2013	239
Fig. 56	Tony Bruce, <i>Maten</i> (detail), natangora nut, 2013	239
Fig. 57	Tony Bruce, <i>Vival</i> (detail), natangora nut, 2013	240
Fig. 58	Tony Bruce <i>Vival</i> (detail), natangora nut, 2013	240
Fig. 59	Johanin Bangdor, <i>Vanuatu et le France</i> , wood, 2010	241
Fig. 60	Johanin Bangdor, <i>Vanuatu et le France</i> (detail), wood, 2010	242
Fig. 61	Jobo Lovo, <i>Navu Im Nomu</i> , acrylic on canvas, date unknown	243
Fig. 62	Juliette Pita, <i>Ol Man blong Erromango</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2013	244
Fig. 63	David William, <i>Totel mo Fis</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2013	245
Fig. 64	National Library and Archives of Vanuatu	246
Fig. 65	National Library and Archives of Vanuatu, foyer	246
Fig. 66	Joseph John, <i>Storian</i> , watercolour, 2013	247
Fig. 67	Alvaro Kuautonga, <i>Six Provins blong Vanuatu</i> , acrylic on board, 2008	248
Fig. 68	Nikiyatu Kuautonga, <i>Majijiki</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2008	249
Fig. 69	Taitu Kuautonga, <i>Danis blong Futuna</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2010	250
Fig. 70	Juliette Pita, <i>Jif blong Erromango</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2013	251
Fig. 71	Andrew Tovovur, <i>Untitled</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2012	252
Fig. 72	Matthew Abbock, <i>Bilding Pis tru Kalja</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2008	253
Fig. 73	Matthew Abbock, <i>Kaljoral Heritage blong Lapita</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2010	254
Fig. 74	Sero Kuautonga, <i>Cycle long Laef</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2010	255
Fig. 75	Sero Kuautonga, <i>Fiuja</i> , acrylic on canvas, 1999	256
Fig. 76	Eric Natuoivi, <i>Namawia Danis</i> , mixed media, 2012	257
Fig. 77	Emmanuel Watt, <i>Mas blong Solwata</i> , wood, 2010	258
Fig. 78	Emmanuel Watt, <i>Duti</i> , wood, 2005	259

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Questionnaire participants by province	163
Table 2	Questionnaire participants by island	163
Table 3	Positive responses to works of art	164
Table 4	Negative responses to works of art	172

PREFACE

In 2009 I had the great privilege of commencing a year-long volunteer placement with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (*Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta* or VKS), under the auspice of the Australian Government's international aid programme Youth Ambassadors for Development. During my time in Port Vila I was everyday exposed to the distinctly Melanesian customs, practices and values of the local community. My time at the VKS not only introduced me to the rich and diverse material culture of the nation, but also allowed me to bear witness to an extraordinary array of deeply significant indigenous ceremonies and rituals. It was here that I learned about the history, traditions and achievements of the archipelago, the aspirations of its people and the realities of life in one of the world's least developed countries.

Walking down the main street in *taon* (town) soon after my arrival I was struck by an exhibition of brightly coloured tapestries. Turning to my companion, an expatriate of more than 20 years with profound knowledge of the arts of the region, I enquired about the display. 'This' she told me 'is the work of Juliette Pita. She is Vanuatu's only female contemporary artist.' As I marvelled at the intricate needlework before me I heard my companion call my name. Surrounded by inks, brushes and parchments on the floor below, she stood quietly talking with Juliette. Upon making introductions it was thus that I met the first of many local practitioners. This chance encounter, during which Juliette told me not only about her art but also her career and her family, aroused my curiosity. I wondered how many other artists were in Port Vila and how I could see their work.

This thesis is the result of that curiosity. Over the years I have been inspired, challenged and humbled by the artists who have so warmly invited me to share in their lives. It is hoped that my interest in, and enthusiasm for, contemporary art from Vanuatu will enliven appreciation in others and that the outputs of these talented and dedicated makers will receive the attention and acclaim they so rightly deserve.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary visual artists in Port Vila, Vanuatu are more than simply image makers.¹ Locally acknowledged as holders of great skill, painters and sculptors are considered ambassadors of the nation. From delicate watercolours to intricate mixed-media installations, their outputs act as material embodiments of indigenous identity. The diversity of their representations reflects the environment in which they work – artists utilise available materials to create forms that convey their lived realities. United as nationalists, yet bound by codes of natal affiliation and pride, makers encapsulate their cultural heritage in a variety of visual formats. Since the country's achievement of political independence from British and French administrators in 1980, artists have adopted the rich and varied traditions of the archipelago as inspiration for their images. Profoundly symbolic rituals, ceremonies and practices are masterfully presented in media once associated with European imperialism. Over the years' artists have determinedly created a new visual language that is now synonymous with state sovereignty and national identity. Once regarded with dubious suspicion as a threat to deeply embedded systems of customary status and entitlement, makers have elevated the social capital of their artworks. As a result, practitioners are central agents in the public presentation and promotion of community values and ideals.

Throughout Vanuatu the concept of *kastom* (custom) is central to constructs of identity. As a totalising logic that informs indigenous practices, beliefs and knowledge, *kastom* is not an easily defined term. In the years immediately following independence scholars sought to apply a single definition that would explain *kastom* (see Keesing 1982, 1993; Larcom 1982, 199; Philbert 1986; Tonkinson 1982a, 1982b, 1982c) Yet the pluralistic aspects of *kastom* characterise its very essence. As Lissant Bolton (1999b: 1) notes, 'The word provides a way of summing up what the ni-Vanuatu understand to belong to themselves and to their place in opposition to all that contact with other people and other places has introduced to their way of life.'² Just as culture is not static nor is *kastom*. It is an active category of perpetual negotiation, evaluation and expansion. In an increasingly globalised world ni-Vanuatu adopt and adapt outside

¹ Port Vila is the capital of Vanuatu, a nation state located in the south-west Pacific. Comprising 83 islands that stretch over 900 kilometres of ocean, the country is 1750 kilometres east of Australia and 500 kilometres north-east of New Caledonia (see Chapter 1).

² ni-Vanuatu is the term adopted by Islanders at independence to denote indigenous identity.

influences to best suit their specific needs. Material goods are incorporated into ceremonial rituals and exchanges, cash is used for the payment of fines and systems of governance are formalised by way of the police, parliament and judiciary. Just because an action, object or ideology was not considered *kastom* yesterday does not necessarily confer its status tomorrow. This is particularly true in Port Vila, the centre of contemporary art production in Vanuatu. It is in *taon* (town) that the influences of capitalism and modernisation, vital to the careers of artists, are delicately balanced alongside the tropes of *kastom*.

The principal aim of this thesis is to locate the relatively recent urban phenomenon of contemporary art in historical and social contexts specific to Port Vila. In doing so, it is hoped that this study will make a substantial contribution to knowledge about a particular form of visual representation found in the capital. By analysing the production, circulation and reception of objects, the complex cultural foundations upon which artists base their works are revealed. As a result, the main question of this research is addressed: What is the current relationship between *kastom* and contemporary art in Port Vila? Close examination of the outputs of a variety of practitioners reveals the influence of local systems of knowledge and entitlement on individual creativity. The active motivations that inspire artists to paint, draw or sculpt are intrinsically linked to explorations of identity in rural, urban, national and global milieux. From this, related research questions are explored: what subject matter do artists select as content for their creations? How do codes of ownership and authority influence an artist's choice of iconography? To what extent are works of art acknowledged as visual expressions of indigeneity?

The definition of contemporary art adopted throughout this thesis corresponds with that which is locally applied. Amid a plethora of material culture in Port Vila artists employ the Kantian concept of 'fine art' to differentiate their outputs from other visual forms. As practitioners ascribe to self-constructed distinctions between the categories of art and craft their creations have come to occupy a privileged space 'in terms of their cultural capital, at least as evaluated by outsiders' (Rothenberg and Alan 2008: 34). This is not to say that other objects and images are without merit or value but, rather, that local reckonings inform the basis of this research. Woven baskets and mats, decorated items of clothing, wooden carvings, compact disc covers, political posters and graphic designs highlight the wide variety of indigenous expressions found in town. Against this backdrop, artists seek to assert the sanctified status of their

paintings, drawings and sculptures. It must here be noted that this research refrains from commenting on the quality of the objects it examines. Such an approach follows the argument made by Penelope Harvey (1996: 220) that, ‘Anthropology compares and contrasts but does not judge ... It is this feature of anthropology, its refusal to judge the cultures it compares and contrasts, which sets it most firmly against the modern Western aesthetic project.’ Rather than offer critical appraisal of the art it examines, this thesis instead provides insight into the circumstances of its production, circulation and reception in the urban environment.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Contemporary art created by indigenous makers from the south Pacific region has been of interest to scholars since its emergence in the mid-1970s. At ‘The Art of Oceania’, a symposium held at McMaster University, Ontario in 1974, Nelson Graburn (1979: 362) noted that, ‘a new breed of artist is producing a new synthetic art, born of an awareness of the Western tradition and a pride in local and past production.’³ Four years later, in 1978, a second symposium was convened at Victoria University, Wellington.⁴ Here, Albert Wendt argued for due recognition to be directed toward local practitioners rather than expatriates with the financial means to pursue art as a leisurely hobby. He asserted that, ‘Tourist and weekend art are acting as major barriers to the emergence of a vital Oceanic art which reflects the realities of our societies in truly unique Oceanic ways, styles, images and symbols’ (Wendt 1983: 201). The signing of the United Nations *Declaration on the Granting Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples* in 1960 heralded a time of significant socio-political change for Islanders. As colonised territories came to achieve political independence from their European administrators, innovative forms of artistic representation were intrinsically linked to these emergent sovereign states.⁵ Newly affirmed governments endorsed indigenous artists, architects, musicians, dramatists, dancers and writers as agents in the process of cultural reconstruction, renewal and revitalisation. The outputs of practitioners were central to

³ The symposium was held 21 – 26 August, 1974, and resulted in the publication *Exploring the Visual Art of Oceania* (Mead 1979).

⁴ The symposium was held in the first week of February, 1978, and resulted in the publication *Art and Artists of Oceania* (Mead and Kernot 1983).

⁵ For example: Fiji achieved independence in 1970; Papua New Guinea in 1975; Solomon Islands in 1978; Vanuatu in 1980.

the project of nation-building and the establishment of a collective consciousness that embraced unity, peace and progress.

While a shift in academic concerns did indeed focus attention on the outputs of indigenous artists, debates during the late 1980s and early 1990s centred upon the legitimacy of contemporary Pacific art. Scholars questioned the authenticity of new visual forms and, in doing so, disparaged the creative agency of individual makers. Objects were categorised according to André Malraux's (1949) theory of 'art by destination' or 'art by metamorphosis' as academics labelled paintings and sculptures 'tourist art' (Graburn 1976), 'airport art' (Graburn 1983: 70), 'primitive art' (Price 1989) or 'high ethnic art' (Errington 1998: 140). The merits of contemporary artworks were contested within the paradigms of the established Western canon, a framework that 'generated an imagined Other that was savage, ignorant, and uncivilized' (Errington 1998: 16). Some commentators were particularly critical of what they perceived as the deliberate commodification of goods and labour. For example, Phillip Dark (1993: 220) asserted that, 'The tourist market dictates the kind of art produced.' While this may have been true to some extent, the suggestion that makers privileged the economic capital of objects to satisfy consumer demand implicitly denied the internalised aesthetic sensibilities of source communities.

Over time such critiques were replaced by a more encompassing anthropology of art that privileged specific contexts of production. As Nicholas Thomas (2005: 12) noted, 'The intention behind an image ... can only have a local motivation.' The analytic category of contemporary Pacific art expanded as indigenous makers in colonial settler societies such as Australia (see Morphy 2007; Myers 2002) and New Zealand (see Skinner 2008) became the subject of dominant academic enquiry. Similarly, the outputs of Polynesian artists based in urban centres including Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington emerged as the focus of concerted attention (see Stevenson 2008, 2011). Such studies reveal that in both countries the operations of established institutions support the work of many artists. Access to educational opportunities at tertiary institutions provides the foundation from which a number of makers professionalise their practices and establish professional reputations. The provision of dedicated display spaces ensures that objects are traded by commercial

dealers, acquired by public museums and feature in international festivals.⁶

Organisations such as the Australia Council for the Arts, Creative New Zealand and the Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust also provide crucial funding that allows practitioners to purchase materials, participate in exhibitions and engage with global markets.

For artists based in Melanesia the situation is strikingly different and, as a result, the study of contemporary art created by makers living in the region has proven more complex. Unlike their counterparts in Australia and New Zealand, makers in Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and West Papua often do not have access to the most basic of resources. Government funding is extremely limited as political leaders allocate scarce cash reserves to essential amenities such as healthcare, education and the provision of infrastructure including roads, sanitation and electricity. The absence of corporate sponsorship and private philanthropy further compounds the precarious financial situation faced by many practitioners. As a result, artists have very little money with which to purchase materials, stage exhibitions and undertake formal training. Without the means to present their work to international audiences, most contemporary artists in Melanesia ‘are still virtually unknown to metropolitan critics and are seldom reviewed in leading art journals’ (Cochrane 2013: 163). The success enjoyed by Aboriginal, Maori and diaspora Polynesian practitioners has not yet extended to makers in the islands of the western Pacific. With no galleries or dealers dedicated to the promotion of their outputs, the work of Melanesian artists is poorly represented in prestigious museum collections and all but ignored by influential international biennales.

This is not to say, however, that important academic enquiries have not focused on the region. To the contrary, rigorous studies have highlighted the outputs of artists based in Melanesia since the mid-1990s. Seminal ethnographic research focused upon artists’ resident in Port Moresby, PNG (Cochrane 1995a; Rosi 1995) – the first of the capitals to emerge as a site of concentrated art production. In the years immediately preceding decolonisation from Australia, the incumbent government introduced a range

⁶ For example, both Australia and New Zealand have pavilions at the Venice Biennale in which indigenous artists have exhibited. For Australia: Rover Thomas and Trevor Nickolls in 1990; Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Judy Watson and Yvonne Koolmatrice in 1997. For New Zealand: Peter Robinson and Jacqueline Fraser in 2001; Michael Parekowhai in 2011.

of cultural policies designed to unify the new nation state. Pamela Rosi (2002: 243) notes that

Beyond the immediate rush to form a national government and to instigate an economic and educational plan of development, the Administration recognized that new art forms were needed to establish a modern communications industry. They would also contribute to the visible construction of a new national culture in Papua New Guinea's fragmented village-based society.

The opening of the Centre for Creative Arts under the directorship of Scottish expatriate Tom Craig in 1972 affirmed the social relativity afforded to contemporary art.⁷ In 1974 a grant from the Government of Australia enabled expansion of the institution's facilities and programmes with the result being that, in 1975 to coincide with independence, the organisation was renamed the National Arts School. Craig, along with Georgina and Ulli Beier, here continued to foster the skills of practitioners such as Timothy Akis, Jakupa Ako, Mathias Kauage and Martin Morububuna.⁸ With the influential support of inaugural Prime Minister Michael Somare and activist Bernard Narokobi, these students were responsible for the execution of a range of public commissions, including murals, architectural façades and works of art for the National Parliament House.⁹

Early scholarship examined the contribution made by artists to the project of nation-making. Advocating that 'A new paradigm should enable the study of art as a social and cultural practice, accepting differences across cultures' (Cochrane 1995a: 98), investigations challenged Eurocentric presuppositions about the legitimacy of indigenous Melanesian art. Somare (1979: xv) himself asserted that 'art should be an instrument of synthesis in the process of national integration, modernization, and general (integral) human development.' As a result, authors synonymised contemporary art with state sovereignty. Susan Cochrane (1997: 40) noted that 'contemporary art

⁷ Craig held a number of positions in PNG: a secondary school art teacher in Kwikila (1964-1968); Director of the Expressive Arts Department at Goroka Teachers College (1968-1972); Director of the Creative Arts Centre (1972-1976); and, Director of the National Arts School (1976-1983).

⁸ Georgina Beier taught art to illiterate migrants at the University of Papua New Guinea and sponsored artists at her studio from 1967-1971. Her husband, Ulli Beier, taught literature at the University during this time. Upon returning to PNG in 1974, Georgina was involved with the Creative Arts Centre / National Arts School and Ulli the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies until their departure in 1978.

⁹ Michael Somare was Prime Minister from 1975 to 1980 (and again between the years 1982 – 1985, and 2002 – 2011). Bernard Narokobi was a constitutional lawyer, activist and politician who founded the Melanesian Alliance Party.

offers a visual interpretation of the transformations taking place in Papua New Guinean culture and society in a manner which is both striking and expressive of current philosophies.’ The highly stylised images produced by artists were considered a means of harnessing national consciousness, unity, pride and progress. The political capital attached to objects was intrinsically linked to emergent notions of collective identity and self-determination. Works of art that visually achieved a ‘PNG look’ were privileged in the literature as were practitioners that ‘accomplished this look by restyling traditional motifs for new contexts, or making objects to represent old and new aspects of national life’ (Rosi 2006: 248). Such surveys introduced readers to the work of artists that may have otherwise gone unrecognised and highlighted the ‘aesthetic wealth and cultural values’ (Cochrane 2013: 147) of the country.

With the passage of time the focus of academic enquiries shifted. The currency of objects in global marketplaces came to dominate discussions. Scholars questioned the lack of international recognition afforded to contemporary art from PNG. As a result, two lines of enquiry emerged – one focused on circumstances in Port Moresby and external impediments hampering artists, the other concerned the curatorial challenges of engaging audiences with little knowledge of the country. Rosi (2002, 2006) examined local barriers to artistic success. She identified a range of contributing factors affecting painters and sculptors: declining government support and sponsorship; bureaucratic corruption; financial and customary obligations to kin; unemployment; social and economic dislocation; inequality and violence (particularly experienced by female artists); and, a lack of marketing and exhibition opportunities. She explained that, as a consequence, ‘contemporary artists often seek whatever possibilities are available to promote their art abroad. Their hopes for success are tied to the belief that entering the global art market will provide many more opportunities to sell their work’ (2006: 260). The difficulties of achieving acclaim, however, were varied. The highly competitive nature of the commercial arena demanded that exhibitions be financially profitable, yet for many dealers, sponsors and museum professionals the art of PNG was of dubious worth. Similarly, the monetary value of objects was contested by collectors who questioned the legitimacy of contemporary hybrid forms.

Meanwhile commentators and curators in Europe simultaneously grappled with how best to exhibit contemporary indigenous forms, including those from PNG (see Cochrane 1997; Raabe 1999; Schindlbeck 2002). As strict ideological divisions between museums and galleries blurred, so too did definitions of art and artefact. In

1997, for example, the Museum of World Cultures in Frankfurt opened a dedicated space in which to display the outputs of practitioners from Africa, South America, Asia and the Pacific. Eva Raabe (2011: 138) suggested that because of such developments

Curators must negotiate between artists who demand to be treated as members of a global art world on equal terms with their European contemporaries and a public who need to be educated ... The somewhat naïve approach of interpreting contemporary art as a document of cultural change has to make way for the detailed study and presentation of non-western art in all its aesthetic diversity.

Up until this point foreign audiences largely unfamiliar with PNG had equated the material culture of the country with ethnographic artefacts prized as traditional relics of a bygone era. Such assessments, however, typified a ‘value-laden approach [that] reinforces the exotic stereotypes which are so readily associated with Pacific cultures and art forms’ (Lewis-Harris 2004: 288). By interrupting the entrenched assumption that only objects produced in the pre-colonial era had meaning and value, cultural institutions sought to open their doors to contemporary indigenous art that had previously been denied the space it merited.

The new millennium witnessed an expansion of ethnographic enquiry into contemporary art from the region. Scholars began to investigate the practices of contemporary artists based in other urban centres. The opening of the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre (hereafter the Tjibaou Cultural Centre) in Nouméa, New Caledonia, in 1998 provided the impetus for examination of the outputs of contemporary Kanak practitioners based in the capital. Caroline Graille (2001: 1) asserted that, ‘new Kanak artists have appeared, producing hybrid forms of art which claim to be rooted in the traditional Kanak world whilst at the same time being very much influenced by Western art standards, media, and techniques.’ Although the signing of the Matignon Accord in 1988 by Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Jacques Lafleur failed to afford New Caledonia independence from France, it did result in the implementation of a range of policies designed to promote indigenous art and culture.¹⁰ In accordance with the agreement, the Agence de développement de la culture kanak

¹⁰ Jean-Marie Tjibaou (1936 – 1989) was a politician and leader of the pro-independence party Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front until his assassination in 1989. Jacques Lafleur (1932 – 2010) was a French politician born in Nouméa who was one-time leader of the anti-independence party Rally for Caledonia in the Republic.

(Agency for the Development of Kanak Culture or ADCK) was established to support contemporary forms of Kanak expression, especially in the fields of handicraft, broadcasting, technology and art.

Over the years the ADCK purchased a number of objects for the Tjibaou Cultural Centre collection. Such a highly institutionalised bureaucracy, however, limited the autonomy of local makers. As Emmanuel Kasarhérou, Director of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, noted

Whereas, in the past, the Kastom chiefs ordered the art pieces, now, the cultural institutions are doing it; ... it is true to say that we strongly influence what [the artists] are making ... we try to select the one who produces something new, rather than the one who simply copies what's already there, the one who tries to innovate, rather than the one who does not' (as quoted in Graille 2001: 3).

As a means of affirming Kanak identity in a highly contentious socio-political environment, the assessment of creative quality was bound to the perceived promotion of 'a living and dynamic indigenous culture as expressed through the artists' works' (Graille 2001: 3).

In Vanuatu, Ralph Regenvanu (1996a, 1999b) and Haidy Geismar (2003a, 2004, 2007, 2011) drew attention to the outputs of artists who pledged membership to the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association in Port Vila (further discussed throughout the chapters of this thesis). Writing in the late 1990s, Regenvanu (1996a: 312, original emphasis) defined contemporary art from the archipelago as 'explicitly *against* the concept of kastom.' He instead argued that

What is called "art" in Vanuatu today is based on many of the same principles as those creative forms that preceded it. Indeed, contemporary art is perhaps indistinguishable from these forebears only in terms of the wider range of media used, and the sources of inspiration and motivation for creative expression (Regenvanu 1996a: 309).

Geismar extended this line of enquiry, comparing the socio-cultural relativity of paintings and sculptures with traditional carvings and weavings. In her analysis, which relied heavily on the theory of abductive reasoning proposed by Alfred Gell (1998), she compared the material agency of each category of object to highlight 'the endurance of

relations between persons and things across contexts’ (Geismar: 2003a: 194). The materiality of contemporary art was primarily examined rather than subject matter or imagery. Geismar (2003a: 296) thus surmised that, ‘the distinction arising in the minds of ni-Vanuatu artists between contemporary and traditional artefacts are not so much temporal, but material – contemporaneity (as a form of cross-cultural encounter) is expressed through the use of particular media.’

Most recently Fiji has become a locus of consideration. Katherine Higgins (2008, 2009, 2012) documented the influence of the Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies (hereafter the Oceania Centre) at the Laucala Campus of the University of the South Pacific, Suva as a regional hub for innovative expression.¹¹ Founded in 1997 under the directorship of Dr Epeli Hau’ofa the space provides a learning environment for the study of the visual, performing and literary arts. Hau’ofa made clear his vision that the institution be of benefit to the community before the individual. He asserted that ‘the creative process unleashed must reflect fundamental principles of our societies, in particular reciprocity, cooperation, openness to community (in terms of both participations and viewing) and transmission of skills through observation and participation rather than through formal instruction’ (Hau’ofa 2005: 8). In 1998, under the auspices of the Oceania Centre, the Red Wave Collective was established. Taking its name ‘from the Fijian *biau kula* or Tongan *peau kula* for tidal wave, literally, red wave’ (Higgins 2008: 2), the organisation is for the exclusive membership of contemporary visual artists.

Unlike the National Arts School in PNG, however, here ‘artists are not taught to paint or sculpt ... there are no classes. The programs are based on participative learning and experience, with the artists drawing on internal strengths and inspirations’ (Higgins 2008: 1). Alongside offering residencies to practitioners from Fiji, including Ben Fong, Paula Liga and Frederick Butafa, the Oceania Centre has also hosted visiting artists from countries such as Niue (John Pule), Tonga (Lingikoni Vaka’uta, himself a long-term resident of Fiji and founding member of the Red Wave Collective), the Solomon Islands (Fred Butafa) and Vanuatu (Jean-Claude Touré). Rather than chart the careers of individual practitioners, Higgins assimilated the outputs of painters and sculptors to explore the impact of artist residencies on cross-cultural exchanges and partnerships.

¹¹ From 1997 until 2008 the institution was known as the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture. In late 2008 it was incorporated into the Faculty of Arts, Law and Education whereupon it was re-named the Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies.

She noted that the ‘arts are a valuable means of commentary on cultural, social, and political issues, and also tools to create individual and regional connections with history and tradition. Contemporary art in Oceania is emerging as a technique for communication unrestricted by language’ (Higgins 2008: 3).

It is to this growing body of scholarship that this thesis makes an original contribution. As previous investigations have shown, the circumstances of contemporary artists in Melanesia significantly differs from one country to the next. The profound cultural diversity within and between nations negates simplistic categorisations, casual comparisons or broad generalisations. As Cochrane (2013: 147) notes, ‘Every indigenous art system operates within its own contemporary framework, its place and time.’ This thesis, therefore, limits its scope of enquiry to Port Vila in order to provide comprehensive analysis of a bounded locale. While makers in PNG, New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Fiji draw upon their heritage to produce works of art that reflect their indigenous identities, the structures that support their practices vary. The most pronounced points of departure relate to education and exhibition opportunities available in each urban centre. The National Art School in Port Moresby and the Oceania Centre in Suva provide practitioners with studio spaces in which ideologies and methodologies are shared alongside materials and equipment. In Nouméa, the Tjibaou Cultural Centre offers display facilities that are unparalleled in the region. Without such formal institutions in Port Vila, artists instead founded the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association and the Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Art Association as vehicles to assert their collective agency. As practitioners seek to emulate the success of their counterparts in Australia and New Zealand they utilise the infrastructure available to them, however basic this may be. Despite this, contemporary artists in Melanesia are resiliently optimistic – sure of the innate significance of their creative pursuits.

INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Although this thesis presents an ethnographic survey of contemporary art in Port Vila, it is here instructive to locate the objects under discussion within wider international frameworks. To date, few exhibitions with a focus on contemporary art from Vanuatu

have been staged outside the archipelago.¹² The first, *New Traditions: Contemporary Art of Vanuatu*, opened at VKS in 1999 before traveling to museums and galleries in Australia, New Caledonia and New Zealand.¹³ The display, a collaborative project between VKS (then under the directorship of Ralph Regenvanu) and the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association (further discussed in Chapter 2), was funded by the Pacific Development and Conservation Trust and the Australian Federal Government under the auspice of the Australia-South Pacific 2000 Program. Importantly, the exhibition was initiated, administered and curated by indigenous agents. Ten artists were invited to create objects that responded to significant periods of the nation's history.¹⁴ Resultantly, the show contained visual material that conveyed to international audiences the collective characteristics, values and experiences of the country.

In order to contextualise the paintings and sculptures that comprised the exhibition a selection of artefacts made during the final decades of the 20th century was also displayed.¹⁵ In the catalogue preface Simon Mark (2000: 8) explained that, 'By including recently made traditional artefacts in the exhibition alongside the work of 10 contemporary artists, we feel that both the similarities and contrasts between modern art has been illustrated effectively, thus demonstrating the creative vibrancy of current Vanuatu artistic practice.' The juxtaposition of contemporary art with mats and baskets, headdresses, circumcision boards, canoe prows, ceramic pots and pig-killing clubs highlighted the many and varied forms of material culture particular to the archipelago. Paintings and sculptures were presented as extensions of the rich visual heritage of the nation. Ross Searle (2000: 29) argued that such an approach 'prevents the audience ... [from] forming a single, coherent idea of what contemporary Pacific Islander culture

¹² Exhibitions with a broader focus on Melanesia in which the work of ni-Vanuatu artists has been displayed include: *Pacific Dreams: Contemporary Art from Melanesia* (Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, 1995); *Awe! Artis blong tude: Contemporary Art from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands* (Agence de developpement de la culture kanak, 1997; Vanuatu Culture Centre, 1998; Solomon Islands National Museum, 1998); *News From Islands* (Campbelltown Arts Centre, 2007); *Spirit of the People: New Melanesian Art* (Corbans Estate Art Centre, 2009); *Paradise Lost? Contemporary Works from the Pacific* (Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia and Satellite Gallery, 2013).

¹³ The exhibition was organised by VKS and travelled to: Pataka Porirua Museum of Arts and Cultures; Canterbury Museum; Science Centre and Manawatu Museum; Waikato Museum of Art and History; New Zealand National Maritime Museum; Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre; University of Queensland Art Museum; and, Drill Hall Gallery at the Australian National University.

¹⁴ The time periods and corresponding artists were: Origins – Eric Natuoivi; Darkness Time – Sylvester Bulesa; Missionisation – Jobo Lovo; Blackbirding – Aloï Pilioko and Michael Busai; World War II – Joseph John; Independence and Nationhood – Juliette Pita; Development after Independence – Ralph Regenvanu; Future – Sero Kuautonga. Emmanuel Watt also included a work of art that did not focus on a specific historical period.

¹⁵ Not all artefacts were attributed to specific makers. Of those that were, the following artisans were named: Irene Dini; Eli Fieldl; Harrison Hango; James Hanghangkon Tainmail; and, Army Wesly.

amounts to.’ The exhibition thus exposed viewers to the nuanced complexities of indigenous identity by highlighting the intertwined relationship between the past and present.

In 2003 the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge staged the exhibition *Vanuatu Stael: Kastom and Creativity*. Working in partnership with the institution, guest curator Haidy Geismar invited six contemporary makers to create works of art that were subsequently acquired by the museum.¹⁶ The project was supported by the Crowther-Beynon Fund, The Getty Grant Trust and the Economic and Social Research Council. Paintings, sculpture and tapestry produced by members of the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association were interspersed among mats, baskets and masks collected by anthropologists such as John Layard, Bernard Deacon and Tom Harrison to ‘provide indigenous visual commentaries on encounters between the past and the present, with a focus on ideas about *kastom*’ (Geismar 2003b: 1). The juxtaposition of new objects and historical collection material highlighted that ‘ideas about *kastom* are continually developing in interaction with broader local, national and international developments’ (Geismar 2003b: 1). The museum became a space in which the notions of tradition/modernity and continuity/change were contested in order to ‘emphasise ‘the importance of “things” in shaping our understanding and experience of the world’ (Geismar 2003b: 1).

More recently the exhibition *Port Vila, Mi Lavem Yu: Port Vila I Love You*, held at the East-West Centre in 2011, explored the realities and challenges of daily life in the capital. Curated by Haidy Geismar and Eric Wittersheim, the project was supported by two private collectors and funding provided by Le Fonds Pacifique of the French Overseas Ministry. The show included the work of six contemporary artists, each of whom were commissioned to create an object that reflected their experience of the urban environment.¹⁷ These paintings and sculptures were displayed alongside everyday objects, archival images and documentary films to highlight that ‘a new, lively urban culture is emerging, which synthesizes local customs and creates new national

¹⁶ Commissioned works of art were produced by: Michael Busai; Moses Jobo; Joseph John; Juliette Pita; Emmanuel Watt. Baskets and mats were also acquired from female makers on Pentecost, as were two masks from male artisans on Malekula.

¹⁷ Artists who participated in the exhibition were: David Ambong; Joseph John; Sero Kuautonga; Eric Natuoivi; Juliette Pita; Emmanuel Watt.

traditions' (East-West Centre).¹⁸ Split into different sections, the exhibition explored public and private spaces particular to the capital: one installation resembled a kava bar and included a screening room in which Wittersheim's film *Man Vila* was played; another installation recreated the domestic interior of a home typical to the settlements of Port Vila; a third installation reflected a trade store in which goods predominantly imported from China are sold; and, a fourth installation reproduced a quintessential market stall stocked with locally produced handicrafts and memorabilia.

Since its inception in 1993 the *Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (APT) at the Queensland Art Gallery has, on occasion, also included the work of ni-Vanuatu makers. As one of the only comprehensive exhibitions to focus on the region the APT has become 'an important gauge of shifting cultural balance' (Morrell 2013). Over the years, the outputs of Melanesian practitioners such as Paula Boi (New Caledonia), Tom Deko (PNG), Mathias Kauage (PNG), Anna and Michael Mel (PNG), and Daniel Waswas (PNG) have featured in the series.¹⁹ In 1996, curatorial adviser Susan Cochrane selected Eric Natuoivi (further discussed in Chapter 2) to be among 101 artists included in the second APT. His mixed-media sculpture, *Conflict Over Equity*, combined wood, boar tusk and sinew to represent 'the changing contemporary status of ni-Vanuatu women' (Regenvanu 1996b: 118). The archipelago was again featured at the sixth APT in 2009 – customary carvings from Ambrym, screen-prints by youth from Mataso and reggae music by bands from Port Vila were presented to gallery visitors.²⁰ The collaborative modes of production and collective authorship attributed to the objects included in the display were construed as a mean of exploring the relationship between 'rites and rights' (Maud 2009: np) in Pacific island contexts.

Such a curatorial strategy was applauded by many commentators. For example, John McDonald (2009) argued that

¹⁸ Historical images were sourced from the collection of the National Film and Sound Archive at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. In addition, material produced by youth from the Wan Smol Bag Photography Project was included in the exhibition.

¹⁹ Mathias Kauage was featured in the first APT in 1993, Anna and Michael Mel participated in the second APT in 1996, while Paula Boi, Tom Deko and Daniel Waswas took part in the third exhibition of the series in 1999.

²⁰ Carvings were produced by: Freddy Bule; Bongnaim Frederick; Chief Joachin Kilfan; members of the Mansak family; Chief Michel Marakon; Michel Rangie; and, Chief Louis Wunabae. Prints were created by: Eddy Bule; Stanley Firiam; Saires Kalo; David Kolin; Herveline Lité; Apia Najos; Sepa Seule; and, Simeon Simix (further discussed in Chapter 2). Groups that participated in the music project 'Pacific Reggae: Roots Beyond the Reef' were: 26 Roots and XX Squad.

It would have been disappointing but forgivable if the carvings and amateur prints from Vanuatu were overshadowed by more glamorous videos and installations, but this does not occur. Instead, we see each work as an expression of a unique sensibility, revealing countries with utterly different histories, levels of development, dreams and expectations.

The same, however, cannot be said for reactions in Port Vila. While previous academics and curators such as Geismar, Wittersheim and Cochrane had collaborated with appropriate organisations including VKS and the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association, the sixth *APT* team instead worked directly with communities and artisans – an act in explicit defiance of official procedures and protocols that govern cultural research throughout the archipelago (further discussed in the Methodology section of this Introduction). Consequently, tensions emerged in the capital as the agency of practicing artists was all but ignored. Local perceptions held that previous exhibitions had adopted inclusive approaches when forming visual art collections for display abroad. *New Traditions: Contemporary Art from Vanuatu*, *Vanuatu Stael: Kastom and Creativity*, *Port Vila*, *Mi Lavem Yu: Port Vila I Love You* and the second *APT* were regarded as opportunities for painters and sculptors to actively contribute to global discourses about indigenous identity. The sixth *APT*, by way of comparison, was felt to misrepresent locally constructed categories of material culture particular to the archipelago. In particular, the presentation of *tamtams* (slit gongs) and *namanges* (spirit figures) as objects of contemporary art negated embedded distinctions between customary entitlement and creative autonomy.

METHODOLOGY

Research in Vanuatu is a highly regulated undertaking. As the above examples make clear, inclusive methodologies are championed throughout the archipelago. Foreign academics seeking to engage with communities require permission from the Vanuatu National Cultural Council, by way of the VKS – a process during which the merits of a study are considered in relation to the needs of the country. Between the years 1985 and 1994 (Bolton 1999b: 1), and again from 2013 until 2014, moratoriums on research conducted by foreign nationals were imposed by the government. Among the reasons for the first embargo was that ‘senior members of the new Vanuatu government had been (justly or not) annoyed by the behaviour of certain researchers’ (Bolton 1999b: 4).

After decades of colonial oppression, newly elected officials sought to define the emergent state. In doing so, they claimed that indigenous customs belonged to the people of the country and should, consequently, be protected from the scrutiny of suspicious outsiders. Thus, ‘in the early eighties there was a strong feeling that ni-Vanuatu should research their own knowledge and practices’ (Bolton 1999b: 4). During the first moratorium, however, a select few researchers were invited to assist with VKS programmes and projects in collaboration with local counterparts: Darrell Tryon established a network of volunteer fieldworkers from different islands of the archipelago; Lissant Bolton initiated the Women’s Culture Project; and, David Roe and Jean-Christophe Gulipaud managed the Vanuatu Cultural and Historical Sites Survey. As a result, ‘The experience of working with these people sustained the belief in the cultural administration of Vanuatu ... that it was indeed possible for non-indigenes to conduct cultural research in a manner that involved, respected and acknowledged their informants and was of benefit to the people and communities which it involved’ (Regenvanu 1999a: 98).

The Vanuatu Cultural Research Policy was drafted by the VKS in 1992. After circulation for comment to government departments, statutory bodies, indigenous organisations and affiliate international institutions (see Regenvanu 1999a: 98), the policy was officially sanctioned in 1994. As a result, all foreign researchers undertaking work in the country (including the author of this thesis) are bound by the terms of the agreement.²¹ After almost a decade of sustained activity a second moratorium was issued by the VKS in 2013.²² A memorandum issued on behalf of the Vanuatu National Cultural Council explained that, ‘The Reason [sic] of the Moratorium is to allow the VNCC to redevelop its National Collaborative Research policy and other policies relating to Culture and Custom.’ In an interview with Radio New Zealand (15 July 2013) VKS Director Marcelin Abong stated that the ban was necessary to quell misconduct by unscrupulous outsiders. He asserted

The council would like to know about the research and what is beneficial to this nation and what is not beneficial to this nation, and also look for the people who are only in it for their own self-interest. So I think we try our best to protect our intangible cultural

²¹ See Appendix 1.

²² The second moratorium applied only to new research projects. Previously approved studies (including this thesis) were not subject to the embargo but researchers were required to submit a summary report to the Council.

heritage and to avoid exploitation of this knowledge ... In the Pacific and also in Vanuatu, we live on the cultural and traditional knowledge and it's very important for us.

Although imposed for only one year the moratorium highlights the gravity assigned to scholarly transgressions in Vanuatu.²³ The demand that research activities be conducted in a transparent, inclusive and culturally sensitive manner attests to the importance of sustaining collaborative working relationships with local communities.

With this in mind, field research informing this thesis was conducted in Port Vila during two separate site visits (September 2012 – March 2013 and September 2013 – December 2013, in addition to a previous period of residency from September 2009 – October 2010). Since the late 1970s scholars have suggested that sustained engagement with indigenous makers is central to the study of their art. Sidney Mead (1979:7), for example, argues that

Personal acquaintance with a culture seems to be of paramount importance to the study of art ... the student must enter the field and become familiar with the people whose art he or she is studying. Only by direct experience in the field is the student able to appreciate the richness and complexity of the cultural milieu in which art is produced.

As the most recent moratorium suggests, a significant number of researchers over recent years have elected to undertake studies in Vanuatu. Consequently, a sense of purloining has, in some instances, been expressed toward different academic enquiries. The need to establish and maintain trusting relationships was thus central to the aims of this thesis. With the attainment of mutual trust and respect between the author and artists discussed herein, greater opportunities for sincere dialogue emerged. Sensitive topics that might otherwise have been left undiscussed came to the fore, as did the thoughts and opinions of practitioners on a broad range of pertinent issues not at first apparent to the uninformed onlooker. This widening of disclosure between researcher and artist thus allowed for far richer cross-cultural engagement and exchange.

Primary data collected in Port Vila was achieved by way of semi-structured interviews, informal discussions, written surveys and participant observation.

²³ Institutions such as the VKS and Malvatumauri seek to ensure that research is of benefit to the nation as a whole and not driven by the political agendas of outside agents.

Conversations were conducted in Bislama (the lingua franca of the country) and English, with the decision as to the language of communication left solely with participants.²⁴ Written correspondence, including questionnaires that form the basis of Chapter Six, was composed in Bislama. In addition to meetings with artists, time was also spent with a range of other engaged individuals including cultural officers, local chiefs and government officials to achieve the broadest possible understanding of the topic at hand. Throughout the archipelago knowledge is equated with power. The rights to and of disclosure are fiercely protected and enforced. This is true even of contemporary artists working in the capital. Information restricted on the basis of gender, social status and island heritage is integral to indigenous notions of personhood. While the majority of practitioners included in this study create forms whose content may be openly discussed there were, on occasion, particular motifs or designs about which artists were unwilling to extrapolate. Whether such iconography was indeed customarily sacred, restricted on the basis of gender or social status or, alternatively, content about which makers simply did not wish to disclose information was difficult to ascertain. A deliberate secrecy often pervades individual creative practices. Few practitioners work collaboratively and, from observations made during fieldwork, fewer discuss their images – even after these objects have been exhibited in the public domain.

A career as a contemporary artist in Port Vila is a decidedly male pursuit. Of the 24 practicing artists who comprise this study only two are women. Such gender disparity has been of consequence to the outcomes of this research. As a female researcher of European descent living alone in the capital it was necessary to maintain an acute awareness of the moralising logic that dictates standards of ‘decent’ behaviour, lest grievances of impropriety be directed toward this project. From the attire one wears to the locales one frequents, the conduct of expatriate researchers is closely monitored and scrutinised by community members. A female researcher working almost exclusively with men arouses both curiosity and suspicion. As a result, many of the interviews and interactions that inform this study were conducted in public spaces – at cafes and restaurants in the centre of town, in stalls at marketplaces, on benches and

²⁴ Translations of Bislama to English throughout this thesis are denoted by the term ‘author’s translation’. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise stated. Given space limitations, all verbal communications are included as English translations only. Texts written in Bislama are included as originally transcribed and supplemented with English translations. Any quotations not referenced as ‘author’s translation’ were verbally communicated in English.

patches of grass at the seafront park, in workplaces, at cultural institutions such as the VKS or the Alliance Française de Port-Vila and at kava bars (although this last site might no doubt be considered inappropriate by some). On occasions where meetings were held in domestic dwellings, either those belonging to artists or that of the author, time was shared in the spirit of friendship and collegiality. Such visits provided an opportunity for large, heavy or cumbersome objects to be viewed and for preliminary sketches or works in progress to be shared.

Given the limited resources available to artists in Port Vila, the conditions under which a number of objects included in this thesis were viewed reveal both the ingenuity of makers and the conditions hampering their wider exposure. Few practitioners rely solely on their art as a means of income and those who do depend on basic infrastructure. Large canvases are hung from ceilings or rolled out on floors that inadequately accommodate their size; heavy carvings are stored among other objects that make access difficult; prints and drawings are often covered in sheets of plastic to protect them from the hazards of a tropical environment. Consequently, it was sometimes impossible to fully document the properties of particular objects. The decision was thus made to omit the dimensions of forms discussed in this thesis. Not only did this alleviate any imposed inconvenience upon artists, but it also allowed for free-flowing discussion to fully centre upon the artwork in question. Also of consideration was the fact that makers are often reluctant to publicise their individual practices. Where objects were viewed in public arenas, such as those mentioned above, they were sometimes presented by practitioners with deliberate discretion. In such instances this action was reciprocated – a photographic reference image was captured and the original work of art returned to the artist's rucksack, folder or pocket.

Two final considerations inform the methodology of this research. Firstly, although healthy competition and camaraderie exists between artists it was important to apportion equal time to practitioners who pledge membership to one of the two more prominent art associations in the capital. Meeting with artists from both the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association and the Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association not only assured that the widest possible number of makers were included in this study, but also eliminated any perceptions of bias or preferential treatment. Some artists were willing or able to meet more often than others, yet every attempt was made to engage with as many practitioners as possible. Secondly, enquiries about the prices of objects were not a dominant aspect of discussions. While the cost of a painting or

sculpture was ascertained, such information did not form the basis of interviews. Asking the price of an object was sometimes misconstrued as an expression of interest in purchasing the work of art, an act deliberately avoided so as to maintain neutrality among practitioners. Moreover, conversations about the cost of an artwork occasionally resulted in artists seeking guidance or advice on a topic that this research did not wish to influence.

THESIS OUTLINE

This thesis contains five interrelated chapters that together provide an ethnographic account of contemporary art in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Relevant literature is referred to throughout the thesis, offering opportunities for the interrogation of key sources. Each chapter examines a key aspect of the relationship between *kastom* and contemporary art thus revealing the multiple ways in which the two are intertwined.

The first chapter – Contextualising Contemporary Art – presents an overview of factors influencing the emergence of contemporary art in Port Vila. Key historical moments and events that shaped the nation are chronicled, beginning with the first European expeditions to the region. The arrival of Christian missionaries and expatriate traders are documented, as are the consequences of religious conversion and the labour trade upon local communities. Colonisation of the archipelago significantly altered the social fabric of the country: the introduction of diseases led to widespread deaths; local practices were abolished; and, social segregation based on church affiliation resulted. The ramifications of British and French interests in the islands are also explored to highlight the fractious political domination by Europeans throughout much of the 20th century. The issue of land – central to constructs of personhood – and its subsequent alienation are examined, thereby revealing the oppressive autocracy of foreign governance. Against this backdrop the resistance of indigenous agents, and the consequent demands for independence, provide a causal link to the development of new styles of visual representation. The dominance of Melanesian Socialism and the election of the first national government in 1980 (led by incumbent Prime Minister Walter Lini) set the scene for a revival of diverse cultural expressions. Advocating for the renaissance of *kastom*, a totalising concept that privileges local beliefs and values, the inaugural parliament championed national unity through the celebration of regional difference.

Along with the establishment of an executive sympathetic to indigenous ideologies, this chapter also examines the founding of organisations and institutions central to the project of contemporary art. The role of the New Hebrides Cultural Council and the Malvatumauri (National Council of Chiefs) are explored to situate the work of artists within wider socio-political discourses. With the new sovereign state came the introduction of a range of national symbols that were to define the country in a world of global polities. The design and iconography of the official flag and coat of arms are each investigated to reveal the emergence of an internalised visual vocabulary that was to influence the imagery of artists for years to come. The first exhibitions of paintings and sculptures in Port Vila are analysed to locate preliminary displays by both expatriate and local practitioners alike. In addition, an examination of the provision of arts tutelage by French teachers Jacqui Bourdain and Henri Thailade at the National de Technologie du Vanuatu reveals not only the first students to professionalise their practices, but also seminal styles, materials and techniques that informed the early years of the movement. The chapter concludes with an assessment of pupil's involvement in the first National Arts Festival, along with their execution of several public commissions, to link contemporary art with the rhetoric of the new nation state.

The second chapter – The Contemporary Artworld – provides an introduction to artists resident in Port Vila today. The chapter highlights the people, places and objects that together comprise the local art scene. The importance and influence of four contemporary art associations are examined to reveal the interconnectedness of artists based upon organisational membership. As a result, attention is focused on the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association, the Red Wave Vanuatu Arts Association, the Tuburin Association and the Mataso Printmakers Collective. In Port Vila the production of contemporary art is a solitary pursuit – artists more often than not work independently of one another and are reluctant to publically promote their outputs. The advocacy and encouragement offered by each association are therefore assessed to contextualise the broader social circumstances under which practitioners labour. The expansion of the local industry is further examined in relation to formal educational opportunities available to emerging artists. Courses offered at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology and the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education are analysed, as are objects created by graduating students. The display and distribution of works of art, by way of public exhibitions and commercial outlets are explored, with attention being focused on the Espace Culturel Français and retail outlets owned and operated by indigenous agents. In

doing so the means by which object of contemporary art circulate within the capital are revealed. Consequently, this chapter explains how artists establish professional reputations while negotiating challenges posed by age, gender and natal affiliation.

The third chapter – *Kastom as Subject Matter* – provides an in-depth analysis of paintings and sculptures that take indigenous practices as their central theme, thus revealing artistic preoccupations with representations of *kastom*, culture and heritage. The outputs of ten practitioners, both emerging and established, are examined in relation to four dominant concepts: chiefs, dance, marriage and stories. The chapter relies upon interviews and informal discussions conducted with artists during periods of fieldwork (2012 – 2013) in Port Vila. Focusing on works of art viewed in the capital during this time, the visual content of objects is examined to reveal the relativity of traditional beliefs and values to individual creative pursuits. The depiction of chiefly figures, dancing bodies, betrothed couples and narrative legends attests to the many and varied means by which makers share distinct forms of knowledge and explore issues of indigenous identity.

The fourth chapter – *Kastom as Iconography* – examines the use of specific motifs by different artists. Systems of indigenous copyright are explored, thereby exposing restrictions related to the depiction of particular icons. While some symbols are freely adopted by practitioners, notably those upheld by the state as being representative of nationhood, other designs and patterns are fiercely protected by traditional owners. Using case studies in which claims of unauthorised appropriation have been levelled against artists, this chapter examines processes of conflict resolution and restitution. Several contested images are considered including those of the *nagol*, otherwise known as the land dive (a highly ritualised ceremony from the island of Pentecost), sand drawings (temporary mnemonic devices that are made in sand or soil) and carvings (particularly those related to systems of male initiation and hierarchy on the island of Ambrym). Local constructs of ownership and entitlement are examined to highlight the impact of gender, social status and patrilineal lineage upon the outputs of artists working in the capital. The introduction of formal legislation by way of the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000 is discussed, with attention directed toward the inclusion of provisions for the protection of traditional knowledge and expressions of indigenous culture. The chapter concludes with an account of recent debates in Port Vila that have enacted the legislation, focusing on discussions held in 2013 relating to a

proposed exhibition that was to commemorate the anniversary of the Mount Benlow volcanic eruption of 1913.

In the final chapter – Aesthetic Experiences – enquiries move beyond the workshops and studios of practitioners to explore the reception of contemporary art by local audiences. Using as a case study the inaugural exhibition staged at the site-specific premises of the National Library and Archives of Vanuatu in 2013, the chapter examines public responses to thirteen works of art (ten paintings, two wood carvings and one mixed-media sculpture) created by ten different artists. The official opening of the new building is documented, as are the functions of the institution. As a result, the link between the state and art is considered. In order to liaise with the widest possible number of people and ascertain varying reactions to the objects included in the display, the chapter relies upon data gathered using photographs and written questionnaires. In all, the responses of 148 survey participants are analysed as a means of examining the criteria against which aesthetic value judgements are made. The reactions of individuals from a range of backgrounds, professions and organisations provide insights into the normative morals and principles embraced by the broader community. By extending the framework of the thesis to include the role of active viewers, understandings of the socio-cultural impetuses that drive creative expression are better understood. Concepts such as national identity, unity and diversity are explored to explain the preference of particular images over others, thus highlighting the internalised mechanisms by which audiences evaluate and appreciate contemporary works of art.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXTUALISING CONTEMPORARY ART

The emergence of an indigenous contemporary art movement in Port Vila was not an isolated occurrence – key historical events, political doctrines and local values created the circumstances necessary for new modes of visual representation to emerge. This chapter, therefore, outlines decisive colonial encounters that not only shaped the foundations of Vanuatu as a new nation state, but also influenced both the content and materiality of contemporary art objects created by practitioners in the country's capital. Periods of European exploration, imperialism, missionisation and settlement provide the background against which claims to national sovereignty were made by local agents. By way of revitalisation and promotion, the tropes of customary tradition were evoked in opposition to ideological demands in which Western constructs of prosperity and progress conflicted with deeply embedded codes of Melanesian spirituality. As the archipelago moved toward independence after decades of joint British and French administration, young artists were provided with opportunities to professionalise their artistic endeavours. This chapter presents an account of the early years of contemporary art production, highlighting the institutions and events that enabled material forms to enter the public sphere for the first time during a period of intense socio-political activity in the region. Thus, the argument is made that such objects came to be linked to the achievement of indigenous self-determination.

COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS

Located in the south-west Pacific region, Vanuatu has been subject to centuries of Western exploration, fascination and imagination. Comprising 83 islands that stretch over 900 kilometres of ocean to form a Y-shape running from north to south, the archipelago is situated 1750 kilometres east of Australia and 500 kilometres north-east of New Caledonia (Fig. 1). The name Vanuatu – an amalgamation of *vanua* (land or home) and *tu* (stand), both words found in several Austronesian languages – translates to mean 'the country that stands up' and was adopted by the Islanders after the country's independence on 30 July 1980 (Garanger 1996: 8).²⁵ Today the nation is

²⁵ The official name of the country is the Republic of Vanuatu. In everyday discourse which is most commonly shortened to Vanuatu.

home to almost 250,000 people who, between them, speak 113 languages (Tyron 1996: 171), thus making the country one of the world's most culturally and linguistically diverse locales.²⁶ Since independence the country has adopted three national languages: French, English and the neo-Melanesian *lingua franca* Bislama. Roger Keesing (1989: 26) notes that 'Pidgin English [was] created mainly by indigenous participants in contexts of domination and exploration during eras of shipboard and plantation labour [and] has become a vehicle of nationalism.' In the current climate, Bislama is the language with which ni-Vanuatu communicate with one another in the country's capital.

The first European report of the archipelago was made by the Portuguese navigator Pedro Fernandez de Quiros during the Spanish voyages of discovery. In May 1606 he led an expedition of three ships, 136 men and six Catholic priests to the north of the islands as he sailed the Pacific Ocean in search of Terra Australis Incognita.²⁷ Believing he had found the desired land mass, de Quiros named his discovery Terra Australialis del Espiritu Santo (MacClancy 1981: 36). The name has survived to the present day and Espiritu Santo is now home to the country's second largest urban hub, Luganville. Over 150 years later, in May 1768, the French admiral and explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville navigated the islands, naming the region as a whole the Great Cyclades and two northern land masses Pentecost and Aurora (now Maewo). In 1774, Captain James Cook sighted the archipelago during his voyage on HMS *Resolution* (Bolton 2003a: 7). He charted and mapped many of the islands and, as they were the most westerly of those he had discovered, he named them the New Hebrides after the western most isles of Britain, those being the Hebrides of Scotland.

During the early 19th century the London Missionary Society (LMS) undertook an energetic programme of evangelisation throughout the Pacific, initially with varying degrees of success in the New Hebrides. Among the first of many missionaries to visit the archipelago was English-born Reverend John Williams. Sailing on LMS *Camden*, Williams dropped anchor off the southern island of Erromango on 20 November 1839. Here he, his companions Mr. Cunningham and James Harris, along with Captain Morgan and four crew-hands rowed a whale boat toward shore. In an act guided by

²⁶ The most recent census, held in 2009, revealed the total population at that time to be 234,023, of whom 57,195 resided in urban areas, while 176,828 inhabited rural parts of the country (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2009: 4).

²⁷ *Terra Australis Incognita* (Latin for 'unknown land of the South') was a hypothesised continent appearing on European maps between the 15th and 18th centuries.

miscommunication, misunderstanding or, perhaps, misplaced bravado, three of the party ventured into thick bush scrub that lined the beachfront. Captain Morgan recounts that soon after he saw

Mr. Williams and Mr. Cunningham running – Mr. Cunningham toward the boat, and Mr. Williams straight for the sea, with one native close behind him ... [Williams] fell backward and a native struck him with a club and often repeated the blow. A short time after another came up and struck him, and very soon another came up and pierced several arrows into his body (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions 1840: 411).

It was thus that Williams and Harris met their deaths. In response the LMS doubled its efforts at evangelism of the region. Sending Polynesian converts of Samoan and Tongan descent to teach the word of the Gospel, European missionaries and church leaders believed that ‘the natives have not the same prejudices against them as against white men, and they are therefore not exposed to the same dangers’ (Patterson 1882: 135).

Throughout the latter part of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, several other religious denominations undertook missions throughout the islands. The establishment of the Presbyterian and Anglican churches in the 1840s was followed by the arrival of Catholic missionaries in the 1880s and the Church of Christ and the Seventh-day Adventists in the 1920s. The intrusion of each sect into ni-Vanuatu society fragmented the delicate stability between clan, kinship and hamlet groups. As Lissant Bolton (2003a: 8) explains, ‘it was not the arrival of the Europeans but rather their subsequent assumptions of the right to direct islander’s lives and practices that was significant.’ As ni-Vanuatu converted to different forms of Christianity, strong social divides came to mark the region, both at a local and national level. The various denominations perceived themselves as competitors, each missionary desperate to reform ‘the perishing Heathen in the South Seas’ (Paton 1889: 85) and further the imperial aspirations of their respective home governments. The attractions of converting to Christianity for ni-Vanuatu were many and varied. For some communities the church was perceived as a means of establishing peace; for others, access to the supposed wealth of the *waetman* (European) was a determining factor; while for others still, elevated social standing within their locale or hamlet attributed to the individual

religious pursuits of men in particular. While the Presbyterian Church remains dominant in many parts of the archipelago, it is not unusual even today, to find clear delineations within village spaces based upon faith associations.²⁸ In Port Vila, which is home to indigenous peoples from a wide array of the country's islands and religious convictions, tensions can arise between competing creeds and faiths.

Much like the missionaries, European traders arrived in the region during the early 19th century. After the discovery of sandalwood (an aromatic wood prized by the Chinese) on Erromango by the Irish trader and explorer Peter Dillon in 1826, others followed to harvest this valuable commodity, paying short visits to the islands of Efate, Erromango, Espiritu Santo and Tanna. As the decades passed, settlers established cotton, coffee, cocoa, banana and coconut plantations. Howard Van Trease (1995: 6) explains that 'by mid-century, permanent trading posts began to appear, often associated with small plantations. By the second half of the 19th century, Vanuatu was the focus of intensive efforts by European land speculators and developers.' The establishment of the Caledonia Company of the New Hebrides in 1882 expanded French interests, leading to increased immigration from the European mainland. As foreign nationals continued to colonise the archipelago and international travel became more feasible, a growing number of ni-Vanuatu men voluntarily undertook work on plantations in Australia, Fiji and New Caledonia during the early years of labour recruitment. The first such group was recruited by Ross Lewin in 1863, under the employment of Queensland sugar cane farmer Robert Towns, and 65 islanders travelled to the continent to commence relentless and often gruelling physical work (MacClancy 1981: 54).

As the years progressed however, the labour trade quickly gained a disreputable reputation. Reverend John Paton, the first Presbyterian missionary on the southern islands of Aneityum and Aniwa, wrote of 'the shocking ... labour-traffic to the Colonies, after the sandalwood trade was exhausted, which has since destroyed so many thousands of the Natives in what was nothing less than Colonial slavery, and has largely depopulated the Islanders either directly or indirectly' (Paton 1889: 213). Word of the

²⁸ The 2009 census data reveals the following percentages: Presbyterian 28.5%; Anglican 15%; Seventh-day Adventist 12.5%; other 12.5%; Catholic 12%; Assembly of God 5%; Church of Christ 4.5%; customary belief 4%; Neil Thomas Ministries 3%; Apocalypse 2%; no religion 1% (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2009: 34). It must be noted however, that these figures include expatriate and temporary residents as well as ni-Vanuatu respondents, and that identification with a single denomination does not allow for inter-religious categorisation.

depraved working conditions soon spread among ni-Vanuatu and, as a consequence, many islanders shunned the advances of agents offering employment abroad. Desperate to continue enlisting cost-effective labour, unscrupulous recruiters resorted to tactics of deception, trickery and, in some cases, kidnap – such behaviour came to be described in the colloquial vernacular as ‘blackbirding’ (Philibert 1981: 317). In 1875 the Queensland State Government enacted the *Pacific Islands Protection Act*, with a preamble stating that legislation was necessary ‘for the protection and punishment of criminal ‘outrages upon natives of the islands in the Pacific Ocean’ (Queensland State Government 1875: 1). The law however did little to curb the malicious practices of some recruiters. Paton (1889: 245) argues that traders ‘deliberately gloried in ... destroying the poor heathen. A more fiendish spirit could scarcely be imagined ... and their traffic of every kind amongst these Islands was, generally speaking, steeped in human blood.’ In 1885 the *Pacific Island Labourers Act* of 1880 was amended to include a provision that no new recruitment licenses be issued after 31 December 1890. A violent period in the history of the archipelago may have ceased, but not without lasting consequences for the indigenous population.

The combined effects of colonial encounters with missionaries and land speculators devastated local communities. Adoption of the principles of Christianity resulted in cultural decline as the churches sought to eliminate indigenous practices linked to status alteration and social progression, including grade-taking rites and ritual pig-killing ceremonies.²⁹ The introduction of diseases against which locals had no immunity led to a considerable number of deaths. Missionaries stationed on Aneityum, for example, reported dramatic population depletion: in 1848 it was recorded that 4000 people inhabited the island, but by 1859 this number had dropped to a meagre 680 men, women and children (Rallu 1996: 318). The introduction of European clothing also affected communities. Writing about the small northern island of Vanua Lava, Reverend Walter John Durrad (1922: 7) argued that, ‘Of all the evil customs introduced by civilisation the wearing of clothes is probably the greatest.’ For example, women would wear several skirts at any one time, superimposing a deteriorating article worn close to the body with a fresh garment atop. Wet and soiled clothes were not washed or changed, thus proving ‘disastrous for those who fall victim to influenza, colds and

²⁹ This is not to say that ni-Vanuatu were complicit in the abandonment of traditional social practices – many activities were hidden from the missionaries and others adapted to meet the demands of the churches.

coughs' (Durrad 1922: 8). Coupled with this, the unrecorded but significant number of men that either perished on foreign plantations or declined the chance of returning to the New Hebrides compounded the insurmountable population decrease.

Anthropologists and academics familiar with the archipelago began to fear for the very existence of the islanders. As a result, individuals such as Arthur Bernard Deacon (1934), Tom Harrison (1937) and Felix Speiser (1913, 1990) began to document the practices, lifestyles and customs of the islanders in the hope of recording and preserving indigenous culture.

French and British interests in the islands of the Pacific had been prevalent long before the arrival of missionaries and traders in the region. In September 1853 the French Government annexed New Caledonia and was increasingly determined to strengthen its national presence in the New Hebrides. Britain, on the other hand, was reluctant to invest in a colony of dubious worth but, under pressure from the Australian Government, opposed French interests and control. In 1906 the two nations agreed to an unconventional form of colonial rule, thus forming a *tufala gavman* – the Anglo-French Condominium Government of the New Hebrides. The Condominium sought 'to secure the exercise of their paramount rights in the New Hebrides and to assure for the future the better protection of life and property in the Group' (France 1906: Preamble). As a consequence, both administrations established distinct police forces, immigration procedures, systems of judicial governance, education policies and civil structures that led to the Condominium being derisively labelled by locals as 'pandemonium' (Haas 1980: 5). The conflicting aims of each administration were to result in an even greater fracture of the indigenous community. Already divided by imposed religious doctrine, particularly Anglo-Protestant / Franco-Catholic separatism, islanders now found themselves marginalised from one another based upon the language of their formal schooling, employment in the cash economy and abidance of introduced rules of law.

Technically the New Hebrides was never a colony, but instead a region of joint British and French influence. The British and French sought to administer the archipelago as a means of serving nationalistic interests, focusing specifically upon the dominance and control of Port Vila. Neither made attempts to formalise local practices, nor enact effective engagement with islanders outside the capital. Jeremy MacClancy (1981: 68) argues that, 'The British and French High Commissions, by not providing any civil authority in the islands, and by refusing to oversee properly the actions of settlers, indirectly allowed a state of anarchy and lawlessness to develop in Vanuatu,

one that was to characterize white settlement for the next four decades.’ The appropriation of *graon* (customary land) by European settlers and corporations, often by force, became a defining feature of colonisation during much of the 20th century. At the time of the signing of the *Anglo-French New Hebrides Convention* in 1906 the French land company Soci  t   Fran  aise des Nouvelles-H  brides claimed 55% (approximately 600,000 hectares) of the total land area of the islands (Van Trease 1995: 8). In the minds of the local population however, the land that expatriates occupied had been leased rather than sold. The European was entitled to harvest the *graon* and reap his rewards, but the permanent legal transfer of title was inconceivable to customary owners and all but impossible under traditional land tenure systems.

In an attempt to settle land disputes the Condominium established the Joint Court, a legal tribunal that provided the only instance in which the British and French administrations collaborated to solidify political control. While Britain had appealed for a land commission to examine claims in a way that protected indigenous interests, France sought to validate the applications of her nationals and encourage permanent settlement. Ultimately the British conceded to French demands. The judiciary comprised three judges (one British, one French and one appointed by the King of Spain) who implemented legislation that decreed, ‘In land suits, the right of non-natives may be proved either by occupation or by title-deeds establishing the sale or grant of the land in question’ (France 1906, Article xxii (1)). To further strengthen the interests of the French, it was determined that land titles registered before 1 January 1896 could not be challenged. Subsequently, the French enjoyed a period of substantial influence throughout the archipelago during the early 20th century. Without any official documentation or understanding of the flawed judicial system, the rightful claims of islanders to traditional lands were effectively silenced. Land disputes between expatriates and locals, along with contestation between indigenous tribes and hamlets, came to dominate socio-political relations.³⁰ Local campaigns of opposition to land alienation had been active since the 19th century but, as Van Trease (1995: 12) notes, ‘the Condominium provided a mechanism for Europeans to gain title to land and the

³⁰ The consequences of an introduced European system of land ownership are, to this day, unresolved. In 2011 Ralph Regenvanu MP, as then Minister for Lands, temporarily suspended the registration of leases. At that time 3,000 leases were awaiting registration, and Regenvanu intended to establish a transparent system to ensure that agreements complied with land laws and involved all applicable land owners. In a statement to the media Regenvanu commented that the leasing system had been ‘hampered for years by corrupt and unfair dealings [and] had alienated many ni-Vanuatu from their customary land’ (as quoted in Makin 2011).

police protection necessary to enable them to develop their holdings in the face of ni-Vanuatu resistance.’ For the indigenous community however, *graon* was more than simply a means of subsistence agriculture and economy.

The notion of *ples* (place) binds social organisation and personal identity to land: one’s place of origin is synonymous with one’s knowledge, customs, personhood and indigeneity. In his study of south Malekula, for example, Tim Curtis (1999: 60) notes that

What is characteristic of this region ... is the way people use the concept of *ples* (place) as a key metaphor through which their identities and associations are expressed and negotiated ... *Ples* is not just a locale or a physical situation, but a powerful idiom and a moral value that validates group affiliation.

Ples, then, is strategically used to create genealogical connections between the landscape and the body, organise social relations and mediate access to traditional practices, wisdom and customs. As Bolton (2003a: 71) notes, ‘Place is a resource, a basis of social identity, a source of knowledge; it is also, of course, a source of all the necessities of life – of food and of the materials from which houses, clothing, and all other artifacts can be made.’ Even in Port Vila today, with its divergent socio-political mix of migrants from different islands of the archipelago, place of residency in the capital is based upon family lineage and claims to *ples*. This is exemplified in suburbs such as Seaside where settlements of ni-Vanuatu from Tongoa and Paama dominate the area, Blacksands with its majority of Tannese residents and Melemaat which is home to a large contingent of peoples originating from Ambrym. The extension of the concepts of *ples* and *graon* into the urban setting delineates a complex web of indigenous social relations.

INDEPENDENCE

The far-reaching and ongoing ramifications of land alienation could not have been predicted or anticipated by either the British or the French administrations – the issue became a key political vehicle that spurred indigenous movements toward independence. In 1971 the New Hebrides Cultural Association (NHCA) was founded ‘to promote, to preserve, to revive and to encourage New Hebridean culture. To seek the advancement of the New Hebrides socially, educationally, economically and

politically in relation with New Hebridean culture and Western civilization' (as quoted in Bolton 2003a: 12).³¹ Later that same year the NHCA re-formed as the New Hebrides National Party (NHNP) and seized upon consternation regarding land alienation as a platform from which to garner popular support, particularly among Anglophone islanders. Led by Anglican pastor Father Walter Lini, the NHNP advocated for the recognition of indigenous values and traditions. Lini (1980a: 15) recounts that during his time studying at St John's College in New Zealand he 'began to grow uneasy about the way New Zealanders and Pacific Islanders were forced to learn theology, ethical principles, philosophies, and ideas which were completely foreign to us.' The NHNP consequently touched upon a growing mood of nationalism and, with the guidance of academics at the University of the South Pacific and newly liberated peoples of other South Pacific nations (including Papua New Guinea in 1975 and the Solomon Islands in 1978), actively launched claims for self-determination.

In doing so Lini championed the tropes of Melanesian Socialism – an indigenously derived form of political rhetoric that emphasised the virtues of traditional cultural beliefs. Much like the Melanesian Way, a radical nationalistic agenda mounted against colonial authority in Papua New Guinea (see Narakobi 1983), Melanesian Socialism proposed the reestablishment of islander society and polity after independence. The inherent ideological convictions of Lini's philosophical stance are best described by way of juxtaposition with their capitalist, antithetical counterparts: 'communalism versus individualism, sharing versus self-interest, humanism versus materialism' (Premdas 1987: 108). Lini (1983), in a statement to the 38th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, argued that communalism is 'based on an awareness of the community where the individual was not to consider himself or his private interests taking precedent over the general interests of the community.' The NHNP subsequently strove to invoke a cultural renaissance and, as Lini (1983) asserted, allow for 'the rebirth of our identity and purpose, and to preserve without inhibition our God-given right to develop in our own way and in accordance with our own values and expectations.' However, Lini and the NHNP were careful to distance and separate their political convictions from the central tenants of communism, lest their socialist doctrine be mistakenly aligned with imported European dogma. Invoking the issue of land as a

³¹ The founding members of the Association were Father John Bani, Donald Kalpokas and Father Walter Lini.

means of illustrating the local specificity of Melanesian Socialism, Lini (1983) asserted that, 'land exists to be used by the community for its needs. This is by definition a socialist principle, but one which we practised hundreds of years before Marx, Engels, or indeed Lenin were even born, let alone heard of.' Therefore, the NHNP took the elimination of antipodal institutions of colonialism as its central task, to be replaced by the establishment of decentralised social, political and economic structures to engage and empower local communities.

The struggle for independence in the New Hebrides was far greater than that faced by many other Pacific countries. The Condominium was antagonistically hostile and subverted indigenous attempts to oust colonial rule. Pastor Sethy Regenvanu, an active member of the campaign for independence, recounts that the French administration, in particular, 'managed to separate French educated ni-Vanuatu from their English counterparts in the New Hebrides National Party, and encouraged the former to form their own political party, Union des Communautés des Nouvelles-Hébrides ... which stood in direct opposition to the independence as advocated by NHNP' (2004: 104-105).³² As a consequence, the NHNP was re-branded and in 1977 became the Vanua'aka Pati (VP). Loosely translated to mean 'Our Land Party' the VP resolved to establish a People's Provisional Government. The synergism between party's political doctrine and the rhetoric of Presbyterianism exacerbated the separation between Anglophone Protestants and Francophone Catholics, with the latter supporting 'moderate' oppositional parties (Tonkinson 1982: 308). Similarly, extremist cargo-cult organisations such as Nagriamel and the John Frum movement – both of which adopted broad anti-colonialist, anti-state and anti-missionary sentiments – opposed the legislative ideologies and discourse proposed by the VP members.³³ Nonetheless, on 29 November 1977 the People's Provisional Government raised its flag alongside that of the United Nations at VP headquarters in Port Vila. However, the building was surrounded by local opponents armed with rifles and ammunition and a tense stand-off ensued. The situation undermined the Condominium, and while a peaceful resolution

³² Sethy Regenvanu went on to hold several key positions in the cabinet of the newly formed independent government. These included: Minister of Land, Mines and Rural Water Supplies (1979-1983); Minister of Home Affairs (1983-1987); Minister of Transport, Public Works, Communication and Civil Aviation (1987-1988); Minister of Education, Youth and Sport (1988-1990); Minister of Finance, Industry and Tourism (1990-1991); Minister of Justice, Culture, Religion, Women's Affairs and Archives (1991-1995); Deputy Prime Minister (1982-1987, 1991-1995) (see S. Regenvanu 2004).

³³ Nagriamel was led by Jimmy Stevens with a headquarters based on Espiritu Santo, while the activities of the John Frum movement were confined to the island of Tanna (see MacClancy 1981; Jolly 1992; Morgan 2008; Tonkinson 1982; Van Trease 1995).

was affected, the French and British administrations quickly realised the resolve of the spreading independence movement.

The nation's first general election was held in November 1979. The VP harnessed much support, despite the linguistic and cultural diversity that had resulted from decades of indecisive Condominium rule. Robert Tonkinson (1982: 308) poignantly notes, '[t]he fact that several of the most forceful party leaders were also Protestant clergy helped swing the churches from a neutral position into active supporters for the independence movement.' The VP cultivated popular opinion by way of the churches, utilising sermons as a means of disseminating the group's political agenda to the largely illiterate masses. Presenting reforms that focused upon issues relating to the 'alienation of land and associated problems such as foreign immigration, economic imperialism and tourism' (Tonkinson 1982: 308), the VP won a two-thirds majority, gaining 25 of the 39 seats in the new parliament.³⁴ With Lini assuming the role of Prime Minister and Ati George Sokomanu appointed President, the inaugural government set about establishing a sovereign democratic state. In 1985 the islands of the archipelago were divided into 11 regions: Ambae and Maewo; Ambrym; Banks and Torres; Efate; Epi; Malekula; Paama; Pentecost; Espiritu Santo and Malo; Shepherd Islands; Tafea.³⁵ Once elected, the VP then faced the task of bridging the divide between the majority rural populace and small, but growing, Western-educated urban elite.

KASTOM

To do so the VP enacted claims to *kastom* – an omnipresent value system and totalising logic that operates throughout the country. Indisputably, prior to European arrival, internal systems and networks of governance, value and exchange operated within and between ni-Vanuatu families, clans, villages and hamlets. Such practices however, were not overtly codified by islanders and the word *kastom* appears in the official lexicon only after the advent of Western systems of classification, beginning with William

³⁴ The VP is often credited with winning 26 seats, however, as Michael Morgan (2008: 126) points out, 'Kalmer Vocor was elected on the Natuitanno ticket, but voted with the Government consistently'. The remaining 13 seats of the new parliament were divided between seven other parties, thus the government comprised the following: Vanua'aka Pati (25); Pati Federel / Communautés des Nouvelles-Hébrides (5); Independent (2); Namangki Aute (2); Natuitanno (1); Mouvement Autonomiste des Nouvelles-Hébrides (1); Nagriamel (1); John Frum (1); Kapiel (1).

³⁵ In 1994 the islands were redivided into six administrative provinces: Shefa (Efate, Epi, Tongoa); Tafea (Aneityum, Aniwa, Erromango, Futuna, Tanna); Malampa (Ambrym, Malekula, Paama); Sanma (Espiritu Santo); Penama (Ambae, Maewo, Pentecost); Torba (Banks and Torres).

Camden's (1977) descriptive dictionary (see Bolton 2003: 10-11). MacClancy (1981: 20) makes the important point that, '[w]hat written knowledge we do have of custom comes primarily from the articles and books of anthropologists and interested missionaries.' Since the early 1980s, scholars visiting the archipelago have undertaken to define the concept of *kastom* and articulate the influences of the idiom upon ni-Vanuatu values, behaviours and norms. Bolton (2003a: 51) surmises that

the term "*kastom*" does not refer to precolonial knowledge and practice as a whole system – as "culture" – but rather to specific items, aspects, of that knowledge and practice. More importantly, "*kastom*" is a term that confers certain kinds of comparative value ... The term was applied to aspects of indigenous life that became symbolic of the difference between local and expatriate.

Kastom acted as an exclusive site in which ni-Vanuatu could contest dichotomies such as tradition and modernity, past and present, inclusion and exclusion.

The acceptance of *kastom* on a national level required the incorporation of institutionalised religion. Whether by imposition or free will, Christianity had come to be a defining feature of local modern life. The arrival of European missionaries had necessitated the abandonment of many established cultural practices with church agents 'agreed that certain institutions, behaviours and values were anathema to Christianity' (Tonkinson 1982: 307). However, as the push for independence strengthened and *kastom* came to dominate the nationalist agenda, expatriate leaders of different churches soon appreciated the need to accommodate ni-Vanuatu claims of indigeneity. The irony of the predicament faced by the Anglican and Presbyterian churches, in particular, stemmed from the fact that indigenous pastors and preachers (such as Lini and Regenvanu) manipulated the tropes of the Gospel to voice revivalist dogma to their congregations. Lindstrom (1982: 316) notes that, 'The emergence of a history as tradition is a multiple process. It first consists of increasing social awareness.' For a generation of ni-Vanuatu indoctrinated in the teachings of the bible the message that *kastom* and religion need not contradict each other gathered grass-roots support. As Margaret Jolly (1992: 342) explains, 'Christianity was exempted from its association with colonialism, and viewed positively, not negatively. Although introduced by foreigners, Christianity ... has been indigenized and is viewed as intrinsic to sovereign statehood and personal independence.' Rather than view *kastom* as a negative construct

of a perceived heathen past, the VP incorporated prevailing Christian hegemony as a means of diminishing the denigration of long-established indigenous traditions.

The rich cultural diversity that characterises ni-Vanuatu society necessitated that *kastom* be kept as vague and undefined a term as possible. As Tonkinson (1982: 310) argues

kastom has at no stage been subject to classification, codification, subdivision or any kind of close analysis or security. It is ... hardly surprising that kastom has remained undifferentiated in political discourse, because its utility as a rallying point depends heavily on its confinement to an ideological level, indivisible and unexamined.

For example, procedures of rank modification and grade-taking ceremonies were a common feature throughout the archipelago long before expatriates inhabited the region. Different islands upheld divergent practices: the north (including Pentecost and Malekula) being characterised by status-alteration systems in which men (and sometimes women) performed rituals and rites in order to attain higher economic, political, social and spiritual status; the central and southern regions (such as Futuna and Erromango) dominated by systems of hereditary chieftainship. In Vanuatu, knowledge is power. Lamont Lindstrom (1982: 320), discussing the island of Tanna, notes that, 'political prestige and authority ... depend less on economic manipulation than ... on the control and communication of knowledge.' *Kastom* therefore came to mean all things to all people, making it easily adaptable to the demands of indigenous ethnocentrism and social variation. Recognising this, the VP employed *kastom* as a means of asserting national identity, promoting cultural values and acknowledging internal rituals and traditions bound to different islands.

Generally speaking, *kastom* can be divided into those practices which are public and those which are *tabu* (taboo). Most visible are objects of material culture such as carvings and weavings that circulate in traditional and cash economies, being held as items of *kastom* or as commodity goods depending upon the context of their exchange. Intangible heritage also dominates public demonstrations of indigeneity. Song and dance performances, oral histories and stories, ephemeral arts, cooking techniques and some ritualistic ceremonies offer general audiences a glimpse into the customary preoccupations of local communities. Knowledge of, and participation in, other activities however, is strictly regulated: for example, male and female graded societies

are highly secretive. The presence of uninitiated onlookers is forbidden as the right to particular forms of knowledge is carefully regulated, only being shared with those individuals of appropriate rank, genealogy and gender. The most contentious of all *tabu* are *majik* (magic) and *nakaemas* (sorcery). As Jane Joshua (10 August 2011) comments, ‘The art of sorcery has its own place and time, existing for a purpose. But fears are growing that it is becoming “commercialised” and the demand for kastom “hit men” may be growing as sorcery is used outside its respective boundaries and for the wrong purposes.’ By its very nature then, *kastom* embodies the dichotomies of public / private, inclusivity / exclusivity, transparency / opaqueness. That which can be revealed, and those who hold authority over disclosure, are governed by doctrines that strictly regulate the circulation of knowledge.

Art, culture and heritage were crucial to the goals of the VP. In 1956, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Condominium rule, the British and French established the New Hebrides Cultural Centre (NHCC), with a dedicated building being opened on the main street of Port Vila in 1959 (see Bolton 2003a: 32). The NHCC was later renamed the Vanuatu Cultural Centre or *Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta* (VKS) at the time of independence.³⁶ The planning committee responsible for the facility ‘had suggested that a museum be founded’ but the British administration ‘advised that while British Development Funds could not be used to build a museum, money could be provided if the institution were called a Cultural Centre’ (Bolton 2003a: 32). This was to be indicative of the governance of the NHCC throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, with the preoccupations of the institution being principally European. The employment of Kirk Huffman, the first salaried curator, in 1977 was to have a profound effect on the indigenisation, management, objectives and achievements of the Centre. Huffman, a British anthropology student, had conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the Malekula since 1973. During his 11 years of service between 1977 and 1989 with the NHCC, Huffman focused his attention upon the documentation, preservation and revival of *kastom* by way of indigenous oral traditions. He explains

³⁶ In November 1995 the VKS relocated to purpose-built premises adjacent to Parliament House and today comprises eight departments: the National Museum of Vanuatu; the National Library of Vanuatu; the National Archives of Vanuatu; the National Film, Sound and Photograph Archive; the Cultural and Historical Sites Registry; the Fieldworkers Project; the Women’s Culture programme; and, the Traditional Resources Management Unit (otherwise known as the Land’s Desk). The Pacific Islands Museum Association (PIMA) head office is also based at VKS.

In the highly sophisticated, profoundly spiritual, traditional cultures of Vanuatu – all orally based – modern literacy is, of course, a luxury rather than a necessity ... a written version of an extensive myth, song, or story cannot compare with the real thing. It simplifies and stupefies it, often also wiping out the special codes which “initiated” listeners or observers need to catch to understand the often hidden levels of meaning within (Huffman 1996d: 14).

As such, the NHCC became a place in which both *kastom* knowledge and artefacts were deposited, shared and analysed. Huffman’s recognition of the vital importance of oral histories to Islanders, along with his sensitivity to indigenous practices and ideologies, made him a staunch ally of the independence movement, and his ‘advocacy of the importance of *kastom* [was] influential at national and local levels through the country’ (Bolton 2003a: xvii).

Huffman initiated important working relationships between the NHCC and newly established local institutions, particularly the Malvatumauri (National Council of Chiefs). The iconic symbol of the chief is an important figure with regard to the integration of *kastom* into everyday life. In many parts of the archipelago the ‘graded society collapsed rapidly following early contact with Europeans and most people today have at best a sketchy idea of what the institution was all about and the nature of its relationship to chieftainship’ (Tonkinson 1982: 311). To further legitimate tradition and strengthen the adoption of *kastom* as national practice, the *Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu*, drafted in 1979 and taking effect on 30 July 1980, made provisions for the establishment of the Malvatumauri.³⁷ The document states that, ‘The National Council of Chiefs has a general competence to discuss all matters relating to custom and tradition and may make recommendations for the preservation and promotion of ni-Vanuatu culture and languages’ (Government of the Republic of Vanuatu 1979: Chapter 5, Article 30.1). The organisation mandates national recognition of *kastom* systems, procedures and structures. Representatives are *kastom jifs* (custom chiefs) who are elected every four years, after recognition of an individual’s claim to the title has been publicly sanctified by way of a ‘true custom ceremony in which pigs are killed and kava exchanged’ (Malvatumauri 1983: Article 7a, Section 3). Local communities in

³⁷ To commemorate the naming of Malvatumauri, members undertook a *kastom* ceremony: on 27 April 1977 in front of the Parliament Building, at that time located on the main street of Port Vila, the chiefs ‘laid a stone with commemorative wording on it and sanctified both it and the name by killing a pig’ (Bolton 1999: 9).

different regions exercise distinct evaluative criteria when selecting a *jif*. In some areas leadership adopted a ‘big man’ prototype, while in other locales there were neither chiefs nor graded societies. For some districts the concept of the *jif* became a construct of post-European contact, and in other hamlets church delegates appropriated the role of traditional leader. In all cases however, the *jif* was regarded as an ultimate conciliator whose knowledge, wisdom and mediation were fundamental to sustained community harmony and amicable dispute resolution.

NATIONAL SYMBOLS

As a young sovereign state it was necessary for the incumbent government to mediate the tropes of tradition and modernity when developing notions of ni-Vanuatu national identity. By way of representational symbols a new visual language for the expression of independent selfhood emerged. Robert Foster (1997: 1) suggests that ‘nationalism in post-colonial Melanesia largely takes shape as state functionaries try to nationalize state structures rather than as collections of “peoples” try to create or seize structures as their own.’ In a milieu of cultural, linguistic and sectarian heterogeneity the project of nation building entailed the ‘self-conscious production and dissemination of national consciousness and sentiment’ (Foster 1997: 3). To overcome the legacies of divisive colonial rule, political elites and local intelligentsia enacted ‘structures associated and linked by a historically entrenched and validated discursive form’ (LiPuma 1997: 35). The founding of the Malvatumauri and the evolution of the NHCC from expatriate organisation to indigenous institution, alongside the establishment of parliamentary offices and government agencies, attests to the dual paradigms of the state. Consequently, by way of distinct national symbols, the VP decisively positioned Vanuatu amid a world of polities – the creation and circulation of particular motifs and emblems enacted claims of collective identity. Raymond Firth (1973: 54) notes that, ‘The meaning of symbols ultimately developed into that of a concrete indication of abstract values.’ The VP made use of *kastom* symbols to visually promote tradition, culture and heritage. The local specificity of representational forms enabled a plethora of meaning to be conveyed to disparate tribal, village and island groups. Edward LiPuma (1997: 52) argues that the production of national identity is, in part, ‘the ways that the nation leans to appropriate and appreciate art ... this means the emergence of new art forms or, more precisely, social relations to art.’ Therefore, the VP utilised stylised icons as vehicles for the construction of shared memories and social cohesion

based upon uniquely indigenous values, norms, ideals and achievements. As an actively produced cultural category, the conceptualisation of the ‘nation’ has been considered as ‘imagined’ (Anderson 2006), ‘invented’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and ‘imposed’ (Gellner 1983). However, despite the methods by which collective ideologies may be enacted they are communicated without ‘falsehood or spuriousness’ (Foster 1997: 5), whether based on political rhetoric, canonical values or primordial suppositions.

Official paraphernalia, such as national flags and coats of arms, represents characteristics deemed by governments as demonstrating collective unity and identity. Karen Cerulo (1993: 244) argues that these emblems ‘serve as modern totems ... signs that bear a special relationship to the nations they represent, distinguishing them from one another and reaffirming their identity boundaries.’ In the months immediately preceding independence, leaders of the VP issued an open call for designs that would become symbols of the newly formed sovereign state (Sethy Regenvanu, personal communication, 30 May 2014). A national flag, created by Malon Kalontas and officially adopted on 13 February 1980, became ‘observable by numbers of people at once [and] a prime vehicle for conveying attitudes toward a social unit of which one is a member’ (Firth 1973: 342). Kalontas, working within the colour schema specified by Lini and the parliamentary selection committee (that being, red, green, black and yellow) was inspired by the geographical configuration of the archipelago (Fig. 2). In explaining his composition, Kalontas notes that, ‘At school I learned that my country was shaped as a “Y” ... so I drew a “Y”’ (as quoted in Bolton 2003a: 73). Positioned along the horizontal axis of the flag, the yellow hue of the motif signifies the light of the gospel shining throughout the islands of the nation, thus uniting the values of *kastom* and Christianity in national rhetoric. The surrounding black fimbriation and triangular block of colour at the hoist side of the flag represents the people of the islands and their prideful Melanesian heritage. The red upper half of the design symbolises the blood spilled in the struggle for independence, and the lower green half the lush vegetation and fertility of the land.

The inclusion of two powerful motifs of *kastom* – crossed *namele* leaves (*Cycas* spp.) and a circular boar’s tusk – complete the design.³⁸ Each icon, instantly recognisable within the community, exemplifies an instance when ‘the producer and the

³⁸ The *namele* is a seed plant that has a stout and woody trunk with a crown of large, stiff, evergreen leaves.

consumer of the art broadly shared the same set of values and interpretations of the symbolic image created' (Firth 1973: 40). The crossed *namele* leaves here represent peace, while the circular boar's tusk denotes power and wealth.³⁹ In Vanuatu pigs have long held tremendous cultural value, to both men and women. The political, social and economic capital of the animal lays in the fact that 'Leadership – the status of *bigman* – is achieved through the accumulation of pigs, whose ceremonial sacrifice is a means, particularly in the northern and central islands, to ascending a progressive scale of chieftainship' (Miles 1997: 158). The most prized boars are not those with the largest girth, but rather, those with the most developed tusks. The greater the unimpeded round-turn of the lower teeth the more valuable the resultant tusks, with the cultivation of a tusk that has twice or thrice encircled itself, although extremely rare, being the ultimate attainment.⁴⁰ In the subsistence societies of Vanuatu the ownership of pigs is a powerful medium by which social standing is measured. The animal not only serves in grade-taking ceremonies (after which the tusks are often worn as a pendent or bracelet, as an outward sign of rank), but also acts as a form of 'sacred currency' (Huffman 2008: 22) for the payment of bride price, fines, dispute reconciliation and rights to ritual knowledge.

National ideologies were further reinstated by the country's official crest (Fig. 3). The figure of a chief, clothed in a *nambas* (penis sheath), wears body adornments that signify precolonial male authority and holds a traditionally crafted spear. He is flanked by crossed *namele* leaves and encircled by a rounded pig's tusk while standing atop a woven pandanus mat inscribed with the national motto *Long God Yumi Stanap* (In God We Stand). The elements of the design each represent the importance of land and agriculture to the functions of the country. Given that 'mats are the products of women's labour and women are the producers and managers of [the] agricultural economy' (Whyte 1990: 27), the emblem demonstrates national unity by pairing traditional icons of male and female *kastom*. The rendering, created by Richard Fraser (an Australian expatriate in Port Vila at the time of independence), is an adaptation of the lithograph *Man and Woman of Vate or Sandwich Island*. The original drawing was

³⁹ Crossed *namele* leaves possess a dual meaning in Vanuatu. While, as in the example of the flag, the motif is a symbol of peace, in other circumstances such as land disputes, two crossed leaves indicate the presence of *tabu*. In such instances the crossed *namele* leaves act as a marker of land that must not be accessed.

⁴⁰ To achieve circular tusk growth the pig's upper teeth are removed to allow the lower canines space in which to grow. The animal is then carefully nurtured and reared by hand, a protracted task undertaken over many years, so as to avoid damage to, or breakage of, the curved tusks.

published in the private journal of John Erskine, senior officer on HMS *Havannah*, in which he documented his tour of the region in 1849 (see Erskine 1853: illustration to face page 332).⁴¹ In discussing his modification of the original image, Fraser explains that, '[t]he illustration represents a young ni-Vanuatu chief ... standing firmly on the land. This is the dawn of their enlightenment ... [they] have no fear as the chief will protect them from the unknown forces from across the water' (as quoted in Macdonald-Milne and Thomas 1981: i). Through a process of transference, whereby an 'object created or selected by one person as a symbol is identified by other persons as having the same meaning' (Firth 1973: 40), the coat of arms acts as a token that legitimises the authority of the Malvatumauri and unites disparate island groups by way of an easily recognisable shared generic idiom.

CONTEMPORARY ART

It is against this socio-political backdrop that indigenous contemporary art emerges. Prior to the years immediately leading up to independence, the production and exhibition of modern art had been exclusively dominated by expatriates in Port Vila. Since the early 1960s Nicolai Michoutouchkine and Aloï Pilioko had exerted significant control over the local art scene.⁴² Michoutouchkine (a Russian émigré) and Pilioko (an Islander from Wallis and Futuna) met in New Caledonia shortly after the former opened the country's first art gallery in 1959 (Regenvanu 1996a: 309). A partnership between the two artists quickly developed, with Michoutouchkine adopting the roles of mentor, benefactor and publicist. In 1961 the pair migrated to Port Vila. Pilioko recounts, 'We were originally invited to Vanuatu by the French Government during the time of the Condominium. We came from Wallis and Futuna to hold an exhibition. Some people saw our exhibition and bought our work. After that we decided to stay here and open a foundation' (interview 27 January 2013).⁴³ Between 1961 and 1967 the two travelled the Pacific, displaying their paintings and artefact collection throughout the region and, in 1977, they established the Michoutouchkine-Pilioko Foundation and the Centre for the Preservation of Artistic Values in the Pacific in Esnaar, a community on the

⁴¹ Erskine does not directly attribute this lithograph, or others contained within his journal, to a particular artist. He does note that 'For illustrations ... I am indebted to Mr. Kempster Knapp, Naval Instructor, and Dr. Henry Hume Turnbull, Surgeon, of the *Havannah*, and particularly to my friend Captain Richard Alworthy Oliver, lately commanding H.M. sloop *Fly* on the Australian station' (Erskine 1853: 4).

⁴² Michoutouchkine passed away in Nouméa, New Caledonia on 2 May 2010, at the age of 80.

⁴³ The exhibition was held at the NHCC from 26 August to 6 September 1961.

outskirts of Port Vila (Fig. 4). Here, both artists extended their practices – Michoutouchkine producing figuratively realist canvases and Pilioko creating colourful tapestries and paintings that extolled long-held European preconceptions of the exoticism of the Pacific region.

Michoutouchkine and Pilioko have often been credited as champions of indigenous contemporary art, regarded as central protagonists in developments occurring in the New Hebrides. In truth however, two distinct facts show the opposite to be true. Firstly, the personal relationship between the two men, as life partners, was perceived as an affront to Christian morality – a strong element of the highly conservative norms that had come to typify islander society in the late 1970s. Huffman, recollecting the relationship between the two artists and the local community, perceives that gender and sexuality came to be intrinsically linked to the contemporary art movement (personal communication, 14 September 2012). The inference that a correlation existed between art production and homosexuality proved unacceptable to ni-Vanuatu values. As a result, contemporary visual expression was not accepted, appreciated nor embraced by islanders in Port Vila. Secondly, Michoutouchkine in particular, along with other Francophone expatriate artists such as Robert Tatin, Henri Crocq and Victoria Martinoff, monopolised the local market, exploiting the social isolation of ni-Vanuatu from wealthy New Zealand, Australian and European settlers as a means of controlling the display and sale of works of art. Although regional workshops convened by the University of the South Pacific were held in Esnaar, the participation and involvement of ni-Vanuatu was minimal.⁴⁴ During conversations with older artists at cafes and *nakamals* (kava bars) in Port Vila, Michoutouchkine's ruthless business acumen and fierce competitiveness became apparent. In one story about an incident some years ago, it was recounted that a local carver had displayed a sign marketing his wares in a prominent roadside location next to a banner belonging to the Foundation. It is alleged that Michoutouchkine was so incensed that he damaged and removed the offending advertisement *from se hemi wantam kantrol nomo* (because he wanted total control).

The situation was to change however, with the first public solo exhibition of indigenous contemporary art held by Emmanuel Watt at his studio located at Devil's

⁴⁴ The first workshop was held at Esnaar in 1985 and included artists from Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu and Wallis and Futuna (see Regenvanu 1996a: 310).

Point, an outer seafront suburb of Port Vila, in 1978. A self-taught carver, Watt began his art practice in 1975, and since that time has been a leading figure of the contemporary art movement in Port Vila. Watt, who identifies with his matrilineal lineage from the island of Ambae, takes the natural products of the landscape as his materials. Fallen tree branches and coconuts, along with coral, shells and driftwood are transformed into striking sculptures and elegant jewellery. With minimal intervention, he manipulates the existing forms of his reclaimed media to produce works of art that reflect the Melanesian environment from which they emerge. Previously unpublished photographs of the exhibition reveal the layout of the display (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). Against one wall of the long, narrow space stand benches covered with crimson tablecloths, atop of which sit ornamental pieces of black and white coral, decorative shells and aureate wooden forms. From the ceiling hang bulbous creations, while the far end of the room is dominated by a large free-standing sculpture. Having collected and transformed each natural element, Watt explains that the rationale for the exhibition was to demonstrate ‘the delicate relationship that exists between man and the landscape’ (interview, 9 February 2013, author’s translation). By all accounts the display was well received by ni-Vanuatu and expatriates alike, thus establishing the artist as a forerunner of the indigenous art movement. Watt’s long service and commitment to the arts has been officially recognised, and he is the recipient of the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (Medal of Arts and Letters) from the French Government, and the Medal of General Service from the Government of Vanuatu.

The success of Watt’s exhibition greatly encouraged many other ni-Vanuatu who held an interest in art, particularly a group of young students enrolled at the Institut National de Technologie du Vanuatu (INTV) in Port Vila.⁴⁵ Established in 1970 by the French Government, INTV was integral to the education system implemented by the colonial administration. In 1979 two French instructors, Jacqui Bourdain and Henri Thailade, were offered contracts of employment by the Condominium and arrived at the school to assume teaching positions in the newly created art department. With little knowledge of local customs or traditions, the two men met with Huffman to seek his guidance and expertise (Huffman, personal communication, 14 September 2012). Initially Bourdain and Thailade had proposed that pupils would reproduce *kastom*

⁴⁵ In 2001, via an Act of Parliament (no. 24), INTV was re-established as the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (see Chapter 2).

artefacts held in the collections of the NHCC, in addition to being introduced to colonial media such as paint, cloth, crayons, paper and pencils. However, a strict regime of indigenous intellectual property rights (see Chapter 5) prevented the replication of particular objects, motifs and symbols by uninitiated individuals. Recognising that potential conflicts may arise, Huffman and Chief Willie Bongmatur Maldo (President of the Malvatumauri from 1977 until 1993) arranged for the two teachers to travel to North Ambrym, where a meeting was held with local chiefs to discuss the rules governing the production of works of art at INTV. The chiefs viewed the art school with suspicion, fearing that new forms of visual representation would devalue internal rituals and rites thereby reducing local conventions to mere folklore. Huffman describes the occasion as a ‘hard and heavy confrontation’ (personal communication, 14 September 2012) during which it was agreed that *kastom* may inspire contemporary works of art, but must not be directly copied or appropriated by students.

The first pupils to undertake art classes at INTV were Francophone ni-Vanuatu including Joseph John, Juliette Pita and the late Fidel Yoringmal (each discussed further in Chapter 3).⁴⁶ Ralph Regenvanu, former Director of the VKS, notes that, ‘With the increasing Westernization of the New Hebrides, this generation not only had access to paper and pencils, and sometimes crayons, paint and cloth, but also had greater access to European conceptions and visions of creative expression’ (Regenvanu 1996a: 311). Early works by John and Pita highlight the means by which emerging artists mediated the demands of the Malvatumauri. In her tapestry, woven with strands of colourful wool, Pita depicts two women tending to their garden, a domestic labour duty assigned to females (Fig. 7). Each figure wears an *aelan dres* (island dress) or ‘Mother Hubbard’, a garment introduced by missionaries that has come to be regarded as national attire and is the chosen apparel of many women today.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, in his acrylic on board, John renders a portrait of a village elder with a tobacco pipe in his mouth and walking stick in his hand (Fig. 8). The figurative style of both images is indicative of the aesthetic concerns and ideological preoccupations of the time. Rather than directly confront local sensibilities with radical forms of *avant-garde* representation (such as minimalism,

⁴⁶ Other students to join the course in 1980 included Jobo Lovo, Jean-Claude Touré and Andrew Tovovur.

⁴⁷ Bolton makes the point that historically, mission denomination was distinguished by different styles of introduced European clothing. She explains, ‘The Anglicans introduced blouses and skirts for women, a style that remained characteristic of women’s dress in the Anglican north until independence ... At the start of the twenty-first century Anglican women still wear t-shirts and skirts more commonly than dresses. The Presbyterians introduced dresses’ (Bolton 2003b: 129; see also Bolton 2005, 2007b).

expressionism or abstraction) the students took as their subject matter scenes of everyday island life, thereby resisting critiques and criticisms that might label their work subversive. By firmly locating their imagery within the discourses of commonly shared practices and experiences, the students' outputs sensitively introduced the idioms of colonial media and creative expression to sceptical indigenous audiences. The reliance upon easily identifiable motifs and themes also ensured that the works of art abided by the strict guidelines implemented by the chiefs – *kastom* acted as a source of inspiration but *tabu* knowledge and symbols were not rendered or encroached.

Interestingly, neither student signed the aforementioned works of art. Given the professional training undertaken by Bourdain and Thailade in France it seems reasonable to presume that they relayed the importance of the artist's signature to their pupils. A combination of two factors undoubtedly influenced the decisions made by Pita and John during the early years of their careers. Firstly, material objects of *kastom* were not specifically produced for public display and consumption. As Regenvanu explains, 'Traditionally art belongs to a certain family or tribe and is restricted by codes of ownership. The arts are not taken into the open unless it is for a public ceremony' (interview, 7 November 2012). The ritualistic use of objects such as masks, headdresses, totems and body adornments dictated that their functionality be prioritised above their aesthetic properties or value. While individual artisans were recognised by way of their rite to produce specific artefacts, identifiable markers of their hand (such as a signature) were not made visible. More often than not, after serving a singularly unilateral purpose, materialised spirit forms were discarded or destroyed as a means of nullifying their innate power. Huffman (2013: 34) notes that, 'vast, intangible spirit worlds, where the real art is in ritual endeavour, sacred dance, oratory and cultural *mise en scène*, are behind, or represented by, these objects. It is art with a real purpose, but the associated objects are usually minor (but essential) parts and are often only temporary.' The idea that such artefacts would be attributed to a particular creator and used as decoration in domestic spaces, as contemporary art is today, was abstruse to the sensibilities of local communities.

Secondly, constructs of *kastom* were diametrically opposed to the missionary project of education, termed *skul* in the lingua franca. The adversarial context of the two was apparent as early as 1914. Edward Jacomb (1914: 192), a lawyer based in Port Vila at the time, wrote

The instant branding of all native customs as bad merely repels the native ... If we wish to replace them by other and better customs, we must treat him sympathetically ... How can one convince him of the superiority of our customs unless one's knowledge is sufficient to enable one to contrast the two?

Rural hamlets on the island of Pentecost, for example, juxtaposed *kastom* and the way of the church with 'little sign of reconciliation ... or the synthesis of heathen and Christian elements' (Jolly 1982: 339). *Skul* was intrinsically linked to colonial institutions and ideologies: wage labour, Christian worship and formal education in French or English were conceptualised as Western idioms that negated indigenous traditions. As such, *kastom* and *skul* came 'to have very broad and powerful references to alternative ways of life' (Jolly 1982: 340). For the young art students at INTV the dichotomy between tradition and modernity is exemplified in their early works of art. As islanders sought to embrace *kastom* as both lived practice and political rhetoric, students such as John and Pita tentatively confronted the void between European-inspired ideals of advancement and deeply embedded codes of Melanesian spirituality.

Recognising the intricate nuances particular to indigenous ways of life, Bourdain and Thailade quickly sympathised with the ongoing independence movement. Their relationships with Huffman, the NHCC, the Malvatumauri and members of the VP ensured that the emerging artists under their tuition played a central role in the imminent celebrations. In 1979 at the behest of Sethy Regenvanu, on behalf of the incumbent government, the students were invited to paint a large mural on the façade of the then Parliament House (now the Ministry of Finance) located on the main street of Port Vila (Fig. 9). The fresco depicts men, women and children, all dressed in wonted attire, engaged in a diverse range of indigenous practices that pre-dated and survived colonial contact: everyday labours such as *kastom* food preparation, pig rearing and agricultural harvesting are depicted alongside more ritualistic activities including *sandroing* (sand drawing), *tamtam* (slit gong) carving, pig killing and pandanus mat weaving. Explaining the political motivation for commissioning the painting, Sethy Regenvanu recalls that

At that time the whole focus was on the impending independence. Everyone wanted to be a part of the movement and the excitement. The students contributed in many ways ... Given the importance of what they represented I felt that the government should do

something to enhance their work and to show the potential our country has. The artists were very young at the time of independence; they had real energy and enthusiasm (interview, 7 November 2012).

The significance of the mural, now a historical landmark, was twofold: not only were the structures of the new government visually linked to traditional community values and island practices in a way comprehensible to many illiterate locals residing in the capital, but contemporary art was also legitimated as artists were directly associated with the birth of the new nation.

By way of government support and sanctification, emerging modes of art were elevated in the minds of otherwise incredulous islanders. At a time of profound socio-political change, the introduction of new forms of visual expression coincided with the expansion of Port Vila as an urban centre for islanders with varied educational backgrounds and colonial affiliations. Sethy Regenvanu notes that

The positive impact of contemporary art was that it united the artists and the community more broadly. In Vanuatu we have the English speaking and we have the French speaking, and they are separate. Contemporary art brought us together. The artists' passion – which we all felt – was for the art, not language (interview, 7 November 2012).

Not only did contemporary art breach the divide between Anglophone and Francophone, it also subverted island separatism. The decision to decorate the exterior wall of the parliament building with a provincially neutral work of art, rather than a wooden *tamtam* or fern tree carving, regulated tribal claims of authority and ownership over the independent state. After signing the constitution of the new republic, members of the inaugural legislature were photographed in front of the mural. Explaining this decision, Regenvanu asserts that, 'contemporary art was out in the open and it was national ... we were now a nation not a society of tribal people. What was in Vanuatu belonged to everyone' (interview, 7 November 2012). The painting, then, linked the birth of the new nation with the emergence of new forms of visual representation.

The involvement of the students in preparations for the first National Arts Festival held in Port Vila in 1979 further reinforced the validity of their professional

endeavours.⁴⁸ Goodwin Ligo, an indigenous associate of the NHCC and colleague of Huffman, instigated and managed the staging of the event as a member of the Organising Committee. In an interview with Ligo at the office of the Vanuatu Daily Post newspaper, where he is now a senior journalist, he explained

In September 1978 I prepared a short paper and took it to the Chief Minister of the time – Father Walter Lini. I told him that for us to become independent people must value their cultural identity. I suggested that we organise a national arts festival as a forerunner to independence to show the world who we are; that we are Melanesian, to show our languages and cultures and arts. People were demanding independence based on what they believed in, who they were, where they were from, and the value of themselves, their culture (interview, 17 December 2012).

The eight-day festival (1 – 8 December, 1979) brought together over 2070 participants from throughout the archipelago, with more than 75 chiefly representatives in attendance (see New Hebrides National Arts Festival 1979: 10). Port Vila was transformed as 11 temporary ‘villages’ were erected to accommodate groups travelling from the outer islands of archipelago: Ambrym; Aniwa and Aneityum; Aoba (now Ambae); the Banks and Torres; Futuna; Malekula; Paama; Pentecost; Santo; the Shepherds; and, Tanna. Along with *kastom* dances, the performance of which opened the festival after the official procession, ceremony and speeches, a diverse array of indigenous practices were shared and celebrated. Traditional games, food preparation and house making demonstrations were programmed alongside poetry readings, musical acts (including bamboo flute, *tamtam* and shell playing), pottery making, carving, weaving, fire rubbing, sand drawing and kava preparation. The schedule of events also made provision for the public display of *kastom* business, including the methods by which marriages are agreed and chiefs installed.

The tasks carried out by the students were many and varied. They created official letterheads and graphics, painted signs and banners, and were responsible for the design of leaflets, brochures and posters (Goodwin Ligo, interview, 17 December 2012). Discussions with Huffman, Ligo and Regenvanu reveal that the most significant contribution made by the INTV pupils was the production of 49 carved wooden clubs

⁴⁸ Two subsequent National Arts Festivals have been held; the second in 1991 in Luganville, Espiritu Santo and the third in 2009 in Port Vila, Efate.

that were presented to luminaries at an official independence reception held during the festival. Ligo remembers that, ‘When Lini saw what the students were doing, we asked Bourdain if they could carve some special walking sticks that would then be given to visiting dignitaries’ (interview, 17 December 2012). Each of these gifts was a copy of the club collected by Captain Cook at Port Sandwich on the island of Malekula (then known as Mallicollo) during his second voyage in July 1774, the original of which is now housed in the collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford (1888.1.1466).⁴⁹ The replica clubs, one of which was donated to the VKS in 1981 (K.972), were carved of dense wood and, like the original, possessed janus-faced heads with highly conventionalised features and knobs below the grip decorated by way of incised lines (Fig. 10 and Fig. 11). With permission to carve the facsimiles approved by the appropriate chiefs, the clubs became significant material embodiments of the transference of political sovereignty from the dominant Condominium administration to the indigenous community.

In his planning for the festival, Ligo was inspired by the writings of Albert Wendt, a Samoan-born poet, author and academic who advocated for the solidarity, resilience and self-determination of colonised regions of the Pacific. In his seminal essay *Towards a New Oceania* he asserts that, ‘we must rediscover and reaffirm our faith in the vitality of our past, our cultures, our dead, so that we may develop our own unique eyes, voices, muscles, and imagination’ (1976: 51). Wendt championed the role of the arts to inspire and foster cultural reawakening, arguing for the revival of unique traditions particular to each country of the Pacific as a means of dismantling the legacies of colonialism. He claims that, ‘Self-expression is a prerequisite of self-respect’ (1976: 58) and that by way of locally derived forms of creativity ‘our identities / self-respect / and pride are taking us through a genuine decolonisation’ (1976: 60). Consequently, Ligo notes that he ‘realised that we had to embrace and expose our Melanesian beliefs and values if we were to truly become independent’ (interview, 17 December 2012). The arts festival provided a context in which regional difference could be publically affirmed and celebrated. Islanders shared otherwise unknown practices with one another, reflecting the multiplicity of *kastom* when attached to *ples*.

⁴⁹ The actual island origin of the club is disputed: collection database records from the Pitt Rivers Museum show that the club has been attributed to carvers from the island of Tanna, while the National Museum of Vanuatu collection database registers the club as being from the island of Ambrym. Visual comparison with sketches made by Speiser (1991: plate 57.19) suggests that the club is most likely from Ambrym.

In this milieu, the site of contemporary art was firmly linked to the urban setting as *taon* (town / Port Vila) emerged as a hotbed of progressive indigenous ideals, ideologies and institutions.

CONCLUSION

During the years immediately following independence, Vanuatu experienced a period of relative political stability and parliamentary cohesion. The VP successfully contested the 1983 and 1987 elections, with Lini holding the position of Prime Minister until 1991. Succeeded by the Union des Partis Moderés (Union of Moderate Parties) who retained power until 1998, the VP was again returned to the leadership by way of an official election. The prevailing years however, have been marked by bureaucratic fluctuation and volatility. Since 2002, three public ballots have seen the balance of power lay with the VP (2002 and 2008) and the People's Progressive Party (2012). Despite this, petitions to the Court of Appeal, motions of no confidence, factional infighting, floor crossings and leadership coups have resulted in the inauguration of no less than 11 unelected politicians to the office of the Prime Minister during this ten-year period. Commenting on ni-Vanuatu political practices, Van Trease (2009: 2) explains that

Party loyalties, particularly since the commencement of coalition politics in 1991, have become extraordinarily fickle, with MPs being willing to regularly switch allegiances in search of personal advantage. Connected to this, governing coalitions tend to be exceptionally fragile and brittle and regular 'no confidence' challenges have diminished the ability of successive governments to focus on lawmaking.

The competitive nature of elections, which are now characterised by a demand that members of the electorate remain loyal to familial candidates, typifies the country's fractured political landscape. With accusations of corruption, bribery and nepotism regularly cast against prominent leaders, the project of effective national governance has been elusive.

As a result, the parliamentary support afforded to contemporary artists at the time of independence has inevitably waned. While the government once fostered inclusive socio-economic circumstances that encouraged creative productivity, legislative priorities of the day have significantly shifted. As Sethy Regenvanu

observes, ‘There is no government support now unfortunately. The lack of support is due to a combination of factors – there are other issues that the government feels it must address and there is no one in the government with an interest in art’ (interview, 7 November 2012). The ascendancy of concerns relating to land ownership, economic management, infrastructure and international relations (particularly negotiations relating to foreign aid from countries such as Australia) have come to occupy present political discourses. The development of a contemporary artworld in Port Vila has therefore largely been effected by local agents engaged in the production of such objects. As discussed further in the following chapter, practitioners have predominantly remained self-reliant in their achievement of local recognition. Against a backdrop of, at times, cultural and political turbulence, local artists have navigated the tropes of *kastom* in a continually changing urban context.

CHAPTER 2

THE CONTEMPORARY ARTWORLD

This chapter introduces the corpus of contemporary artists in Port Vila who form the basis of this study.⁵⁰ In doing so, the intricate local circumstances in which practitioners learn their trades, establish professional reputations and exhibit their wares are explored. Rather than simply describe the indigenous ‘artworld’ (Becker 1982; Danto 1964; Dickie 1974), this chapter presents a micro-level analysis of the individuals, objects and institutions that collectively constitute sites of creative expression. George Dickie (1984: 80) argues that, ‘An artist is a person who participates with understanding in the making of a work of art ... What the artist understands is the general idea of art and the particular idea of the medium he is working with.’ Consequently, this chapter examines both the actions and intentions of painters and sculptors to reveal particular socio-economic factors that drive artistic production in the capital. Howard Becker (1982: 59) suggests that, ‘Artists learn other conventions – professional culture – in the course of training and as they participate in the day-to-day activities of the artworld. Only people who participate regularly in those activities, practicing professionals ... know that culture.’ By adopting a concentrated focus on indigenous artists in Port Vila this chapter highlights a plethora of intertwined social relations and synergies between heterogeneous agents. These connections denote an environment in which actors ‘coordinate the activities by which work is produced by referring to a body of conventional understandings embodied in common practice’ (Becker 1982: 34). Naturally, different components of the artworld influence each another. This chapter thus critiques art associations, programmes of education and distribution systems in Port Vila as a means of contextualising the people, products and places that constitute the artworld at any given time.

PORT VILA

To best understand the contemporary artworld it is here necessary to discuss Port Vila, locally referred to as *taon* (town). Located on the shores of Vila Bay, the town is

⁵⁰ See Appendix 2 for a concise overview of artists included in this thesis. Information provides: artist name; date of birth (and death); island affiliation; association membership; dates of activity.

surrounded by five peri-urban villages: Erakor, Ifira, Mele, Mele-Maat and Pango.⁵¹ From humble beginnings as an outpost for French coconut planters and traders in the late 19th century, Port Vila grew as a site of colonial administration with the founding of the Condominium. This expansion, however, was a decidedly *waetman* affair. As Greg Rawlings (1999: 73) notes, ‘there was no indigenous history of urbanisation, no native cities or towns.’ The movement of Islanders was heavily restricted and access to town extended only to individuals undertaking waged labour. A joint regulation issued in 1918 stipulated that unemployed locals from islands other than Efate who were without employment for 15 days or more be returned to their home villages (see Bedford 1973: 55-56). Resultantly, early patterns of migration between the islands and town were circular. Men travelled to Port Vila for the purpose of work and, in doing so, acquired commodities and money that were ‘used to enhance or extend kin and exchange relations’ (Mitchell 2003: 360) once back in their village. Six decades later the independence movement, coupled with the establishment of the New Hebrides as a tax haven in 1971, profoundly altered these imposed travel constraints. The influx of foreign investment resulted in exponential population increases in the capital, both indigenous and expatriate. As international banks and hotels opened premises in Port Vila, airlines and cruise ship operators increased services. The growth of the hospitality and tourism industries, along with the expansion of bureaucratic agencies and offices, presented greater employment opportunities for Islanders than ever before.

With the founding of the nation state came further rapid urbanisation. The increased mobility afforded to ni-Vanuatu significantly altered the demographics of town as a new generation moved to the capital. In his assessment of the developing urban landscape, made just five years after independence, Joël Bonnemaïson (1985: 144) comments that ‘town is seen as a place of freedom and a symbol of modernity; the cultural charge it carries is enough to ensure its magnetism.’ Young men and women travelled from their islands with the intention of finding work: males sought employment in the construction and gardening industries, while females filled roles as housekeepers, secretaries and waitresses. As a result, new spatial, temporal and social practices emerged. People sought to make Port Vila their place of residence as town

⁵¹ While traditional land owners live in the villages of Erakor, Ifira, Mele and Pango, the situation is somewhat different in Mele-Maat. Islanders from Ambrym were invited to settle on the land in 1952 after a volcanic eruption destroyed many of their home communities (see Rawlings 1999: 75; Tonkinson 1968, 1985).

came to be seen as a postcolonial space ‘of work, entertainment, and goods and services’ (Rawlings 1999: 84). Data collected during successive national census surveys testifies to the accelerated speed with which Port Vila has grown: in 1999 the population was recorded as being 29,356, with this number increasing by 50% to 44,040 in 2009 (Port Vila Municipal Council).

The consequences of this trend, however, have greatly impacted upon current living conditions. Continued inter-island migration has resulted in significant pressure being placed on limited resources in Port Vila. The rate of unemployment, particularly among young people, is high as ‘there are not enough jobs available to keep pace with population growth’ (Mitchell 2003: 361). Consequently, many families are unable to afford established homes and instead live in crowded settlements that are a typical feature of town. A report commissioned by the World Bank suggests that 69.5% of land in the capital is currently under lease (Scott, Stefanova, Naupa and Vurobaravu 2012: 2), thus alluding to the confined living arrangements faced by many disempowered residents.⁵² In stark contrast to the expansive properties occupied by expatriates, daily life in these local communities is far from ideal. Access to basic services and infrastructure such as water, electricity, sanitation and good roads is limited or, in some areas, non-existent. Insecure tenancy agreements and the price of building materials mean that dwellings are commonly constructed using affordable goods that are easily transportable such as sheets of corrugated iron, tarpaulins, calico and naturally occurring substances including clay, rocks and tree branches. Added to this, the cost of living in Port Vila is inflated: rents, amenities, school fees and other household expenses are main preoccupations for many families. Without access to green space in which to tend gardens locals instead consume imported goods including white rice and tinned tuna that are ‘approximately 50% more expensive than what they are in developed countries of the region, like Australia and New Zealand’ (Wittersheim 2011: 325). The centrality of consumption to the experience of town has, in part, contributed to rises in crime and violence – theft and burglary are commonplace, instances of domestic violence and rape are increasing and murder is occasionally committed.

⁵² Under the terms of the Constitution perpetual land rights were restored to traditional owners at the time of independence, with the rules of *kastom* governing ownership and use (see Government of the Republic of Vanuatu 1979, Sections 73-75). Land throughout the country is therefore leased, normally for a term of 75 years, rather than sold.

Within the urban environment there is also an emerging ni-Vanuatu middle class, an economic group to which many contemporary artists in Port Vila belong. Benedicta Rousseau (2004: 112) argues that, ‘Middle-class status is more likely to be attained by those resident in Vila for longest, leading to an equation between recent migration, poverty and dependence.’ Since the early 1980s town has been home to a significant number of practitioners meaning that many have established comparatively comfortable lifestyles in the capital. While each maker consulted during the course of this research expressed an avid desire that ‘artist’ be their full-time occupation, the vast majority hold other positions of waged employment: some work with different government departments, others for expatriate-owned commercial enterprises and a few own small businesses or are self-employed. The income generated from paid labour has resulted in artists having the financial means to lease land and occupy sturdily built cement homes in areas of more affluent suburbs such as Malapoa, Nambatu and Seaside – sites in which ni-Vanuatu and expatriate residents live side-by-side. Importantly, these funds also provide practitioners with the necessary cash to purchase art materials including imported canvas, paint and brushes. The unseen costs of participating in the local artworld, both financial and temporal, no doubt influences the number of artists in Port Vila.

ART ASSOCIATIONS

The vast majority of contemporary makers in Port Vila are members of either the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association (hereafter Nawita) or the Red Wave Vanuatu Arts Association (hereafter Nawita and Red Wave, respectively). While other groups have formed for the purpose of promoting artistic outputs from specific islands, for example Naino (Erromango), the Tuburin Association (Ambrym) and the Mataso Printmakers Collective (Mataso), Nawita and Red Wave negate such regional separatism. Affiliation with either association is a vital means by which artists disseminate their creative outputs. Given that there are no dedicated dealers or gallerists of contemporary ni-Vanuatu art in Port Vila, the symbolic capital afforded to these objects is largely mediated by the two autonomous organisations. While the acts of painting, drawing and sculpting are individual pursuits, artists rely upon the cooperative networks provided by the associations to advocate the efficacy of contemporary art among local audiences.

Throughout Vanuatu group affiliation is championed over individual identity. For this reason, socio-economic prosperity is discreetly achieved so overt attention is not drawn to oneself. Rousseau (2004: 224) notes that, 'With the emergence of a higher level of economic differentiation amongst the ni-Vanuatu population in Port Vila, jealousy can arise from success in terms of business and employment.' With this in mind, artists join Nawita or Red Wave as membership provides protection against claims of narcissistic egotism. Chief Ambong Thompson, Head of the National Film and Sound Unit at VKS, highlights the role assumed by each association. He explains that, 'Artists are reluctant to promote themselves ... In Vanuatu it is rare for people to promote themselves as individuals, and you often need the community or an association to represent you. Artists are shy, so by working in a group they can insert themselves into the public interest' (interview, 17 October 2012). By way of collective agency, Nawita and Red Wave provide the infrastructure necessary for artists to distribute their works of art, seek further opportunities and establish professional reputations, in Vanuatu and abroad.

Nawita, the oldest of the associations, was officially established in 1989, two years after a preliminary meeting was called by prominent ni-Vanuatu artists and their French supporters, amid growing dissatisfaction with the lack of exposure afforded to indigenous practitioners.⁵³ Since the 1960s the market in Port Vila had been dominated by expatriate artists, particularly Pilioko and Michoutouchkine. Their outputs had been promoted internationally as representing contemporary visual culture particular to the archipelago. However, as ni-Vanuatu artists were becoming 'more aware of the very tenuous nature of their individual careers' (Regenvanu 1997: 312), they sought to create an organisation that would support, encourage and promote their work while also organising conference, exhibition and workshop opportunities (Nawita Contemporary Arts Association 1996: 1). Thus, Nawita affirmed 'membership open to expatriate and ni-Vanuatu alike, the only condition of membership being that the association was for contemporary artists, and not for artists and artisans using traditional media and traditional principles in visual expression' (Regenvanu 1997: 312). The logo of the organisation testifies to these objectives – an octopus (from which the word *nawita* is derived in Bislama) is depicted holding a tool related to the different material and

⁵³ The meeting was attended by Sylvester Bulesa, Michael Busai, Patrice Cujo, John Fai, Joseph John, Sero Kuautonga, Hardy Leo, Juliette Pita, Emmanuel Watt and Fidel Yoringmal (Regenvanu 1997: 312).

techniques adopted by contemporary artists: paintbrushes, hammers, chisels, knives, pens and pencils (Fig. 12).

The influence of external agents, however, diverted the broad appeal of the organisation. Although the association sought to negate individual divisions based on religion, island lineage, colonial language and education, age, gender and socio-political status to connect artists in a milieu of shared cultural heritage, the involvement of French expatriates in Port Vila problematised the political neutrality of the organisation. The input of Suzanne Bastien (a long-time French expatriate and founder of the local gallery L'Atelier) and Patrice Cujo (a Paris-based artist who regularly visited the archipelago) into the affairs of the association resulted in Nawita adopting a particularly French disposition. With Emmanuel Watt elected inaugural President and a constitution drafted in French in 1996, Nawita has for many years been considered by Anglophone artists as an organisation decidedly biased to the demands of ni-Vanuatu practitioners educated under the French colonial administration. This is reflected today in the membership of the association with over three-quarters of Nawita members identifying as Francophone.⁵⁴ For example, Sero Kuautonga, President of Nawita since 2001, heads a family of prominent artists from the island of Futuna, including his son Alvaro Kuautonga and his nephews Nikiyatu Kuautonga and Taitu Kuautonga. Similarly, Chief Jobo Lovo leads a powerful kin network of related artists from Erromango consisting of his sister Juliette Pita and her daughter Amelia Lovo, brother John Lovo, and nephews Ben Natum and Cyrus Nivwo.⁵⁵

Both Lovo and Kuautonga credit extensions of their art practices and ideologies to a shared three-month residency undertaken in Basel in 1997. At the behest of Roger Boulay and Christian Kaufmann a travelling exhibition toured the VKS, the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris, the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, and the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Nouméa.⁵⁶ The rationale for the project was twofold. In Vanuatu and New Caledonia, where the display was entitled *Spirit blong bubu i kam bak* (*The Spirits of the Ancestors Return*), objects selected for

⁵⁴ Sero Kuautonga estimates that Nawita has approximately 20 members in total, with some artists presently residing on the outer islands (interview, 11 October 2012). Similarly, a number of artists, such as Sylvester Bulesa, Nikiyatu Kuautonga, Hardy Leo, David Nahling and Ralph Regenvanu remain affiliated with the association despite not currently engaging in the active production of art.

⁵⁵ Chief Jobo Lovo is often referred to as Moses Jobo or Moses Jobo Lovo. During discussions with the artist he indicated his preference for the name Jobo Lovo.

⁵⁶ At this time Roger Boulay was Curator at the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie and Christian Kaufmann was Curator at the Museum der Kulturen.

inclusion were ‘to help reinforce cultural identity or to help spark off or maintain cultural reawakening or “revival”’ (Huffman 1996d: 2). In Europe, under the name *Arts of Vanuatu*, the exhibition presented material culture to museum audiences unfamiliar with the rich heritage of the archipelago. To complement the inclusion of artefacts collected by Swiss anthropologist Felix Speiser, during his expedition to the region from 1910 to 1912 (see Speiser 1990), an affiliate exhibition was staged, *Spirit blong tedei (The Spirit of Today)*, comprising a selection of paintings by Nawita artists to complete ‘the full circle of the exhibition concept demonstrating that the art of Vanuatu is still alive and its future seems to be much assured’ (Deterts 1997: 15). As participants in the associated artist-in-residence programme, Kuautonga and Lovo were presented with the opportunity to engage in cross-cultural discourses pertaining to the creation of contemporary works of art.

Since the mid 1990s Kuautonga has interrogated abstract expressionism, a style with which he first became familiar during a visit to France in 1994. His artistic skills were recognised at an early age whilst he was a pupil at the Catholic mission primary school in Ipau Village, Futuna. As a means of extending his talents, Kuautonga transferred to the regional district school on Tanna where he completed his junior studies, after which he undertook his secondary school education at the Lycée de Antoine de Bougainville in Port Vila during the 1970s. While in Basel he was further exposed to paintings that exemplify the post 1940s American avant-garde movement. He notes that he ‘was inspired by abstract art [as] another form of expression. People in Vanuatu prefer more realistic art; they would like to see a painting of a ship or an aeroplane instead of something different. I was the first artist to introduce abstract art to the country’ (interview, 11 October 2012, author’s translation). In his role as President of Nawita, Kuautonga encourages innovation and experimentation in the art practice of other members of the association. He analogises Nawita as being symbolic of a keyhole and contemporary art a key, both of which open the door to new forms of visual representation that extend indigenous conceptions of the relationship between tradition and modernity, the local and the global.

The contradictory characteristics of two of the three tribes of his home island Futuna – the *Namruke* and the *Kawiameta* – further influence his practice. He explains that, ‘Abstract art is an existing art in our culture. On my island there are two ways of talking ... there is the direct language and also the abstract language. This abstract language I change into painting. If we are wise then we can understand the abstract

language (interview, 11 October 2012, author's translation). While the *Kawiameta* are considered direct communicators, the *Namruke* are conceived as speaking in riddles and parables. Fellow Futunese artist, Eric Natuoivi (discussed below) affirms Kuautonga's assertion, explaining that, 'if the *Kawiameta* say they are going to have a feast and kill ten pigs then this is what will happen – they will kill ten pigs. If the *Namruke* say they are going to have a feast and kill ten pigs it means that they will kill twenty, or even thirty, pigs' (interview, 21 November 2013). For many centuries marriage between the tribes was forbidden, for fear that *tabu* secrets and knowledge would be shared with the opposing group. As customary restrictions eased and marital unions between the tribes became a common occurrence, a third group emerged on the island: the *Fana*. Children born to parents of inter-tribal marriage (that being, a mother from the *Namruke* and a father from the *Kawiameta*, or vice-versa) are positioned as mediators, given their familiarity with the behaviours of both groups, thus assuming categorisation as *Fana*. This supposition informs Kuautonga's practice as he maintains that 'wisdom informs the comprehension of abstract language and abstract art' (interview, 11 October 2012, author's translation).

For Lovo, by way of comparison, the residency in Basel ignited interest in traditional forms of indigenous material culture no longer made on his home island of Erromango. Introduced to Clarence B. Humphreys' book *The Southern New Hebrides*, published in 1926, Lovo sought to revive the lost tradition of barkcloth production (known throughout Vanuatu as *tapa*).⁵⁷ Many of his early works were comprised of oil, acrylic and pencil on canvas, board and paper. He explains that while 'in Basel I was able to see many different types of art and I began to understand how I could combine the traditional and the contemporary in my work' (interview, 2 October 2013, author's translation). Prior to the missionisation of Erromango by Hugh Angus Robertson between 1872 and 1913, the production, circulation and exchange of *tapa* made from the bark of the *bura*o (breadfruit or *Artocarpus altilis*) tree was a prevalent feature of social and ceremonial life.⁵⁸ The versatile material served several utilitarian functions, being used as blankets, mats for sleeping, fabric for clothing and slings for infants (Naupa 2011: 53-54). More significant however, was the use of *tapa* in important public

⁵⁷ While *tapa* is known throughout Vanuatu its production and use only occurs on Erromango.

⁵⁸ Neich and Pendergrast (2005: 119) note that during the early years of World War II shipping routes to the Pacific were disrupted and the importation of fabric and cloth halted, thus necessitating a temporary revival of *tapa* production.

rituals. The motifs painted onto tapa during these occasions were mediated by ‘strict social prohibitions [that] affect the sharing of knowledge of specific clan designs and their associated narratives’ (Carrillo-Huffman and Nemban 2010: 91). Given that the iconography adorning stylised tapa referenced ancestral spirits, clan and status identity, traditional land custodianship and indigenous structures of political power, missionaries such as Robertson sought to systematically erode its potency within the highly stratified regimes of sociality particular to the inhabitants of Erromango. The introduction of calico, coupled with manipulated acts of trade by which Robertson accumulated objects of tapa from the local community, resulted in the eventual erosion of its manufacture and use on the island.

Upon returning to Vanuatu after his time in Basel, Lovo requested the counsel of his elders on Erromango with regard to the methods of tapa production and decoration (*nemasitse*, literally meaning ‘beaten cloth’, as it is known in the Sy language of the island). In collaboration with his father and grandfather, Lovo researched and documented the ‘traditional *kastom* dress’ of his paternal ancestors (interview, 1 October 2012, author’s translation). Consequently, his corpus now includes tapa made from the bark of one of three trees: the whitewood tree (*Endospermum medullosum*); the breadfruit tree (*Artocarpus altilis*); or, the banyan tree (*Ficus macrocarpa*), with each species producing cloth of a different colour. To these supports Jobo applies only organic pigments: pure yellow is derived from the ground bark of the noni tree (*Morinda citrifolia*); red and brown from the burnt bark ashes of the noni tree; black from the roots of the kauri tree (*Agathis macrophylla*); and, white from limestone. Firmly positing his work within the lineage of his clan, Lovo notes that

My ancestors made traditional art and used the patterns of Erromango. I use these same patterns in my art to show that life continues; it does not have an end ... I use tradition but twist it slightly to find new ways to tell my stories. I mix the traditional and the contemporary in my works of art (interview, 2 October 2013, author’s translation).

By way of combining *kastom* knowledge of the techniques of tapa manufacture and natural pigment extraction with iconographic symbols of his heritage, Lovo has innovatively developed a distinct visual repertoire that interrogates indigenous experiences of contemporaneity in Vanuatu.

Recognising the fragility of orally transmitted knowledge Lovo and his sister formed Naino, an organisation for the exclusive membership of artists and artisans from Erromango who are committed to the protection and advancement of material culture from the island in all its forms. Along with acrylic and oil paintings on canvas and board, the group promulgates the traditions of tapa, weaving, body adornment and performance. Lovo and Pita credit their artistic skills to their late paternal grandfather who was a *fan lou nussian* (paramount chief in the Sy language) from southern Erromango and held responsibility for the composition of intangible heritage, such as *kastom* songs, dances and stories. In celebration of the family's creativity capacities, and to promote the cultural renaissance and resistance of their kin network, Lovo and Pita established the collective in memory of their grandfather. Lovo explains that, 'My family have art and creativity in our blood – it comes from our grandfather. The younger generations of my family are also born of this blood and have these skills' (interview, 1 October 2012, author's translation). Thus, he and Pita feel keenly obliged to impart genealogically protected knowledge to their own children, along with the offspring of their immediate siblings.

This is particularly true for Pita. She, as the only established female contemporary artist in the country, carries with her locally constructed gender stereotypes particular to ni-Vanuatu society, which often serve to disempower and subordinate women. As Roselyn Tor and Anthea Toka (2004: 11) note, 'Currently in Vanuatu, there is a significant marginalization of women from pertinent discussions and decisions on area of social and economic development, governance and human rights at community and national levels.' The pervasive perception that female responsibilities lie in the realm of domesticity – the rearing of children, maintenance of households, tending to gardens and actualisation of spousal ambitions – situates art as an occupation best suited to male practitioners. For Pita, then, the obtrusions of societal norms have mitigated the circumstances of her creative outputs. She notes that, 'I have been very strong and promoted the value of my practice so people will appreciate the work that I do ... I work everyday to create paintings for sale so that I can sustain an income' (interview, 28 September 2012, author's translation). As one of the few artists in Port Vila to make a living solely from the sale of her art, Pita's corpus oscillates between labour intensive paintings, tapa and tapestries to small-scale, easily transportable drawings on canvas, paper and parchment that are directly aimed at the tourist market, a

key driver of the local economy and one of the fastest growing industries in relation to gross domestic product.

Not all Nawita members however, dedicate themselves principally to the practice of art. For some, the financial obligations of residing in Port Vila necessitate that their artistic pursuits remain secondary to gainful employment in the cash economy. For example, Chief Michael Busai from Matangi village on Futuna, balances his creative pursuits alongside his professional duties as an employee of the Ministry of Finance. Primarily a self-taught artist Busai, one of Nawita's few Anglophone members, credits the writings of Albert Wendt to the development of his practice. Just as Goodwin Ligo embraced Wendt's philosophical stance when planning the First National Art Festivals in 1979, so too does Busai enact the author's conviction that Pacific communities have, 'A fabulous treasure house of traditional motifs, themes, styles, material which we can use in contemporary forms to express our uniqueness, identity, pain, joy, and our own visions of Oceania and earth' (Wendt 1976: 58). Having received limited art tuition during his time as a secondary school student at Malapoa College, he was familiar with stylistic principles such as proportion, scale and perspective. During the early years of his visual art practice, while studying for a Bachelor of Arts at the University of the South Pacific, Busai concluded that fine art 'must be original, creative, aesthetic and expressive ... it must be made by hand not a machine as it must have a moving spirit' (interview, 21 December 2012). Much like Lovo, Busai experimented with natural pigments including coral, limestone and black rock found on the ocean floor. He explains his use of these materials in relation to the affinity between the Futunese and the sea, as a source of nourishment, a resting place for the spirits of the ancestors and a geographic element connecting the peoples of Oceania (interview, 28 November 2013). Today, Busai's preferred mediums are pencil, ink, pastel and gouache on paper or parchment which he works in line formation with limited colour palettes to invoke *matau*, a Futunese term that conceptualises the harmonious components of an expression, action or event.

For younger Nawita members, such as Alvaro Kuautonga, Taitu Kuautonga and Andrew Ulus, an intensive six-month workshop jointly organised by Nawita and the VKS in 2002 provided technical training, materials and studio space during the

formative years of their artistic careers.⁵⁹ Led by French artist Julie Dupré (now represented by Anuanua Galerie d'Art based in Ra'iatea, French Polynesia) the workshop was co-funded by the governments of France and New Zealand. Participants received tuition in the techniques of carving, clay modelling, drawing, fabric design, painting, weaving and wood-block printing in an environment of creative support and exchange that cumulated in a public exhibition of their outputs. In addition, under the guidance Ralph Regenvanu, then Director of VKS, the participants produced visual material including banners, posters, logos and letterheads for the Second Melanesian Arts Festival, held in Port Vila the same year as the workshop. For the three artists, the workshop and their exposure to international practitioners by way of the Festival, proved the inspiration for their practices. Each continues to create works of art that examine issues such as identity, colonialism and globalisation in a variety of media, such as x-ray film (Fig. 13), coconut shell (Fig. 14), sand and kava (Fig. 15).

The kin relationships between Sero Kuautonga, his son (Alvaro) and his nephew (Taitu) heightened a disgruntled perception of nepotism among other artists with regard to the management and administration of Nawita. While, over the years, the association had established links with international organisations by which artists were invited to participate in overseas exhibitions and workshops, the allocation of opportunities was often viewed as biased. In 1995, works of art by Eric Natuoivi, Juliette Pita and Emmanuel Watt were displayed in the group exhibition *Contemporary Art of Melanesia* at the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Nouméa. Also in the same year Michael Busai, Joseph John (discussed below), Sero Kuautonga, Jonah Mael, Eric Natuoivi, Juliette Pita, Ralph Regenvanu and Emmanuel Watt showed their outputs in *Contemporary Arts of the South Pacific* held at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. In 1999, the first exhibition solely dedicated to ni-Vanuatu art was staged by the VKS in conjunction with Nawita. *New Traditions: Contemporary Art of Vanuatu*, a two-year travelling exhibition, contained the work of ten local artists, each of whom was commissioned to create an object that responded to a specific period of the nation's history, along with twenty traditional artefacts from different islands of the

⁵⁹ The workshop was attended by 14 male and 6 female ni-Vanuatu participants: Lisa Abong, Lonsdale Coppage, Denis Falau, Bill Fatapa, Niki Jimmy, Rachel Jimmy, Matthew Jimmy, James Johns, Maria Kaltabang, Alvaro Kuautonga, Dimitri Kuautonga, Taitu Kuautonga, Kami Malwersets, Roger Marmolon, Sharon Mera, Jero Nango, Christopher Paul, Madlen Tah, Nettie Tah and Andrew Ulus.

archipelago.⁶⁰ The cohesively self-reliant structure of Nawita thus provided sole representation for indigenous artists who may not otherwise easily access opportunities to extend their visual practices. Amidst a sense of powerless disillusionment some artists, both Anglophone and Francophone, began to speculate about the need for an alternative means of exposure.

Consequently, Red Wave was established in Port Vila in 2005 by Jean Claude Touré, a Francophone painter from the island of Ambae. For two years, from 2000 to 2002, Touré had been an artist-in-residence at the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture (hereafter the Oceania Centre) at the University of the South Pacific's Fiji campus.⁶¹ It was here that he was introduced to Dr Epeli Hau'ofa, the founder and then Director of the Oceania Centre, who governed the institution with the purpose of providing a place in which artists had the freedom to 'express themselves ... [and] innovate' (as quoted in Thomas 2012: 130). The Oceania Centre was an open space of participative learning. Hau'ofa did not teach a timetable of classes in fine art, but rather encouraged artists to draw upon their own, and each other's, 'internal strengths and inspirations' (Higgins 2008: 1). Having been unaware of the project implemented by Hau'ofa prior to his arrival in Suva, Touré was sceptical about the legitimacy of a centre for contemporary art. After his first visit to the university he readily accepted an invitation to base his practice at the campus. Joining other artists such as Ben Fong, Mason Lee and Lingikoni Vaka'uta, Touré became a member of the Red Wave Collective. Here, he commenced work in the environment of a communal studio space, much removed from the solitary conditions familiar to artists in Port Vila, and it was this experience that altered his preconceived notions of art. By way of engagement with the visual expressions of other practitioners at the Oceania Centre, Touré became aware of progressive painting styles that were to inform his corpus. He notes, 'Prior to this I had been working in the realistic style. It was while I was at the Centre that I was inspired to create a new style of art' (interview, 22 October 2012, author's translation). Having developed a deep affinity with the aesthetic ideologies and teaching methods championed by Hau'ofa (see Hau'ofa 2008; Thomas 2012), Touré became a mentor

⁶⁰ The participating artists were: Sylvester Bulesa, Michael Busai, Joseph John, Sero Kuautonga, Jobo Lovo, Eric Natuoivi, Aloï Pilioko, Juliette Pita, Ralph Regenvanu, and Emmanuel Watt. The exhibition was initially mounted at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and then travelled to Australia, New Caledonia and New Zealand (see Regenvanu 1999b).

⁶¹ The Oceanic Centre for Arts and Culture opened 1 February 1997 (Hau'ofa 2008: 83).

during his time at the Centre, providing guidance and support to newly arriving students and artists.

After returning to Port Vila Touré sought to actualise an art space similar to that of the Oceania Centre, with provisions for visual artists, theatre performers, dancers and musicians. However, a shortage of funds prevented the construction of an appropriate building so instead Touré founded Red Wave, an organisation that could function without the necessity of a business premises. Modelled upon the association of which he had been a member in Suva, Touré applied the name 'Red Wave' in Vanuatu to acknowledge that

A new wave has come out of the sea. Unlike a blue or a white wave, the red wave symbolises a new kind of contemporary art that is emerging in the Pacific region. The art made by members of the association is different to other types of art anywhere in the world and will be recognised internationally as coming from our region (interview 22 October 2012, author's translation).

This is reflected in the logo of the association whereby the handle of a paintbrush, its bristles dripping white pigment, is entwined within the peak of a red wave (Fig. 16). With a strong mandate to equally share opportunities, encourage the talents of emerging artists and provide an alternative to Nawita as a platform for exposure, the appeal of Red Wave actualised a shifting of associate affiliations.

In his capacity as President, Touré encouraged a number of established artists to join Red Wave. As a prelude to the establishment of the association, a group of core artists including Matthew Abbock, David Ambong, Eric Natuoivi, Roy Thompson and Andrew Tovovur (all Nawita members at the time) participated in a woodblock print-making workshop in 2001 that was organised by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Office for the Pacific States. The programme, Artists in Development: A Unique Workshop, provided instruction to artists with regard to the manufacture of paper, construction of woodblocks and the operation of a printing press. The course was sponsored by the Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD) and instructed by New Zealand based artists

Chris Delany and Michel Tuffery.⁶² In all, 18 artists from 12 countries participated in the workshop held in Port Vila.⁶³ Mali Voi, UNESCO Cultural Advisor to the Pacific, noted at the time of the workshop that

We need to explore ways to empower young people to participate fully in the life of their communities. Academic subjects will always be essential if we are to participate in the modern world, but equally important for Pacific peoples are those skills which enable them to explore their inner creativity (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation 2001: n.p).

During the workshop artists were shown methods to harvest and construct fibres from locally available resources such as banana stems, sugarcane leaves and grass to make durable paper. Each participant was encouraged to develop their own language of cultural expression and, eleven years later in 2012, the five ni-Vanuatu attendees continue to produce high quality paper upon which they print woodblock images, paint and draw. The medium is synonymous now with Red Wave in Port Vila and acts as a material signifier of allegiance to the association, as no Nawita members are schooled in the art of papermaking.

Alongside printmaking, Eric Natuoivi from Matangi village, Futuna, also incorporates clay (imported from Australia or New Zealand) in his corpus, thus making him the only ceramicist in Port Vila.⁶⁴ The themes of his work, beginning in the late 1970s, oscillate between the re-telling of *kastom* stories and the inquisition of contemporary socio-political issues affecting the lives of ni-Vanuatu. Natuoivi is the only indigenous artist to have attained international academic qualifications in the subject of fine art, completing a Graduate Diploma in Expressive and Performing Arts in 1987 and a Master of Education in Creative Art in 1991, both at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. Inspired by the work of Papua New Guinean potter Mary

⁶² Chris Delany is a Rainer Arnhold Fellow who works with communities in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to develop livelihoods for indigenous artists and artisans, while Michel Tuffery is a New Zealand based visual artist of Samoan, Cook Island and Tahitian descent.

⁶³ Other artists that attended the workshop were: Jason Napa from the Cook Islands, Lauretta Ah Sam from Fiji, Berenato Buatia from Kiribati, Josephine Dame and Charlene Funaki from Nauru, Moline Smaserui from Palau, Johannes Gelag from Papua New Guinea, Angas Falelua Saili from Samoa, Ralph Ako and Alido Pita from the Solomon Islands, Lisa Havea and Tekitau Fifita from Tonga, and Tenene Nelu from Tuvalu.

⁶⁴ Experimentation with local clay has proven ineffective for Eric's use: clay from the Banks Islands experiences shrinkage, while clay from Malekula crumbles after the firing process despite the addition of grog.

Gole, who blends traditional and modern pot-making techniques to craft vessels that champion the role of women in Melanesian society, Natuoivi creates hand-made coiled pots that are bisque or saw-dust fired to achieve varying textural and colour finishes. He locates his practice within the historical traditions of local Lapita and Wusi pottery. Located on the southwest coast of the island of Espiritu Santo, the village of Wusi has long been the only site in the archipelago synonymous with the continued production of knee-moulded, red-slipped earthenware. Women work with unsifted clay to create deep bowls that are decorated with incised designs and fired in the cinders of burnt bamboo. Sherds of similar pottery have been uncovered in archaeological sites on other northern and central islands of the archipelago, suggesting ‘a time depth of at least several thousand years’ (Shutler 1971: 81). As such, Natuoivi intentionally steeps his contemporary creations within the frameworks of national cultural heritage, history and materiality.

Natuoivi is the sole Red Wave member from Futuna. Unlike the Kuautonga and Lovo clans that comprise the majority of Nawita members, Natuoivi’s kin do not actively participate in the creation of contemporary visual culture. While Kuautonga is also from Futuna and Busai from the same village, Natuoivi elected to break ties with his island *wontok* (companions) and joined Red Wave upon its establishment. Rather than operate in a climate of animosity and malignity, the existence of two artist associations is regarded by practitioners as a stimulus for the production of new and engaging art. Kuautonga notes, ‘it is good that we now have two associations, it creates competition and increases the quality of our work’ (personal communication, 19 November 2012). Despite their different artistic affiliations Kuautonga and Natuoivi remain strongly committed to, and bound by, the heritage of their home island, as is evidenced by their engagement with the Futuna Cultural Association. Natuoivi explains, ‘We have an internal island association that is set up to promote different aspects of life on Futuna. There is a main body and then there are subgroups. Sero and I have been appointed by the Board to look after the arts of our community’ (interview, 1 October 2012). Therefore, the pair are jointly responsible for the promotion and protection of artistic and performative heritage from the island, including visual art, weaving, dance, song and storytelling.

For Joseph John, the only contemporary artist from the Shepherds Islands, the professional relationship he shares with Natuoivi (as discussed below) was a determining factor in his decision to join Red Wave. As one of the founding members

of Nawita he explains his resolve, noting that ‘I was with Nawita, but I have now joined Red Wave. When something does not change it becomes mundane and you must move on’ (interview, 10 October 2012). John’s corpus is characterised by watercolour, acrylic and oil paintings that explore the intricate relationship between man and nature. His pictures juxtapose traditional ways of living with introduced concepts of Western modernity, to highlight the fragility of cultural heritage, local ecosystems and *kastom* knowledge. As one of the first artists to have held a solo exhibition in Port Vila (at the VKS in 1984) John’s narratives have been in the public domain for many years, in both visual art and book illustration format. He has produced images for publications including *Nambanga Pikinini*, *Nana Coco petite sorcière de la Grande-Terre et la vieille Dame* and *Legends of Ambrym*, while also creating visual material for pamphlets and brochures distributed by organisations such as Save the Children, the Department of Women’s Affairs and the National Council of Women. Consequently, John’s work is readily identifiable by local audiences, as are the messages embodied in his many allegorical representations.

The appeal of Red Wave for other artists lay in the very diversity of members’ island genealogy. Given that Red Wave currently comprises nine members from seven different islands, the equal distribution of power, opportunity and information is construed as more democratic than Nawita. However, geographical lineage remains an important marker of identity and allegiance for some mid-career practitioners. For example, Matthew Abbock, David Ambong and Tony Bruce – all from the Malampa province of Vanuatu – are the only dedicated contemporary artists from their home islands.⁶⁵ Abbock (from the island of Paama), Ambong (from the island of Malekula) and Bruce (from the island of Ambrym) rescinded their Nawita memberships to join Red Wave in an act of solidarity. Of his decision to migrate to Red Wave, Abbock comments,

I joined Nawita as it was the only association in existence at the time [during the late 1990s]. It was important for me to join so I could begin to publically display my paintings. Joining Nawita affirmed that I was a professional artist ... Some artists, though, promote their kin ahead of other artists in the community, so opportunities are limited for artists that do not have public exposure ... David and I are both from

⁶⁵ Chief Johanin Bangdor is also from the island of Ambrym; however his art practice alternates between the production of contemporary art and traditional carvings (as further discussed below).

Malampa and we joined Red Wave when Jean Claude returned from Fiji so that we might have greater access to more opportunities (interview, 5 November 2013, author's translation).

While not related to one another in any capacity other than friendship, Abbock, Ambong and Bruce consolidated their individual positions based upon territorial ancestry and provincial patrimony. The common bond of regional camaraderie was a driving factor in the decision made by each artist to join Red Wave.

Abbock and Ambong, both self-taught artists, work primarily with acrylic paints and canvas. While each is proficient in the techniques of paper-making and woodblock printing, extenuating circumstances dictate that their practices focus on painting. Abbock explains, 'We are restricted with regard to making woodblock prints. The press is at the art school at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology and the Principal has decided that only staff and students can access the machine so we are not making works on paper at this time' (interview, 5 November 2013, author's translation). Like many artists in Port Vila, Abbock and Ambong are constrained by the limited accessibility of art materials. There are no dedicated stores from which to purchase high-quality brushes, paints, supports and other essential items, and imported substandard merchandise often retails at inflated prices. Ambong explains the preference for acrylic paint amongst ni-Vanuatu practitioners, noting that 'it is better suited to the humid environmental conditions in Vanuatu, and it is what is affordable and available to us. When working with oil paint you must have the correct chemicals to clean and care for brushes. This is both expensive and time consuming, but acrylic paint does not require this' (interview, 29 October 2012, author's translation). Consequently, a significant proportion of local art resembles the materiality of high-modernism as paint on canvas, ink on paper, and ceramic forms dominate the visual landscape. Artists, whether members of Red Wave or Nawita, do not create works of art using photographic or new media digital technologies as cameras and computers are luxury items, affordable only to an elite few.

The relative isolation of Vanuatu hinders the easy transportation of goods across the expanse of the Pacific Ocean. By way of creative agency other Red Wave artists have developed 'their own innovative materials over a period of time, creating a body of conventions peculiar to their own work' (Becker 1982: 64). For example, Bruce makes use of natural resources that are locally available to him thus negating his

dependence on external suppliers. Crediting his artistic skills to his paternal grandfather he has, since 2000, created intricate carvings from the nuts of the natangora tree (*Metroxylon warburghii*). Having learnt the techniques of wood carving from his uncle, Bruce attended a workshop sponsored by the Fonds pour le Pacifique Sud (FPS) that focused on the plethora of uses for the natangora nut. His miniature creations alternate between depictions of *kastom* stories and legends in three-dimensional form and the representation of marine and earth creatures that inhabit the lands and oceans of Vanuatu. Depending upon the narrative of his work, Bruce utilises Indian ink to exaggerate the details of his highly polished surfaces. Of his *modus operandi*, he explains 'I adopt one of two methods when I carve the natangora nut. Sometimes I create a picture in my mind, similar to a silhouette. Other times I look at the shape and size of the nut and this directs the picture I produce - I am inspired by the properties of each nut' (interview, 26 October 2010, author's translation). The materiality of Bruce's outputs distinguishes him from other artists in the Port Vila artworld, as he is the sole practitioner to utilise the natangora nut in his corpus.

Much as regional alliance influenced the decisions of Abbock, Ambong and Bruce, so did island heritage persuade other artists to join Red Wave. The dominance of Lovo and Pita within Nawita proved a decisive factor for other artists from Erromango. Andrew Tovovur and Roy Thompson, along with his nephew David William, revoked their Nawita memberships as a means of circumventing assumed inequity and partisanship based upon traditional tribal lineages and kin relationships. Nonetheless, over the years Tovovur has secured a number of commissions that have resulted in highly visible public murals. From panoramas for utility companies and commercial service providers (Fig. 17), to scenes for restaurants (Fig. 18) and guesthouses (Fig. 19), the distinctive style of his imagery is immediately discernible in an urban landscape that, more and more, has come to be dominated by repetitive advertising billboards. As a graduate of the art course of INTV, Tovovur has long been a central personality within the local artworld. Having trained in a variety of media, today his practice centres upon the production of paintings and drawings on supports including paper, canvas and tapa.

The encouragement and guidance offered by such professionally established members of Red Wave to emerging artists also altered the organisational affiliation of some young practitioners. William, for example, states that

I was a member of Nawita, but I did not feel that they provided me with as equal an opportunity as some of the other artists. David Ambong, a friend and mentor, was a member of Red Wave. He encouraged me to join their association as any opportunities are more fairly shared between members. My uncle [Roy Thompson] was a member too. I feel joining Red Wave was best for my career (interview, 19 November 2012, author's translation).

Of note is the fact that several prominent Red Wave members such as John, Natuoivi and Thompson hold positions of employment in the art education sector.⁶⁶ The occupational training of youth with an interest in art is a key premise upon which the Red Wave constitution is based. Thompson points out that he, and other Red Wave members, 'encourage young artists to join us. Nawita tends to push them out or neglect them, but they have talent. By having another Association we are able to encourage the next generation of artists' (interview, 6 November 2012). Such sentiments are echoed by Natuoivi who, for many young people, provides practical tuition and pragmatic guidance when he notes, 'we encourage our members to make work even when there is not an upcoming exhibition. To be an artist means that making work is an everyday practice' (interview, 1 October 2012). By way of education, whether formal or informal, artists and educators share 'Knowledge of professional culture ... [that] defines a group of practicing professionals who use certain conventions to go about their artistic business' (Becker 1982: 63). Thus, by way of collective consciousness, the cultural category of contemporary art is validated, maintained and reproduced.

The respective ideologies of Nawita and Red Wave ensure that both associations are firmly entrenched within the functions of the local artworld. However, over recent years less active groups have emerged; either by way of indigenous agency or expatriate influence. Of the former category is the Tuburin Association (hereafter Tuburin). Founded by Chief Johanin Bangdor in 2008, to coincide with an exhibition of his carvings at the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, the administrative functions of

⁶⁶ For some artists the desire to educate young painters and sculptors is hampered by the realities of everyday urban life. There are few artists who have the financial means to dedicate themselves solely to the practice of art, while occupational opportunities in the field of contemporary visual culture are limited. For example, Jean Claude Touré explains, 'I was a teacher at VIT [Vanuatu Institute of Technology]. I taught the module that covered contemporary art. I resigned from my position because I was on the payroll of the government, so my salary was low and the regularity of my payments was unreliable ... I am saddened that I am not in a position to be able to teach the youth and children but I must make a living and earn enough money to be able to support my family, especially given the high costs of living in Port Vila' (interview 22 October 2012, author's translation).

Tuburin are managed in Nouméa by French artist and collaborator Marc Faucompré (interview 5 February 2013).⁶⁷ Bangdor, from the village of Melbera in north Ambrym, is the son of a high chief. His father, Gilbert, having reached the level of *Mweleun* (Bangdor, Faucompré, Rossignol and Wittersheim 2009: 53) within the *Maghe* (male graded society of the region), was a prolific carver renowned for his skills and abilities in the mediums of wood and tree fern. Having followed a similar path, Bangdor too has achieved three *kastom* titles that permit his production of restricted carvings based upon the acquisition of entitled *tabu* knowledge and chiefly status. Prior to 2000, he concentrated his efforts upon the creation of ritualised objects such as *tamtams* (slit gongs) and *namange* (spirit figures). It was only after joining the Vanuatu delegation in attendance at the Pacific Arts Festival held in Nouméa in 2000 that Bangdor's practice evolved. He notes

In 2000 I attended the Pacific Arts Festival that was held in Nouméa. This gave me the opportunity to look at the work of artists from many other Pacific countries. It was at this time that I was inspired to start creating new forms. My creativity was enacted. Up until then I was only making traditional work, but after attending the Festival my mind was opened. I am very thankful I was given the opportunity to participate – it gave me a new way of seeing, and inspired me to create new types of carvings. It was an awakening for me as an artist (interview 5 February 2013, author's translation).

With encouragement from long-time friend and fellow artist Joseph John, Bangdor expanded his visual repertoire to include new motifs that appropriated the stylistic elements of traditional carvings from his island.

The distinct character and incisive narrative content of his resultant forms were in diametric contrast to the outputs of other men from Ambrym working within the confines of established representational systems. Consequently, conflicting ideological and aesthetic articulations acted as a vehicle for the establishment of Tuburin, with Bangdor assuming the role of sole member. He explains

I started the association as a way to protect the *kastoms* of Ambrym and to promote our stories. I wanted other carvers from my island to realise that we could create new things, but the men wanted to continue to make only traditional objects. That is why I started my own association. I used to work with other men from Ambrym but now I

⁶⁷ The exhibition followed a month long residency undertaken by the artist at the institution.

have different ideas so no longer collaborate with them. There are men who carve only in the traditional style and do not like the contemporary art that I make (interview, 5 February 2013, author's translation).

The hybridity of Bangdor's carvings exemplifies the extension of his practice. When once he created forms specific to the hierarchical conventions of male achievement, today his practice is inspired by *kastom* stories and oral traditions of Ambrym that are accessible to uninitiated audiences. The bilingual publication *Légendes d'Ambrym contées par le sculpteur Johanin Bangdor / Legends of Ambrym Related by the Sculptor Johnanin Bangdor* (2009) highlights the inclusive framework within which Bangdor operates. The book contains eight narratives, each of which is accompanied by a photograph of the artist's correlating sculpture, along with illustrations produced by John. From the *Barkolkol* creation myth to the memorialisation of Captain James Cook's voyage to the archipelago, the text catalogues previously unpublished indigenous stories particular to the communities of Ambrym. Bangdor notes that, 'It was important to me that the book be published in French and English, the two official languages of Vanuatu, so that the younger generations will learn our stories and not forget the history of our island' (interview 5 February 2013, author's translation). Firmly positing his practice within the legacies of indigenous heritage, Bangdor utilises his practice as a means of visually conveying the purpose and authority of Tuburin.

By way of comparison is the Mataso Printmakers Collective (hereafter Mataso Collective), the least formalised of the groups in Port Vila. With no binding constitution, leadership structure or membership criterion, the Mataso Collective is more a cursory crew than an official association. Under the impetus of Carl Amneus, a Swedish expatriate living in the capital, discussion about forming the group first began in 2004. Comprised of youth (in the ni-Vanuatu sense of the word, that being 16 – 30 year olds) from the Mataso satellite community located in the Port Vila suburb of Ohlen, the faction originally consisted of one female and five male members: Eddy Bule, Saires Kalo, David Kolin, Herveline Lité, Sepa Seule and Simeon Simix. The relative proximity of Mataso to Efate, with approximately 45 kilometers separating the two, has afforded ease of travel between the two islands. Over the years, as permanent migration from one locale to the other increased, the Mataso population in Port Vila has doubled that of the island (Sherkin 1999: viii). As a result, a generation of youngsters have been born and raised in the urban environment of the capital, carrying with them

connotations of displacement and marginalization from their traditional *ples*. With this in mind, Amneus' initiative can be viewed as an effort to engage with, what some would perceive as, disenfranchised youth. Recalling the formation of the group, Simix explains, 'I was working as a gardener for Carl. I did not have any experience with art. Carl wanted to do something to help us earn money and suggested that we start drawing. When Carl decided to start the project he asked me to invite other interested youth, especially those who were unemployed' (interview, 15 January 2013, author's translation).

With no formal art training the youth relied upon the guidance of Newell Harry, an Australian-born artist of South African-Mauritian descent. At the invitation of Amneus, and with the support of Chief Jack Siviu Martau (a young neighbourhood leader, brother to Simix and husband of Lit  ), Harry conducted a series of printmaking workshops beginning in September 2004. Simix notes that, 'Newell encouraged us to draw from our imagination and to use our local arts as inspiration. After we made the drawings Newell selected the ones that he liked best to be printed' (interview, 15 January 2013, author's translation). The resultant pictures combined imagery inspired by island life (such as butterflies, turtles, fruit and kava) with icons of urban culture (including advertising slogans, consumer goods and reggae music). A selection of nine images, under the aggregate title *The Bebellic Print Portfolio*, were included in the group exhibition *News From Islands* curated by Aaron Seeto for the Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, in 2007 (1 September – 28 October).⁶⁸ As a result, the Mataso Collective came to international attention and editions of the portfolio were available for purchase, each printed from silkscreens crafted by Tom Goulder at Duck Print Fine Art in Port Kembla.⁶⁹ In 2009 images produced by the six core practitioners, along with those of new members Stanley Firiam and Priscilla Thomas, were included in the 6th *Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane (5 December 2009 – 5 April 2010). Initially composed on a sheet of transparent acetate, each support acted as a stencil in the printing process. The workshop participants produced designs that were subsequently transferred to mesh screens and printed in Australia, this time by Theo Tremblay (Burnett 2009: np).

⁶⁸ The exhibition included three prints by Kalo, two prints by Simex, and one print each by Bule, Kolin, Lit   and Seule – all prints were dated 2007.

⁶⁹ As testament to the appeal of the portfolio, an edition of prints was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia in 2010.

While the inclusion of prints by the Mataso Collective in both exhibitions exposed the group to foreign audiences, the circumstances surrounding each commission highlight the prevalence of unequal power relations, expatriate dominance and market manipulations. Over the years Amneus and Harry opted to work independently of the VKS, Nawita and Red Wave, much to the chagrin of each organisation. The youth, therefore, were afforded no indigenous advocacy, protection or advice. Each maker was paid a nominal one-off fee of 40,000 vatu (£240) for their designs (Simeon Simix, interview, 18 January 2013), yet commercial dealers in Australia continue to profit from the sale of the *Bebellic Portfolio*.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, promises of attendance at events and functions in conjunction with the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art were unfulfilled, as were assurances of further workshops and training opportunities (Simeon Simix, interview 18 January 2013). It is not surprising then, that members of the group have grown despondent given their vulnerability to external exploitation. Without access to the materials and technology required to produce the prints for which they have become renowned, none of the youth have exclusively concentrated on the extension of their art practices.⁷¹

The international traction achieved by the Mataso Collective when compared to that of Nawita and Red Wave has kindled tensions in the capital. Members of the group are disparaged by some senior artists given their invisibility within, and lack of contribution to, the local artworld. Therefore, this gives credence to a central question: what is it to be a *tru* (true) contemporary artist in Port Vila? Sero Kuautonga insists that

To be an artist you have to realise that money is important but not so important that you value it above your art. You have to put your practice before financial gain because this is what you love doing. It doesn't matter if you are making money from your paintings or not because your choice is to make art. We must not pretend to be artists (interview, 11 October 2012).

⁷⁰ Duck Print Fine Art sell a boxed set of 9 artists' proofs for AUD\$4,000 (£1,900) (Tom Goulder, personal communication, 29 January 2013), while the Aboriginal Art Network, Sydney, sell individual prints from the portfolio for AUD\$600 (£285) (Aboriginal Art Network website). It is noteworthy that the youth were not provided with a copy of each of their final prints.

⁷¹ A recent exhibition, *Awis – Artis blong Vanuatu*, first mounted at Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane (10 June – 4 July 2015) then displayed at the University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery (9 July – 15 August 2015) contained 25 prints by seven youth, under the name Awis Artists (three prints each by Stanley Firiam, David Kolin, Herveline Lité, Sepa Seule, Patrick Tomas and Apia Willie, and seven prints by Simeon Simex). The inkjet prints were marked as Edition 45, dated 2014 and retailed for AUD\$550 (£260) each. Exhibition organisers stated that proceeds from any sales would be donated to disaster relief efforts following the devastation of Cyclone Pam, which struck the archipelago in March 2015.

The notion that the Mataso Collective produces prints solely for financial remuneration from international buyers dislocates the group's outputs from those of other practitioners. Linked to this is the sporadic schedule by which the youth work (as determined by external forces) lends weight to criticism of the group's engagement with, and beneficence to, indigenous mechanisms of cultural production and promotion. Having failed to first establish bounded artistic reputations within the immediate community, members of the Mataso Collective are perceived to have disregarded undocumented but nonetheless acknowledged, hierarchical codes of conduct. The youth are therefore subjugated – intimidated by the power structures that they have contravened and largely abandoned by their expatriate patrons, the group's relevance to artworld is all but abated.

ART EDUCATION

How then do aspiring artists ascend to legitimacy? For some, the opportunity to undertake formal education at the Vanuatu Institute of Technology (VIT), the only vocational training centre in the country, presents a means to enter the local artworld. Under the leadership of Principal Kalpat Kalbea and Vice-Principal of Academics Jack Graham Takalo, the institution strives to be a 'polytechnic institute' that provides a learning experience that focuses upon 'technology to maximise student potential and ensure that they are equipped to meet the challenges in their choice of further education or employment' (Vanuatu Institute of Technology website). Since 2005, VIT has encompassed a dedicated department of art led by Roy Thompson, thus offering graduates the award of a Higher Vocational Certificate in Fine Art upon the successful completion of two years of study.⁷² Having been invited by senior VIT staff to direct and instruct the art course, Thompson remembers that 'in the beginning there was no equipment or material with which to teach the students. I, along with other artists and educators based in Port Vila, came together to create the art department' (interview, 6 November 2012). Today the studio is divided into discreet sections that provide students with space to actively undertake their technical training. Thompson, along with his colleague Daniel Tamathuri (a Samoan / ni-Vanuatu artist), Natuoivi and Touré

⁷² In addition to the study of art, VIT offers twelve other courses: Accounting, Automotive Studies, Building and Construction, Business Studies, Electro-Technology Studies, Financial Management and Accountancy, Information Technology, General Mechanic Studies, Hospitality and Tourism, Joinery, Media and Journalism, and Office Administration.

compiled a comprehensive study module outline in 2009 to ensure that the two-year course ‘includes both theoretical and practical applications which provide opportunities for graduates either to seek employment or be self employed upon completion’ (Vanuatu Institute of Technology 2009: 2). To qualify for the Higher Vocational Certificate in Fine Art, students must complete 16 modules – four in painting, two in woodblock printing, two in drawing, two in fabric art, one in paper-making, four in carving and one in fibre art.⁷³

Noticeably, the instructive ideology adopted by Thompson and Tamathuri is dominated by a concerted preoccupation with realistic modes of representation, as is evidenced by an acrylic on canvas (Fig. 20) and watercolour (Fig. 21) by Francois Yoringmal (son of the late Fidel Yoringmal), a student during the 2012 academic year. Thompson maintains that the rendition of realistic images requires skills that supersede those necessary to produce other styles of art, arguing that ‘it is much easier to paint in the abstract style’ (interview 6 November 2012). Despite the teaching bias toward visual representation without artifice, students are permitted to engage with subject matter in their own unique styles. As such, works of art created by other students in 2012 ranged from graffiti-like canvases painted by Philimon Natato (Fig. 22) to Pop Art inspired mosaics made by Vatahe Ian (Fig. 23). In addition to applied skill sets, students receive instruction on the theories and movements of the history of art. Tamathuri distinguishes between the practical and theoretical of the course, explaining that ‘the students need a good knowledge of art theory as well as how to draw, paint, work with colour and create forms ... the students must be aware of the development of art history, theory and practice’ (interview 6 November 2012). Throughout their time at VIT, students are encouraged to engage with the patterns and symbols of *kastom*, challenge conventional standards and aesthetics, take inspiration from the stories and scenery of their home islands and evaluate their outputs within wider discourses of Western art history.

Admission to the art course can be difficult for many young ni-Vanuatu, given the restrictive entry prerequisites and financial burden of tuition fees. The minimum requirements for students applying to the Higher Vocational Certificate in Fine Art are

⁷³ The 16 modules that comprise the course are: painting – Introduction to Painting, Traditional Contemporary Art, Contemporary Art, Art Movement; woodblock printing – Key Block Printing, Colour Block Printing; drawing – Introduction to Drawing, Expressive Drawing; fabric art – Stencil Batik Printing, Silkscreen Printing; paper-making – Paper Making; carving – Introduction to Carving, Chip Carving, Relief Carving, Wildlife Carving; fibre arts – Weaving.

the attainment of the Junior Secondary School Certificate to a level of Year 10 and the possession of ‘some artistic background and interest in art’ (Vanuatu Institute of Technology 2005: 2). Given that by the age of 16 some 40% of students have withdrawn from the formal education system (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2009b: 17), many youth do not meet basic VIT stipulations for admittance to the art course. Moreover, tuition costs amount to 62,000 vatu (£440) per academic year, more than double the minimum monthly full-time wage of 30,000 vatu (£214). There are no scholarships available to students undertaking the Higher Vocational Certificate in Fine Art, thus the majority of students are reliant upon their parents and extended kin networks for financial support, fee remuneration and the costs of living in Vanuatu’s capital.

Similar obstacles present themselves to students pursuing either a Diploma in Primary Education (Teaching) or a Diploma in Secondary Education (Teaching) at the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education (VITE), under the instruction of John and Natuoivi.⁷⁴ The institution, originally named Kawena College, was opened by the British Resident Commissioner, Sir John Rennie and the Chief Education Officer, Freddie Fowler in 1962 (Page 1993: 16). Today, VITE offers training courses that accord with best practice in teacher education in the Pacific region and ‘produce teachers who strive for excellence and demonstrate a high level of professional conduct’ (Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education website). For many years courses at VITE have been taught in both the English and French languages, with disparate programmes informing the syllabus of each. Thus in 2009 VITE, in collaboration with the Department of Education, commenced a major process of reform entitled ‘Harmonisation’ – the purpose of which centred upon the restructure of the academic curriculum to ensure that Anglophone and Francophone students were assessed in identical ways, based on their performance in identical classroom environments that taught identical scholastic material. Len Garae, a ni-Vanuatu journalist, notes that Harmonisation has ‘at last erased the colonial mentality which was legalised by the British and the French colonial administrators ... it has successfully done away with this former colonial curse that continued to divide the people of this country’ (2012: 2). As such, the reconstructed schedules of study have resulted in ‘common course

⁷⁴ Degrees obtained in the French language are entitled: *Diplome d’Aptitude a l’Enseignement* and *Diplome d’Aptitude a l’Enseignement Secondaire*.

outlines, common assessment policies, common selection and entry procedures, common teacher practice procedures, and a common calendar' (Vanuatu Institute of Technology website).

With Natuoivi, Head of the Department of Physical Education, Art and Music, providing tuition to Anglophone students, and John moderating the classes of Francophone students, the Diploma courses necessitate three years of study. Natuoivi explains that 'in the arts programme we train upcoming primary and secondary school teachers to teach art as a subject in schools throughout Vanuatu' (interview, 1 October 2012).⁷⁵ Students in both the Primary Education and Secondary Education streams undertake 'Introduction to Visual Arts', a full-year subject that 'introduces basic visual art terminology, creativity, techniques, visual perspective and art appreciation' (Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education 2009: n.p.). During the second year of their studies, students completing the Diploma of Primary Education (Teaching) are required to undertake 'Two Dimensional Arts', in which they engage in theoretical and practical activities that demonstrate the principles of painting, drawing, collage, paper-making and design. Their third year of study incorporates 'Three Dimensional Arts', a subject that teaches 'basic practical skills including manipulative skills, proportional skills, building skills and the use of materials and tools' (Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education 2009: n.p.) in the disciplines of fibre and string art, pottery, sculpture and decorative arts. In addition students, by way of site specific classroom internships, gather data that forms the basis of a comparative analysis between Pacific Islander and European childhood development from the first year of school until early adolescence (Eric Natuoivi, interview, 1 October 2012).

The demand for places at VITE is high and, as such, the institution abides by a strict application process. The competitiveness among candidates, coupled with demanding admission prerequisites, limits the accessibility of VITE to many ni-Vanuatu youth. Of the thousands of applicants each year, VITE accepts on average 120 students per academic year (Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education website). Prospective students are required to hold a Secondary School Certificate to a level of Year 12, of which only 19% of ni-Vanuatu aged between 25 and 29 possess (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2009b: 33). Applications are vetted by a committee of

⁷⁵ VITE comprises six academic departments: Education Studies; Language Studies; Mathematics; Physical Education, Music and Art; Science; Social Science.

academic VITE staff, and short-listed candidates invited to interview in Port Vila (incurring travel expenses at their own cost). For those applicants that successfully navigate the selection process, tuition tariffs often present another barrier to study. The cost of first-year study ranges from 67,500 – 127,000 vatu (£470 – £887), while second and third year students incur costs of between 62,000 – 122,500 vatu (£435 – £851) per academic year.⁷⁶ In circumstances similar to those of students at VIT, trainee teachers at VITE are therefore reliant upon kin for the financial support necessary to undertake programmes of study at higher education institutions.

In December 2012, the first students to embark upon the Harmonisation programme of study completed their courses, thus resulting in 81 graduates having undertaken teacher training in the discipline of fine art. The implementation of the new charter at VITE coincided with a far-reaching review of the education system enacted by the Government of the Republic of Vanuatu that identified art as a subject for inclusion in the national syllabus of primary and secondary schools throughout the archipelago. UNESCO argues that ‘in any attempt to reconnect with the cultural heritage of the past the study and practice of the art must occupy a prominent place’ (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation 2003: 10), a sentiment with which the Government agrees. The VITE modules are therefore a vital component of the restructure of the national education system in which art, for the first time, will be formally implemented as a discipline of study. Natuoivi explains that, ‘At the moment there is no art syllabus in primary and secondary schools, and there are no materials’ (interview, 1 October 2012). Consequently, he and John have been retained by the Government to complete a comprehensive administrative review that will inform the new national curriculum. Natuoivi and John are ‘proud that art has now been recognised as an integral part of a pupil’s education ... [and] that pupils may now have the opportunity to be artists, and choose what field they want to be involved in; either in design or visual art or craft’ (Eric Natuoivi, interview, 1 October 2012). The new syllabus, in which the study of indigenous and Euro-American art will be combined with instruction relating to crafts and carvings particular to the nation, is to be implemented by the Government’s Department of Education in 2015.

⁷⁶ Tuition costs are dependent upon the living and subsistence arrangements of each student. First year fees are 127,500 vatu (£887) for full board students, 91,500 vatu (£634) for half-board day students, and 67,500 (£470) for day students who attend classes only. Fees in second and third years of study follow the same dictum, thus costing 122,500 vatu (£851), 85,000 vatu (£592), and 62,500 vatu (£435) respectively.

ART DISTRIBUTION

While Government recognition of, and support for, the arts is evident a lack of funds and the prioritisation of other areas of policy have resulted in minimal levels of assistance being provided to contemporary makers. As Touré notes, ‘One of the main problems with being an artist in Vanuatu is that there is no financial support from the Government. There is no funding for contemporary artists, not just painters, but also actors and dancers and carvers’ (interview, 22 October 2012, author’s translation). The absence of a state-sponsored fine art gallery or arts centre has left practitioners reliant upon sites managed by external agencies in which to present exhibitions of their wares to the general public. Natuoivi explains that, ‘There are limited exhibition opportunities in Port Vila ... it is difficult to sell work. We need a studio or permanent exhibition space. People are interested in our work but cannot easily view our art’ (interview, 1 October 2012). Both Nawita and Red Wave hold annual two-week long exhibitions at the Espace Culturel Français, a multi-purpose hall adjacent to the French Embassy in the centre of Port Vila’s leisure and business precinct. The space serves a range of community functions and is a prime locale in which events and functions of cultural interest are staged. In 2007 administration of the hall was transferred from the French Embassy to the Alliance française de Port-Vila (hereafter Alliance), which also conducts its operations from the same premises. Georges Cumbo, Director of the Alliance since 1994, notes that the Espace Culturel Français has, for the last twenty years, been the only exhibition hall in Port Vila and that ‘the relationship between the French Embassy and the contemporary artists is strong. We provide the opportunity for the artists to use the exhibition hall to promote their work’ (interview, 8 January 2013).⁷⁷ The localised position of the Espace Culturel Français makes it a prime centre from which Nawita and Red Wave engage with local audiences (ni-Vanuatu and expatriates) and visiting tourists. The hall transcends community divisions, including ethnicity, to offer a forum in which indigenous fine art can be circulated, appreciated and validated as a contemporary cultural category.

During the years that the exhibition hall was managed by the French Embassy, Nawita and Red Wave were requested, in lieu of monetary payment for use of the space, to donate a work of art from their respective exhibitions to the Ambassador. A

⁷⁷ The irony being that the land on which the building sits was forcibly acquired during the years of the Condominium.

definitive catalogue of these objects is, unfortunately, unavailable as Cumbo notes that ‘some of the works are still at the Embassy and some are at the Ambassador’s residence, but other works, I suspect, have been taken to France. We do not have a register of works that were gifted to the Embassy’ (interview 8 January 2013). Today, under the authority of the Alliance, Nawita and Red Wave (along with other community organisations that utilise the space) make a financial payment for occupation of the exhibition hall: 10,000 vatu (£70) for one week, and 5,000 vatu (£35) per week thereafter. Cumbo contends that this annuity is not rent, but rather a contribution used to maintain and improve the facility, and produce publicity material such as posters and newspaper advertisements to communicate upcoming events and exhibitions to the general public. Deterred by these costs, and reluctant to promote themselves individually, few contemporary artists have held solo exhibitions at the Espace Culturel Français. Similarly, as David William explains

There are limited opportunities to exhibit in Port Vila, and the onus is on each artist to organise showings of their art outside of the annual Nawita and Red Wave exhibitions. The French Cultural Space is very busy and it is difficult to book time to hold an exhibition there (interview, 11 December 2012, author’s translation).

Given that exhibitions are a crucial means by which artists develop professional reputations, it stands that, ‘[w]hat is not distributed is not known and thus cannot be well thought of or have historical importance’ (Becker 1982: 95). Acting as vehicles that present artistic labour as an occupation rather than as a vocation, exhibitions are catalysts that enable practitioners to develop essential credentials.

Recognising that ‘participation in the established distribution system is one of the important signs by which art world participants distinguish serious artists from amateurs’ (Becker 1982: 97), the VKS has included a mandate in its most recent corporate plan for the construction of a National Centre for the Arts and Culture of Vanuatu (Vanuatu Cultural Centre 2012: 9). Marcellin Abong, Director of VKS since 2006, explains

We can display our culture; we can develop contemporary culture that we can market. Culture is an economic resource in the country and tourists that come want to experience our unique culture, that which makes us different from other peoples ... we

are a unique people that live their culture because [we] own [our] culture and are proud to show it to the world (as quoted in Garae 2012a).

The proposed space contains provision for an auditorium in which to stage concerts, cinema screenings, theatre performances and conferences; a residential building to accommodate visiting artists; a gallery space to stage exhibitions of fine art; and, rooms to host art lessons, workshops and conferences. While small displays of paintings and sculptures have been presented within the walls of the National Museum of Vanuatu and the National Library and Archives of Vanuatu (see Chapter 5), the proposed Centre is a nexus where artists, objects and audiences will intersect in privileged viewing conditions that legitimise contemporary ni-Vanuatu art.⁷⁸

Government officials acknowledge the value of art as both cultural and economic capital. Ralph Regenvanu notes that, ‘there is great opportunity to develop the arts within Vanuatu, both in terms of self-expression and also as an industry ... We do not have many resources in the country, but we do have human capacity and visual art is a major part of that’ (interview, 28 December 2012). Under provisions outlined in the *Foreign Investment Promotion Act*, implement by the Government in 1998, certain business activities are reserved exclusively for indigenous citizens, including the ‘manufacture of handicrafts and artefacts’ (Government of the Republic of Vanuatu 1998). In recent years this has come to include the production and sale of contemporary art.⁷⁹ Yet, few artists have been able to take advantage of this legislation. The economic realities of life in Port Vila have hindered artist-led commercial initiatives. As Wittersheim (2011: 329) notes, ‘A huge gap exists between the burgeoning luxury resorts and other tourism-related activities developed by foreign – Western – investors on one side, and the small-scale businesses owned by Ni-Vanuatu [sic] on the other side.’ Lack of access to start-up capital and bank loans, combined with the high costs of rent, transport and marketing have significantly disadvantaged local business pursuits.

Only four artists – Leo, Tovovur, Pita and William – have established retail ventures in Port Vila. These outlets sell goods to a largely tourist clientele given that the ‘internal market, Government, business, and a few interested expatriates, is by now virtually saturated (Geismar 2209a: 72). Leo’s store L’Atelier, located on the main

⁷⁸ Bastien foundation

⁷⁹ Enquiries made in 2012 by an expatriate to the Vanuatu Investment Promotion Authority, the regulatory body responsible for enforcing the Act, revealed that business licenses would not be issued to non-indigenous artists.

street of town, trades in a range of traditional artefacts alongside works of contemporary art by makers from both Nawita and Red Wave (including Ambong, John and Pita).⁸⁰ Tovovur's outlet Andrew's Art Gallery, also on the main street, provides a space where the artist sells only his own works of art alongside carvings, weavings and locally-made clothing and jewellery. Pita, meanwhile, shares her enterprise with a network of kin. From a stall located within the handicraft market adjacent to Vila Bay, Pita sells her own works of art as well as paintings, tapestries and drawings produced by her brothers, daughter and nephews. By way of departure William, also situated at the market, retails only his own small and large-scale works on canvas and paper, making him the youngest art entrepreneur in town. In competition with other *souvenir* traders and numerous Chinese-owned *bric-a-brac* stores, these artists contest market forces in the hope of achieving financial security for themselves and their families.

CONCLUSION

As the locus of contemporary art production in Vanuatu, Port Vila is home to a diverse group of makers. Yet, as this chapter has shown, life as an artist in the capital is complex. Becker (1982: 59) argues that, 'Artists learn other conventions – professional culture – in the course of training and as they participate in the day-to-day activities of the art world. Only people who participate regularly in those activities, practicing professionals ... know that culture.' In order to effectively engage with the local artworld, practitioners require discretionary funds with which to purchase materials, access exhibition spaces and undertake formal education – all expensive pursuits. This, combined with the economic realities of residing in town, necessitates that artists hold positions of employment in the wage economy. Although many wish to commit themselves full-time to their practice, the very fact that artists have paid work distinguishes them from others in the urban environment. As part of the newly emerging middle class, practitioners have the benefit of reasonable affluence in Port Vila. Many lease land and live in secure homes with basic amenities, some own vehicles and a few have established businesses. It must be noted, however, that by global standards artists are not holders of great financial wealth. In a country where it is estimated that '40% of the total population ... has an income around \$1 a day, and 10-15% of the population is under the basic needs poverty line' (United Nations 2012: 10)

⁸⁰ Leo purchased the business from Suzanne Bastien in 2005, after serving as her long-time manager.

any suggestions of material prosperity can only be made within broader contexts particular to the archipelago.

The practical challenges faced by artists are further confounded by way of intricate social relations that characterise the artworld. Island genealogy, kin networks, age, gender and the legacies of colonial education influence a practitioner's place within the local schema. Although members of different art associations purport a competitive collegiality, closer examination of each organisation reveals the implications of natal affiliation. While Nawita is primarily comprised of makers from one of two dominant families (the Kuautonga from Futuna or the Lovo from Erromango), Red Wave attracts practitioners from a range of islands. Meanwhile, membership of Turbin or the Mataso Collective is explicitly predicated on paternal lineage. Within these groups inherent structures of hierarchical power determine the standing of an individual. Seniority is linked to career longevity – the longer a maker has been present in the artworld the greater his influence and authority. Emerging and mid-career artists expand their practices within an ideological framework largely constructed by venerated peers. Practitioners thus negotiate deeply embedded cultural codes in order to advance their professional reputations and profit from their talents.

CHAPTER 3

KASTOM AS SUBJECT MATTER

The contemporary artworld in Port Vila has expanded since the 1980s and as a consequence, so too have the themes explored by local practitioners. As discussed in the previous chapter, the artworld today comprises a diverse range of participants, each of whom are interconnected by way of socio-cultural lineage, art association membership and distribution opportunities. In order to further understand the production, circulation and reception of the outputs of these agents a central question emerges: what subject matter do artists select as content for their creations? By way of paintings, drawings, sculptures and carvings a broad range of topics are examined including globalisation, urbanisation, climate change, the environment, politics, gender, the economy and national identity. In some instances private commissions dictate a composition, while in other circumstances imagery responds to a specific brief linked to group exhibitions.⁸¹ Of course, an artist's imagination and creativity are also paramount to the resultant objects they produce. As witnessed during periods of residency and fieldwork in Port Vila from 2009 to 2013 a dominant trend emerged in relation to the content of works of art. Regardless of island heritage, professional experience, age or gender the vast majority of artists adopted aspects of *kastom* from their *ples* as subject matter. The sheer diversity of indigenous practices in Vanuatu is thus made apparent through visual representations that incorporate localised forms of knowledge, ceremonial rituals, embodied identities and divergent value systems. This chapter explores depictions of *kastom* by contemporary artists, paying particular attention to four thematic categories adopted by multiple makers: chiefs, dance, marriage and stories.

By its very nature *kastom* is an all-encompassing system of interrelated values and beliefs. Chiefs attend marriage ceremonies, just as stories are often enacted through dance. Stories are recounted by chiefs, while dances are performed at wedding ceremonies. Rather than implement arbitrary categories of classification, the works of art considered in this chapter are clustered together in two ways. Firstly, the intent of the artist and the messages construed within their images are taken into account.

⁸¹ As was witnessed at the Red Wave exhibition held in 2013 when artists were requested to respond to the theme of climate change.

Secondly, the visual properties of different objects are examined to highlight the ways in which similar themes are explored by different artists. During fieldwork, interviews and informal discussions with practitioners about their creative outputs inevitably turned to talk about the subject matter of a specific painting, sculpture, drawing or carving. During these interactions makers explained their objects as referencing a particular facet of *kastom*. A painting that depicts a story is conceptualised as illustrating that very narrative, despite possible associations with broader topics such as history or religion. Similarly, images of dance are construed as portraying a distinct choreographed routine rather than encompassing potentially wider discourses relating to gender relations or indigenous mythology. With this in mind, the subdivisions applied throughout this chapter recognise that artworks are locally conceived as pictorial representations of explicit practices and forms of knowledge.

We might here question why *kastom* is such a prevalent topic among artists. What drives a diverse group of makers to collectively incorporate similar themes? Just as the previous chapter demonstrated the financial realities of living in Port Vila, this chapter will highlight the acute socio-cultural preoccupations of artists based in the capital. Despite town now being the site of permanent residence for many ni-Vanuatu, anxieties abound about the authenticity of claims to *kastom* made in the capital. The pervasive legacies of colonialism, by which Port Vila was posited as a transient place of work and isolation, continue to dominate beliefs that town is incompatible with traditional ways of life. A nostalgic sentimentality is often attributed to the rural environment as the outer islands are reconstructed as sites of plenty – traditional owners live on their own land, *kastom* is strong, food is in abundance and the forces of economic capitalism are all but obsolete. Town, by comparison, is a subversive space where *kastom* is lost, disregarded or unknown. As Mitchell explains, ‘Forgetting *kastom* is a very common way to formulate the dangers of staying in town and the nature of alienation in town.’ With this in mind, island identity is explicitly asserted in Port Vila. When asked *yu blong wea?* (where are you from?), citizens inevitably frame their gendered responses in terms of natal affiliation. Thus, answers such as *mi man Tanna* (I am a male from Tanna) or *mi woman Pentecost* (I am a female from Pentecost) are offered rather than affiliation with a particular settlement or suburb of Port Vila. As Rawlings (1999:76) notes, ‘It is rare for the term *man Vila* (person from Port Vila) to be

used by either rural to urban migrants in town or by peri-urban villagers, except perhaps by way of insult (similar to saying ‘you have no place’).’⁸²

Throughout Vanuatu to be without *ples* is to be without *kastom*, without identity. The perception that Port Vila is a space of cultural dislocation and decline induces concerns about ‘new forms of production, circulation and consumption’ (Mitchell 2003: 360). These tensions suggest that proclamations of *kastom* may be just as important as actions and behaviours. For example, Rousseau (2004: 42) asserts that

the urban setting introduces a heightened need to provide legitimacy, which makes that the aspect of *kastom* emphasised over and above practices. The tensions between town and island, as both locations and lifestyles, involving particular disparagement of “town” claims to *kastom* on the part of island residence – and sometimes similar sentiments on the part of Vila residents – may add to this insecurity.

Fears about the loss of traditional ways of life in the capital are explicitly articulated as reasons to protect and promote indigenous cultural heritage. As artists seek to affirm and maintain connections to *ples* within the pluralistic matrix of town their outputs display a hybridity in which *kastom* and creativity merge. Practitioners take great pride in presenting images that visually convey events and activities specific to their *ples*. By doing so, they not only share elements of their island identity but also differentiate their forms from those of other makers. The popularity of uniquely local idioms attests to the fact that *kastom* has not been lost in Port Vila but, rather, transformed in the urban setting.

With this in mind artists create forms that reveal their lived experiences and realities. Paintings, drawings and sculptures reflect the fact that *kastom* has been adapted to withstand the challenges of town. Within the confines of the insular artworld makers ascribe value to their outputs ‘through the achievement of consensus about the basis on which it can be judged and through the application of agreed-on aesthetic principles’ (Becker 1982: 129). As the previous chapter demonstrated, many practitioners in Port Vila are self-taught. Consequently, as Joseph John explains, ‘they have not been exposed to academic concepts of art and its production’ (interview, 21

⁸² Island identity is a particularly contentious topic among urban youth, many of whom are the first generation to have been born and raised in Port Vila to parents of different island lineage (see Kraemer 2013; Mitchell 2003; Rawlings 1999).

November 2013). For this reason, emerging and mid-career artists look to more senior figures within the local schema to ascertain ‘what the system characteristic of their world can handle’ (Becker 1982: 94). With little exposure to international marketplaces the artworld that practitioners have constructed in Port Vila is one of ideological conformity. Geismar (2007: 71) notes that, ‘Making art thus becomes a careful accomplishment: to be indigenous but not too traditional, to be contemporary but not to lose touch with a local corpus of objects and images.’ The legitimisation of that which is acceptable has been implicitly accepted as diverse makers submit to an unwritten code of visual propriety. The incorporation of *kastom* narratives, icons and symbols highlights the internalised logic that governs the production of contemporary forms and images.

CHIEFS

The figure of the *kastom* chief is a national icon in Vanuatu. As discussed in Chapter 1, the motif has been legitimised by the state as part of the country’s official coat of arms. The relative coherence of the notion of ‘chief’ has been debated by scholars given that, to some extent, the term derives from 19th century European imaginings of the Pacific region (see Allen 1984; Lindstrom 1982, 1984; Patterson 1981; W. Rodman 1982, 1985, 1993). As Robert Codrington (1891: 46) observed as early as 1891, ‘chiefs exist, and still have in most islands important place and power, though never perhaps so much importance in the native view as they have in the eyes of European visitors, who carry with them the persuasion that savage people are always ruled by chiefs.’ Nevertheless, the category of chief is, today, firmly embedded within the everyday realities of ni-Vanuatu life. Government recognition, by way of constitutional edict, that members of the Malvatumauri are custodians of *kastom* exemplifies the ideological link between chiefs and indigeneity. Generally speaking, there are two broad means by which chiefdom is ascertained in Vanuatu. Joël Bonnemaïson (1996: 200) notes, ‘In the northern islands ... chiefdoms are founded on a hierarchy of grades: men of power come to the fore through competition of an economic sort. In the central and southern islands, chiefdoms are partly hereditary, partly elective, and based on titles, rather than achievements.’ Moreover, there exists the Port Vila Town Council of Chiefs to which respected men from different areas of town are elected by their local urban communities. One such member, Chief Ambong Thompson, explains

It is not like on the islands, where you must perform *kastom* ceremonies to become a chief. Most people who are chiefs in Port Vila have been elected by the people that live in the same community. Selection of chiefs in town is based on leadership skills. Of course, we also have some chiefs who are chiefs on the island that they live. The urban chief system is not based on island lineage but on where you live and the work you do for that area (interview, 17 October 2012).

With this in mind, we might ask: how do contemporary artists portray *kastom* chiefs? How do practitioners reconcile the ideals of chiefdom in the urban environment of Port Vila?

Joseph John's oil on canvas *The Village Forum: The Chief and His People* (Fig. 24) provides an example of artistic imaginings of the role of chiefs in rural settings throughout the archipelago. Here, John highlights the socio-political authority of chiefs in Vanuatu.⁸³ The central protagonist, the chief, sits prominently among his fellow clan members. He wears two circular boar's tusks and strands of shell money around his neck, tusk bracelets and pandanus bands on each arm, and turtle shell earrings in his earlobes – all of which signify his wealth and status. To his right is a warrior, distinguished by way of body adornment, who holds a large wooden club. The foreground of the image is dominated by a large group of figures, both male and female, seated on the ground before the chief and warrior. Congregated under the canopy of a banyan tree, a communal locale that serves as a central meeting place, the group hear oracles and ordinances announced by the chief, while also discussing and debating issues of relevance to the village. The hierarchical relationship between the chief, warrior and tribe is made evident given the staggered positioning of the figures within the visual planes of the picture. As John explains, 'the chief oversees the meeting as he is the leader. The warrior sits next to the chief in a position that shows respect, and the people of the tribe sit below the two men. This was the customary social structure of our communities in Vanuatu' (interview, 21 November 2013). The traditional setting of the scene, and the authority commanded by the chief, are further reinforced by distinct motifs that decorate the background of the image. To the left of the composition a *boubou* (conch shell) atop a stick stands in front of four *tamtams* (slit

⁸³ The painting, commissioned by the then Minister for Finance Willy Jimmy, was presented to the Honourable Speaker of Parliament, Alfred Maseng, on the occasion of the official opening of the new National Parliament building in Port Vila on 26 July 1993.

gongs), all of which are used as musical instruments during dance ceremonies and as a means of communication between distant tribes. Meanwhile, to the right, is a bamboo stick on which hang the mandible and tusks of boars sacrificed during pig-killing rituals. The *namele* leaves attached to this structure indicate the *tabu* significance of the objects and the meeting space to the hamlet as a whole.

The corpus of Jobo Lovo also includes images that depict the role of *kastom* chiefs in Vanuatu. Himself a chief, it is no surprise that Lovo produces images that reinforce the cultural relevance of such local institutions as the Malvatumauri. Having studied alongside John at INTV during the early 1980s, Lovo's corpus is characterised by his production of two-dimensional works of art. During the early years of his career he too employed figurative modes of representation. However, as his visual repertoire expanded he has come to adopt more abstract styles of expression in which he utilises traditional symbols and icons from his home island of Erromango (see Chapter 4). Discussing his current practice, he explains, 'My work is about identity – both my identity and the identity of ni-Vanuatu. It is about individual and collective identity. I show our traditions and *kastom* in my work but come up with new ways to tell my stories. I mix the traditional and the contemporary in my art' (interview, 1 October 2012, author's translation). Lovo's working methods and thematic preoccupations are of significant influence, particularly on younger kin who are pursuing careers as artists. Recognising this, he acknowledges that, 'As an artist in Vanuatu it is my duty to present new ideas to other ni-Vanuatu and show them aspects of my culture and heritage' (interview, 2 October 2012, author's translation). Thus, his position as a chief, community leader and established artist are conveyed throughout his practice.

A large public mural, rendered in a figurative style, exemplifies the modes by which he visually represents chiefly power and authority (Fig. 25). The elements of Lovo's composition – a reconciliation ceremony between two clans from Erromango – are balanced by the figure of a chief who stands at the centre of the unfolding scene. To both his left and right are tribes of men and women, each of whom has contributed objects of traditional wealth including yams, taro, bananas and a pig that are to be distributed among the conflicting parties. In one hand the chief holds a *nirom* (wooden club) and in the other, a *namele* leaf: the former a symbol of his customary prowess, the latter a sign of his mediatory ability to bring peace to the community. The mural holds both historical significance and contemporary relevance. Matthew Spriggs and Stephen Wickler (1989: 83) note that, 'At European contact Erromango appears to have been

divided into six political districts, called *lo* ('canoe'), each controlled by a high chief (*fan-lo*) of patrilineal descent with several 'village chiefs' under him. High chiefs were the leaders in inter-district warfare and feasts (*nisekar*).⁹ Lovo's rendition thus recalls the legacies of often violent altercations particular to his home island while also attesting to the continued national relevance of chiefs as community mediators.

The high visibility of John's canvas and Lovo's mural – the former hung at the entrance to Parliament House and the latter located on a public street – correspond with the local presence and dominant authority held by chiefs throughout Vanuatu. As discussed in Chapter 1, the national emblem of the country comprises this very motif to internationally signify the local sanctity of *kastom* hierarchies, power structures and traditional institutions. Both John and Lovo, however, deviate from representations of a lone male figure. Each image instead shows the chief among the people of his village, thus demonstrating the continued socio-cultural relevance of *kastom* categories of leadership in the urban setting of Port Vila. The figurative style adopted by both artists can also be seen to serve a secondary purpose: both images visually communicate the status of chiefs to broad audiences using a visual language that is accessible to even uninitiated viewers. Far from being mere depictions of male power, both compositions serve to reinforce the communal values of peace and unity.

DANCE

Works of art that depict traditional dances specific to the islands of the archipelago are further evidence of distinct visual representations of *kastom*. As a centrally performative element through which social relations are displayed and reinforced, dance maintains, promotes and memorialises the customary practices and knowledge of divergent geo-cultural language groups. Dance then, is a means by which local agents in Vanuatu celebrate and commemorate key public events, local histories and ritual milestones including weddings, circumcision and grade-taking ceremonies, agricultural cycles, harvest seasons and chiefly initiations. Different hamlets, villages and islands retain exclusive rights to the performance of particular routines that are passed down through the generations, thus participation becomes a marker of lineage within the rubrics of identity relations. Rather than a mere corollary to everyday life, dance is intrinsically linked to embodied ways of being and acts as a mnemonic device for recording and preservation history and heritage. As Stephanie Burrridge (2014: xv) notes, 'In dance, the body is a powerful means of dialogue that ... encapsulates signs

and symbols of place and belief.’ The reconceptualisation of knowledge through dance allows performers to assert collective ideological, pedagogical and cosmological values by way of specific spatial and temporal bodily movements.

Despite the centrality of dance throughout the archipelago, it is noteworthy that there is little recent academic literature that interrogates performance as an art form in Vanuatu. Commentators instead prefer to contextualise routines within the theoretical frameworks of global tourism and cultural commodification. For example, Christopher Tilley (1997: 75) argues that, ‘an inauthentic post-modern pastiche is being produced in which populations pretend to be pre-modern in order to continue to purchase their modernist identity spaces in a world of mass movement, mass production and mass consumption.’ While it is true that some aspects of dance in Vanuatu have undergone a process of commercialisation – troupes perform at many of the holiday resorts in Port Vila and tours to ‘traditional villages’ (both on Efate and Tanna, in particular) include standardised performances – not all ceremonial routines occupy a site of capitalist public spectacle. We might ask then, why contemporary artists take dance as subject matter? Which routines are rendered? If, as Tilley suggests, dance in Vanuatu ‘lacks credibility simply because it is a show’ (1997: 81) and is ‘a reconstructed past that is on display for tourist consumption in the present’ (1997: 86), are we to assume that such representations merely objectify the performances that they portray?

Paintings by Juliette Pita, Amelia Lovo and David Ambong provide evidence that artists render highly ritualised dances from their respective islands that resist classification as tourist expositions. The routines depicted by these three artists articulate ancestral customs and inherited knowledge that form the basis of social-historic identity relations between divergent persons, clans and villages. The ceremonies are not marketed in travel brochures as sightseeing opportunities but, rather, are hosted by indigenous agents at such times as necessity, obligation or entitlement dictates.

The motif of the dancing body is a recurring icon in the corpus of Juliette Pita. As one of the first graduates at INTV in the early 1980s under the tutelage of Jacqui Bourdain and Henri Thailade, she is a leading practitioner from the island of Erromango and a prominent member of Nawita. As Vanuatu’s foremost female artist, her paintings are easily recognisable within the Port Vila artworld, given her repeated rendition of highly stylised forms. Central to Pita’s corpus are representations of female figures, often portrayed as maternal nurturers and providers. She explains, ‘some of my

paintings show the duties women undertake, such as caring for children and tending to gardens to produce food. I highlight the role that women play in contemporary ni-Vanuatu society and the many domestic tasks they perform' (interview, 28 September 2012, author's translation). From images of breastfeeding mothers (Fig. 26) to depictions linking women to the agricultural wealth of the land (Fig. 27), her practice interrogates traditionally embodied gender roles. While many of the male artists alongside whom she works visually convey masculine forms of *kastom* knowledge, Pita focuses her attention upon *kastom* practices that are specifically linked to the feminine. Unlike her counterparts however, she is somewhat reluctant to discuss her use of *kastom* as subject matter. She contends that, '*kastom* in Vanuatu is very strong. Everyone in Vanuatu has *kastom*. As a female artist though, I cannot talk very much about *kastom*. Male artists are able to talk more freely about *kastom*' (interview, 28 September 2012, author's translation). In this way Pita's outputs provide a point of differential reference when considering the means by which *kastom* is visually conveyed by artists.

In her acrylic on canvas entitled *Kastom Danis blong Erromango* (Fig. 28) Pita depicts a group of nine women performing the *nempuru go nao* – one of seven female *kastom* dances from the island (Naupa 2011: 38).⁸⁴ The monochromatic rendering of the figures highlights the costume of each participant, as all wear pandanus armbands and a *nomplat* (grass skirt) made from the *bura* tree (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*). They hold long bamboo sticks that act as stamping tubes that keep rhythm during the performance of the routine. Throughout the dance the actions of the female participants teach the children of their locale about the meanings of different *kastom* patterns and designs particular to the island (Juliette Pita, interview, 10 September 2013), thereby transferring ancestral knowledge by way of physical gesture. The muted hues of brown and yellow against which the figures are juxtaposed suggests that the dance is being performed in a *nasara* (sacred dancing ground), a feature common to island communities. In some instances situated in the settlement of the village, or at other times located in a secluded bush setting, the *nasara* is a site of memory and identity where exchanges, ceremonies and meetings are held. In some hamlets the *nasara* is a highly restricted space where access is predetermined based upon rank, status and gender, while in other districts the dancing ground is the central incarnation of a

⁸⁴ The dance is also known by the names *noryocalau* or *nempegon* (see Naupa 2011: 38).

landowning group (Bolton 2003: 85). The earthy tones that dominate Pita's visual plane actively reinforce the spiritual and physical connections between body and land.

In her capacity as both an artist and a mother, Pita has undertaken to teach her daughter, Amelia Lovo, the technical skills required to produce high quality works of art. She explains, 'I have three children, one girl and two boys. It is my role and duty to teach and encourage them to paint and draw about their *kastom* and culture' (interview, 28 September 2012, author's translation). The close maternal bond between the two has resulted in a nurturing relationship between mentor and student. Amelia Lovo echoes such sentiments when she states that, 'My mother has been my art teacher and she has taught me about the formal elements of paintings such as composition, form and colour. I am inspired by the work my mother makes, but I adapt her designs to create my own style' (interview, 22 February 2013, author's translation). As Lovo's competency and confidence have increased the stylistic variations between her and Pita's canvases have become more pronounced. While both rely on a shared bank of imagery, the generational gap between mother and daughter undoubtedly influences their perceptions of not only the creative process, but also their standing within the artworld and local community more broadly. Lovo makes the point

I am inspired by the history and stories of my island, and through my painting I am learning more about my heritage and *kastom*. As a younger artist, though, I see things around me differently to the more established artists working in town. I am developing my own artistic style – each artist must have their own unique visual language (interview, 22 February 2013, author's translation).

In an environment dominated by male practitioners, both established and emerging, Pita and Lovo exemplify the power of kin relations with regard to the acceptance, promotion and viability of artists perhaps otherwise disadvantaged by gender and age. As a result, Lovo's corpus, much like that of Pita, is characterised by representations of the female body.

Two small-scale paintings produced by Lovo attest to her engagement with *kastom* dance as central subject matter. Drawing upon the patrilineal heritage of her father, Timothy Takifu, Lovo applies colourful inks to supports of recycled paper to depict groups of female figures performing routines that comprise the *nekowiar*, a three-day dance and gift exchange festival held on Tanna. As was witnessed at the

village of Green Point in 2012, the event is held at the discretion of the Tanna Council of Chiefs and requires years of careful planning to ensure ample yams are grown, pigs reared, kava cultivated and ritualised dance routines perfected. In order to protect the festival from malicious spirits the date of the event is kept secret until the last moment, at which time some 2000 participants and many more spectators travel to the host village. Historically, the gathering was a means of forming temporary alliances between often warring tribes: peace was declared on the island as factional rivalries were contested by dance rather than clubs and spears. Lovo titles each of her representations with the corresponding name of the dance depicted. *Napennapen* (Fig. 29) correlates with a routine performed on the first day of the festival when hundreds of women simultaneously enacted repetitive steps while rhythmically chanting and singing in unison. Similarly, *Toka* (Fig. 30) visually signifies the climactic routine of the *nekowiar* when male performers, after dancing until dusk on the second day of the festival, are replaced in the *nasara* by their female counterparts. As the women dance in group formation throughout the night they are encircled by kinsmen holding large spears crafted specifically for the ceremony (Fig. 31). At dawn on the third and final day, the genders reunite on the dancing ground as two *kweriya* (3 metre-tall poles covered in colourful feathers) are carried into the arena by members of the host tribe (Fig. 32). Throughout the revelry marriage arrangements, village reunions and other inter-tribal agreements are made and sanctified by way of a pig-killing ceremony that concludes the festivities.

By way of contrast to the female figures rendered by Pita and Lovo are the male bodies depicted within the corpus of David Ambong. A self-taught artist from the island of Malekula, his practice encompasses paintings, woodblock prints and graphic designs. Since 2007 he has been the official artist for *Fest' Napuan*, an annual five-day music festival held at Saralana Park in Port Vila. During this time he has created logos (Fig. 33 and Fig. 34) and stage backdrops (Fig. 35) that have appeared on merchandise including t-shirts, stickers and mugs, while also being used in promotional material such as newspaper advertisements, banners and programmes.⁸⁵ Ambong combines the

⁸⁵ *Fest' Napuan* began as a single-day event, first held in 1996, to celebrate the opening of the new VKS building. As witnessed in 2013, the festival now comprises five incorporated events: *Fest' Nalenga* dedicated to the performance of local string band music; *Fest' Napuan* that showcases local and international bands and solo artists from the Pacific region; *Fest' Tamariki* devoted to the presentation of song and dance routines by school children from Efate; *Fest' Sawagoro* that hosts traditional *kastom* groups who perform ritual dances, chants and percussion arrangements; and *Zion Fest* devoted to the genre of gospel.

colours of the Vanuatu flag with the motifs of national insignia that make his designs synonymous with the event. As a result, local interest in his work has steadily increased over the last seven years as audiences are regularly exposed to his highly anticipated images. In both his commercial and artistic practices Ambong represents the tropes of *kastom*. For him, the lived experience of tradition informs the substance of his art. He explains, ‘I am inspired by *kastom*. I make works of art that reflect the customary practices of my island. My art is a reflection of my spirituality and my culture’ (interview, 29 October 2012, author’s translation). Ambong’s images are distinct from those of his colleagues given that he is the only contemporary artist from Malekula. His visual explorations of the customary heritage of the island form a core component of his corpus.

In his acrylic on canvas, *Nalawan Danis* (Fig. 36), Ambong depicts a customary dance routine performed by initiated men from the Seniangu district of South West Bay, Malekula (Deacon 1934: 384). The *nalawan*, a male graded society specific to the region, enables local men to achieve *kastom* titles, ancestral rites and access to restricted knowledge by enacting *tabu* rituals and sacrificial pig killing. Each level of the *nalawan* holds an associated name, *tamtam* (slit gong) rhythm and *temes mbalmbal* (mask) that men are entitled to reproduce as they advance through the society (Deacon 1934: 387). Admittance to, and elevation within, the *nalawan* requires laborious effort, determined dedication and technical expertise. Boars are hand-reared not only to ensure plentiful girth, but also to cultivate highly valuable circular tusks. Similarly, slit gong routines are perfected, drum beats expertly struck and masks skilfully hand-crafted

Ambong visually communicates the status of the dancers that dominate his image. They are powerful men of significant status. Each of the five abstract figures is dressed in a *namba* (penis sheath) and wears a croton leaf (*Codiaeum variegatum*) or *nelwas* (Riensenfeld 1950: 45) in his hair – both icons indicative of the social rank and traditional wealth.⁸⁶ Of the hues that comprise the image, Ambong explains, ‘I only use traditional colours in my work and I avoid bright colours. My palette is primarily comprised of black, white, brown and red. I like to use these natural and neutral colours as they represent the natural environment in which I live and work’ (interview, 29 October 2012, author’s translation). Against a background of alternating bands of

⁸⁶ Deacon (1934: 393) identifies that dance as being the *nimbumbal*. However, this was not confirmed with the artist.

bronze and white pigment are rendered the organic-like limbs of each performer in tones of black and deep brown. Reminiscent of tree branches, the arms and legs of the figures convey the pronounced synergy between dance, body and land.

Although the images produced by Pita, Lovo and Ambong depict *kastom* dances from different islands of the archipelago, there are striking visual similarities between all four paintings. In each, groups of dancers in the midst of performance are depicted. In opposition to the rendering of a lone individual, the three artists prefer scenes in which collective identity is reinforced by way of interrelated bodily movement. By extension, the figures of each canvas are depicted without discernible facial features or idiosyncratic physical characteristics so that one performer is indistinguishable from the next. Rather than imply anonymity however, such a device highlights the shared values, beliefs, practices and experiences particular to members of the troupe. As a marker of genealogical heritage and cultural affiliation the dances selected for representation by Pita, Lovo and Ambong speak to their lived experiences of *kastom*, ritual and community.

MARRIAGE

Andrew Tovovur, from Erromango, also appropriates *kastom* practices as subject matter in his paintings. One of seven brothers, he credits his creative dexterity (and that of his siblings) to the blood of his maternal grandfather, the encouragement of his mother and the stern discipline exacted by his father. As an art student at INTV during the early 1980s Tovovur developed skills in, and assumed a preference for, the creation of two-dimensional works of art including paintings, drawings and tapestries. The production of paintings today dominates his practice, which he distinguishes by way of two distinct categories: ‘fine art’ – large-sized canvases that explore indigenous themes, history and ideology; and ‘tourist art’ – small-scale works that incorporate stereotypical Pacific island subject matter, such as local flora and fauna, that appeal to international travellers as mementos and souvenirs (interview, 9 October 2012, author’s translation). Of his present corpus of ‘fine art’ he explains

My art is contemporary because it is something original that I create – contemporary art allows for the making of new things. The symbols of Vanuatu can be used in new contexts to create a rich visual language. As artists we can tell our stories in our paintings and this makes our work meaningful. Within each of my paintings rests a part

of me – telling my stories and showing my *kastom* in my art makes my paintings an extension of myself (interview, 19 February 2013, author's translation).

Yet, it is not only content and subject matter that inform Tovovur's practice. For him, stylistic elements such as form, line, colour and tone are also vital cues by which to assert indigeneity in his paintings. He notes, 'I use the colours of nature in my art to be true to the resources of the land' (interview, 9 October 2012, author's translation). In doing so, Tovovur produces canvases that are visually sensitive to, and respectful of, the traditional stories and legends, cultural heritage and *kastom* that form the basis of each of his representations.

For example, in the acrylic on canvas *A Traditional Marriage* (Fig. 37), Tovovur divides his image into eight distinct picture planes that together narrate the historical process by which an arranged marriage was sanctified on Erromango. The scene precludes notions of romantic love, showing a *taem bifo* (time before) free-will came to inform matrimonial partnerships. The first section of the sequence (lower right, as numbered by the artist) shows two sets of parents discussing the possibility of a marriage between their son and daughter. The enlarged hibiscus flower against which they lean symbolically represents the union of the two families and the stem of the decorative floral motif visually compartmentalises each subsequent field of the representation. In the second section of the image (lower right) the groom's father seeks permission for the nuptials from the village chief – the latter recognisable by a stylised lower body that mimics the shape of a circular boar's tusk, along with his plumed headdress and ornate body adornments. His embrace of the future father-in-law denotes his approval of the proposed marriage for, as Tovovur explains, 'the chief must sanction the marriage and it is he that decides the date of the ceremony' (interview, 19 February 2013, author's translation). Under the physical command and watchful eye of the chief, the third section of the painting (middle left) shows two men escorting the bride to a matrimonial hut where her suitor awaits. Two hearts, one above the dwelling and the other above the groom, denote the joyous prosperity of the occasion. As a modern symbol of romantic love, the hearts highlight the ever-changing nature of *kastom* practices – tradition and modernity merge to reconstruct long-held rituals for future perpetuation. Inside the thatched wooden structure, as depicted in the fourth section of the representation (middle centre), the expectant young man sits atop a woven pandanus mat while a small fire burns at his feet to offset the oncoming chill of the evening. The

setting sun fills the frame of the doorway as the bride and her minders make their approach.

During the groom's moments of contemplative solace before first meeting his bride, the young man drinks a small amount of kava to connect with his ancestors and seek their guidance, counsel and wisdom. After spending an evening together, during which they make arrangements for their forthcoming wedding, the couple agree to the proposed union. The fifth section of the painting (middle right) shows the pair standing hand in hand. Tovovur explains that 'the two have come together and are happy because of the spirit of kava; it has sanctioned the marriage and ensured peace between the man, woman and their respective families' (interview, 9 October 2012, author's translation). A gecko, the *kastom* symbol of kava on Erromango, is depicted alongside the figure of the young woman to denote the sacred ordinance of the nuptials.

Immediately above this scene, in section six (middle right) of the canvas, the young man stands in front of the hut wearing a hibiscus flower behind his ear. The flower, Tovovur notes, is 'an indication to the couple's respective families, and a signal to the people of the village, that the two will be married and everyone can now rejoice' (interview, 9 October 2012, author's translation). In the seventh section of the image (upper left), the bride and groom are shown with objects of traditional wealth – a pig, pandanus mat, yams and kava – displayed around them. A male figure stands aside the couple; his outstretched arms holding a ritualistic fossilised clam shell, or *navilahs* (Speiser 1991: 254), to signify the payment of the bride-price. The icon of a fish, the *kastom* symbol that represents man on Erromango, is rendered above the heads of the newlyweds to delineate the marital responsibilities of the groom. For Tovovur, in this instance the fish 'represents the power and culture of the man. He is a strong man who can fix problems. The woman has peace of mind and the two will have a happy life. Both of their futures will be better because they are now married' (interview, 9 October 2012, author's translation). The final section of the painting (upper right) captures the pair in a moment of celebratory dance and revelry.

We may well wonder why Tovovur and other artists, such as Jean-Claude Touré (discussed below), choose to represent *kastom* marriage in their paintings. Aside from providing rich visual stimuli, why do images that portray indigenous weddings circulate within the Port Vila artworld? Two answers can be suggested, in addition to the obvious reason that such canvases act as vehicles for the promotion of local practices. Firstly, in 1970 – just ten years before the country was to gain independence and still in living

memory of many ni-Vanuatu – the Condominium issued the *Joint Regulation No. 16 of 1970* (New Hebrides Condominium 1970), in an attempt to legislate marriage contracts made between consenting indigenous parties. The document recognised three distinct means by which matrimonial unions would be recognised under the imposed structures of European law: a civil ceremony performed ‘before a District Registrar’⁸⁷, a religious ceremony ‘before a Minister for celebrating marriages’, and a *kastom* ceremony ‘in accordance with custom’ (New Hebrides Condominium 1970: Part 1.1). Of the last category, the Condominium instructed that, ‘Whenever any New Hebridean desires to be married solely by custom he shall before the marriage may be celebrated fulfil the pre-marital requirements of the custom under which he desires to be married’ (New Hebrides Condominium 1970: Part 1.3(4)), and that, ‘Every custom marriage shall be performed in a place and according to the form laid down by local custom’ (New Hebrides Condominium 1970: Part 3.11). While expatriate agents made no attempt to codify the procedural specificities necessary for the validation of a *kastom* marriage, they did assert that, ‘Any person wishing to contest the validity of such a marriage shall first prove that these requirements have not been fulfilled’ (New Hebrides Condominium 1970: Part 1.3(4)), and threatened penalties – a monetary fine of AUS\$150 or a term of six-month imprisonment – to persons found guilty of breaching ritual obligations and responsibilities. In this way the onus was placed on local villagers to prove, to the satisfaction of the Condominium, that customary traditions had been appropriately enacted and executed.

While the enforcement of Condominium legislation has long since ceased, the significance and active practice of *kastom* wedding ceremonies in Vanuatu have not. The category of marriage confers constructed social identities as newlyweds transcend the label of ‘youth’ to assume the status of ‘adult’ as a bride is elevated from girl to woman, and a groom from boy to man (see Farren 2004). Many young people however, find the time, cost and energy associated with such rituals to be both restrictive and prohibitive. Thus, a second reason to explain the rendering of wedding scenes by contemporary artists points to such images acting as endorsements for the youthful pursuance of, and engagement with, traditional practices. A *kastom* marriage takes much planning and preparation: extensive manual labour is required to rear adequate

⁸⁷ The Regulation stated that, ‘District Agents shall be the District Registrars in their active Districts’, and that where no District Agent was pre-assigned, the Resident Commissioner ‘shall appoint some fit and proper person to perform the duties’ (New Hebrides Condominium 1970: Part 1.2(1)).

numbers of pigs, harvest root crops including taro, yam and kava and to weave intricately designed mats – all of which are necessary components to the negotiated exchange relationship entered into by the families of the bride and groom. These obligations extend beyond the matrimonial contract shared by a man and woman, as marriage consolidates reciprocal relations between extended kin groups. The roles played by mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles are critical to binding *kastom* unions.

This subject matter is explored in an acrylic on canvas by Jean-Claude Touré entitled *A Traditional Ambae Marriage* (Fig. 38). Having studied alongside Tovovur at INTV in the early 1980s, and in his capacity as the founding President of Red Wave, Touré adopts a firm ideological stance regarding *kastom* as content in contemporary ni-Vanuatu art discourse. He asserts that, ‘artists in Vanuatu produce valuable objects and use their *kastom* to do this. Our art is unique and reflects the sovereignty of our nation. Contemporary art in Vanuatu is an extension of our heritage, customs and traditions’ (interview, 22 November 2013, author’s translation). By incorporating lived practices in his paintings Touré reasserts the socio-cultural dichotomies of life in Vanuatu today. He explains

In every one of my paintings there is meaning. They are not just decorative – they are related to my life and my culture. I am *man Ambae* and my works reflect this. Our cultures form our identities. I have created my own stylised pictorial language that expresses my Melanesian and ni-Vanuatu identity. We must protect our heritage and not let the modern world kill our traditions (interview, 22 October 2012, author’s translation).

His practice is locally anchored given his use of a visual lexicon particular to his island of paternal descent. The incorporation of traditional heritage as subject matter in his paintings conveys inherent practices and forms of knowledge to his viewing audience. He firmly juxtaposes his paintings against the highly standardised and rigidly codified iconic carvings produced by local artisans (such as miniature *tamtams*, *namange* figurines and *rom* masks) that are purchased by international tourists as souvenirs.⁸⁸ For Touré, art is not merely the reproduction of prescriptively repeated forms but, rather, a unique representation of identity, community, values and beliefs.

⁸⁸ For further discussion regarding the production of carved wooden artefacts, see Chapter 4.

With this in mind he asserts that his paintings present *ol tru sumting* (true things), intrinsic codes, traditions and cosmologies that inform ni-Vanuatu ways of life. Touré holds that it is this intangible quality that secures both the financial and aesthetic value of his canvases. He states

I must make paintings that are true to my culture, so when people look at my work they can trust the story that I am telling them. I want people to visually recognise my work and know that I am telling the truth of my *kastom*. All my art must represent the truth. I combine the truth of my heritage with my imagination to present *kastom* in a new way. Contemporary art is based in truth – it is an extension of *kastom* and our traditions (interview, 22 November 2013, author's translation).

His canvases are bounded by a seemingly paradoxical rhetoric. While on the one hand contemporary art must embody the imaginative creativity of its producer, on the other hand it should communicate facts within a framework of established socio-cultural conventions. Touré positions his paintings as documents of social history, equating his paints and supports with the pen and paper of the historian, or the camera and audio-recorder of the anthropologist. His practice is a means by which to chronicle and critique *laef todae* (life today) and therefore, 'promote and protect the culture and heritage of the country' (interview, 22 November 2013, author's translation). Much like Tovovur, Touré regards his role as an artist to be imbued with an honourable responsibility to visually represent past and present-day customs, axioms and doctrines that illuminate indigenous realities and practices in an ever evolving globalised world.

A Traditional Ambae Marriage is based on *kastom* from Touré's home island that relates to the matrimonial union of a bride and her groom. A young woman on her wedding day – the central protagonist of the scene – occupies the left foreground of the picture. She sits holding a large palm leaf above her head, over which is draped a plaited pandanus mat, known by the name *qana hunhune* in the village of Longana located on the north-east corner of the island (Bolton 2003: 101). By accentuating the properties of the textile, Touré exemplifies the physical and psychological attributes deemed desirable in a wife. He explains that the 'rounded shape of the mat symbolises the fertility of the bride' while the 'structure of the mat allows it to fold in upon itself and this signifies that a woman must be able to bring her family together during times of dispute' (interview, 12 November 2012, author's translation). The triangular

patterning on the textile, representative of sugarcane, acts as a metaphor for marriage given that the tip of a stem is bitter while the stalk contains the sweetness. Touré compares the qualities of the grass to the ongoing relationship between a man and his wife, noting that the ‘longer a marriage lasts the stronger and more pleasing the relationship becomes’ (interview, 12 November 2012, author’s translation). Similarly, the rectangular stencilling, indicating the stomach of a shark, highlights the innate ability of a wife to absorb daily problems that her family may encounter. As Sue Farran (2004: 252) notes that ‘in Ambae women achieve status through pig killing and their wedding costume will reflect the rank they have achieved.’

The woman is flanked by four male figures in traditional dress, each of whom has contributed to her bride-price: root crops of taro and kava (lower left), a tusked boar (lower centre) and a stack of woven mats decorated with intricate geometric designs (lower right). Touré notes that ‘during this part of the ceremony the man and woman are separated. The groom stays with the old men of his village while his male relatives present the payment to the bride and her family’ (interview, 12 November 2012, author’s translation). The goods act as part of a negotiated property exchange, a sign of compensation for the bride’s impending transfer to the home of her new husband. The highly stylised motifs that comprise the body of the preeminent male figure within the composition (middle right), emblematised key components of the wedding ceremony. The icon of a rooster dominates the man’s left hand side, his shoulder being decorated with the head of the bird while its crest and feathers extend along his torso and upper arm. The plumes of the animal add vibrant colour to the customary masks and headdress worn during ritual performances. The conch shell, visible on the man’s right forearm, conveys the traditional means by which villagers are summoned to ceremonies and celebrations. The pig tusk bracelet that adorns his wrist visually evokes his socio-political status within the community and indicates the specific role he must play during the wedding. Further, the footprints on the man’s chest and stomach denote the steps that the bride, groom and their respective kin will undertake during the certification of the couple’s matrimonial union.

The emergent social contract and reciprocal relations between the two families are further highlighted by way of a turtle that sits in the middle of the canvas. The motif pictorially recounts a *kastom* story from Ambae – *Rat mo Totel* (The Rat and the Turtle) – that encourages peace, friendship and harmony between divergent clans and communities of the island. While swimming in the ocean, a turtle bears witness to a

distressed rat on the verge of drowning. Although the two animals are of different species the turtle comes to the rat's rescue, carrying the small creature on his shell to the safety of land. Waiting ashore however, are residents of a local hamlet keen to capture the two as their flesh will provide a hearty meal. The rat, with his speed and agility, flees the impending doom, taking refuge in dense bush. The turtle, slow and cumbersome under the weight of his body, is taken prisoner. As nightfall approaches the expectant villagers prepare to cook their feast, unaware that the rat has nimbly returned to seek out and protect his new friend. Gnawing through a rope that binds the turtle to his place of imprisonment, the rat frees the mammal and aids his escape to freedom. The story acts as an apt metaphor for the relationship formed between familial lineages upon the marriage of their offspring. By way of analogy, Touré suggests that the sharing of wisdom and innate skills 'makes families stronger and ensures that the woman and man have a safe and happy life' (interview, 12 November 2012, author's translation). The prosperity of the occasion is highlighted in the lower right hand corner of the painting as guests dance by moonlight, alongside a kava bowl and clump of melek root (*Antiaris toxicaria*), in celebration of the union.

STORIES

Kastom stories, in and of themselves, provide primary subject matter for many artists. As a means of intergenerational knowledge transmission, oral traditions are a cornerstone of ni-Vanuatu intangible heritage. In recognition, the VKS initiated the Oral Arts Project, a four year programme (2004-2008) that sought to promote and popularise the sharing of *kastom* legends in verbal format.⁸⁹ These narratives, as 'formulary devices' (Lindstrom 2011a: 54), preserve and communicate historical information, events and activities. Narratives most often encapsulate local notions of time and space, serving as markers of authority because stories 'properly speak only to those with kin-based or other local rights to tell, listen, and learn' (Lindstrom 2011a: 50). Oral histories assert claims to land and identity, chiefly status and sacred rites. Collective memory is formulated by the celebration of ancestral spirits and

⁸⁹ The Oral Arts Project culminated with the production of five publications: *Bimbingo: Wan kastom stori blong Erakor*; *Kwarisusu: Wan kastom stori blong Ambae*; *Mashishiki wetem woman we I gat wing: Wan kastom stori blong Futuna*; *Rat mo Nambilak*; *Wan kastom stori blong Ambrym*; and, *Nabanga: An Illustrated Anthology of the Oral Traditions of Vanuatu*.

mythological protagonists.⁹⁰ As Kirk Huffman (2005b: 12) explains, ‘these stories did not develop to be written down; they are part of an ancient, complex, living tradition that is passed down by word of mouth.’ Given the diverse linguistic groups of the archipelago the same story may exist in different versions, with slight variances of narrative evident from area to area, and clan to clan. Yet, as Huffman (2005b: 11) contends, ‘many of these stories follow certain almost universal themes but look at them and deal with them in our own Vanuatu way.’ The rich array of themes, characters and plots presented in *kastom* stories have informed the content of visual representations created by local practitioners.

Eric Natuoivi, for example, incorporates the motifs and narratives of *kastom* stories from his home island of Futuna within his two- and three-dimensional works of art. He explains, ‘Much of my art is based on my *kastom*. I use the traditional stories, myths and legends of my rich culture in my art. We must protect and promote our practices and beliefs, and through contemporary art we revive *kastom*’ (interview, 1 October 2012). With this in mind, Natuoivi and other senior men from the island have, in recent years, made concerted efforts to resurrect endangered aspects of local *kastom* with younger generations of Futunese (see Chapter 2). As the only sculptor currently working in the ceramic medium, Natuoivi’s creations capture indigenous mythology in visual form, thus acting as vehicles for the active promotion of intangible forms of cultural heritage. Natuoivi explains

We have very strong *kastom* stories that connect all the islands of my province [Tafea]. We have sacred places that are marked by stones and caves in the landscape – these are the things that inspire my work. My pots and prints have real meaning as they are related to my *kastom* and show our belief in the spirit world (interview, 21 November 2013).

The esoteric cosmologies of which Natuoivi speaks are reflected in the traditional crafts of the island. Aside from the production of pandanus mats and baskets created by female weavers, Futuna is characterised by the prevalence of intangible arts including dance, song, music and storytelling. As a consequence, material objects that embody

⁹⁰ Recent debates, for example, between the governments of Vanuatu and France regarding territorial claims to the islands of Hunter and Matthew have centred upon information contained within indigenous *kastom* stories from the Tafea province.

indigenous ancestors and spirits, such as carvings, masks, and headdresses do not feature in the rituals or, by extension, the artistic outputs of the island. Rather, aesthetic sensibilities are subtly expressed: the protocols associated with the ocular presentation of a traditional banquet or feast, for example, highlight the incorporation of visual expression within the rhetoric of lived collective practice (Eric Natuoivi, interview, 14 December 2012). The materiality of Natuoivi's outputs not only distinguishes his corpus from that of other artists, but also visually reiterates the nuances of abstruse Futunese heritage.

In his image *Rescue Mission* (Fig. 39), a woodblock print on a support of hand-crafted banana leaf paper, Natuoivi graphically recounts a narrative in which Majijiki – a mythical spirit to whom the creation of Futuna is ascribed – rescues a group of children from the clutches of a malevolent *devel* (devil) named Basiesi, himself a recurring character in Futunese mythology. Natuoivi explains that, 'Majijiki is a good and bad spirit. In some legends he is a good spirit because he tries to help the people of the island, but in other stories he is tricky and sneaky and causes trouble' (interview, 21 November 2013). Represented in the centre of the image by a single eye, Majijiki is, in this instance, a benign ally to local villagers. Acting upon knowledge that Basiesi has kidnapped a group of children and intends to consume their bodies and souls for his evening meal, Majijiki uses his magical powers to free the youngsters from their locked den of imprisonment. With no escape route the heroic spectre transforms the children into seeds, implanting them in the core of a large breadfruit that hangs above an as yet unlit fire. It is this moment that Natuoivi captures in his vibrantly coloured print: the red sperm-shaped motifs that are encased in circles of black pigment represent each child under Majijiki's protection. Basiesi, recognising that he has been duped, begins to stoke his fire in a determined act of hungry displeasure. The children, however, on the orders of their saviour urinate on the encroaching flames to subvert their impending doom. In a rage their adversary departs in search of more wood, at which time Majijiki converts his brood back to human form, ensuring that every child escapes to the safety of their home.

Natuoivi further utilises indigenous oral narratives in his mixed-media sculpture *Bunga, Sina and their Twin Sons* (Fig. 40 and Fig. 41). Best known for his three-dimensional forms, here the artist combines clay, wood and coconut fibre to tell the story of the first inhabitants of Futuna. A highly stylised double-headed carving extends from a hand-coiled circular ceramic pot, The upper face, with its masculine features and

elongated chin, represents Bunga, while the lower inverted profile depicts his wife, Sina. The two, with Sina expecting the birth of her first child, lived on the island of Tanna from where Bunga dived for shellfish beyond the edge of a coral reef. On one such occasion, with Sina following behind in a canoe, an act of trickery occurs. Basiesi (the devil discussed above) forcibly ejects Sina from the vessel, after which he assumes her physical appearance. Unaware of Basiesi's duplicity, Bunga returns to the canoe and the two make their way home. Sina, lost at sea amid strong currents, drifts helplessly farther from land. Alone in deep waters she desperately seeks rest and reprieve. Natuoivi explains that, 'suddenly her wish came true as she felt something under her feet pushing her away from the water's surface. She was standing on a rock in the middle of the ocean. The rock continued to rise from the sea to become the land that we now call Futuna' (interview, 28 November 2013). It is here that Sina recuperates from her ordeal, making a new home on the island before giving birth to not one, but two baby boys.

Bunga, meanwhile, continues to live with Basiesi, all the while believing the devil to be his wife. As the months pass however, he becomes suspicious as no child is born. Unbeknown to him Sina raises the twins as they grow to become strong young men, represented in Natuoivi's sculpture by two identically carved wooden forms. The two are increasingly inquisitive as to the absence of their father. Sina tells them the story of her separation from Bunga, upon which the twins immediately prepare to depart for Tanna: they cut a canoe, harvest food and kava, craft spears and arrows and sacrifice a pig. Guided by the smoke from a fire across the sea the sons navigate their journey. Warmly greeted by Bunga and his fellow kinsmen upon their arrival ashore, the two are ushered inside the village *nakamal* where they reveal their true identities. The killing of Basiesi is unanimously agreed by the men of the hamlet as a means of avenging his deceit. Bunga wastes no time, rushing to his hut whereupon he imprisons Basiesi before setting the dwelling alight. With the death of the villainous spirit assured, Bunga and his sons return to Futuna to be reunited with Sina. Capturing this moment in his mixed media form, Natuoivi explains 'the pot and the arrangement of the wooden elements shows the relationship between Bunga and Sina and their twin sons. It symbolises a happy family relationship' (interview, 28 November 2013).

Stories that champion family relationships are also rendered by Matthew Abbock. Just like John, Ambong and Touré, Abbock is the only contemporary artist from his home island of Paama. He notes

My work tends to focus on the stories and *kastom* from my island and my paintings talk about the identity of people from Paama. Everything in Vanuatu is connected to the spirits and the ancestors. In my paintings I show our belief in the traditional ways of life. The history of my island, my village of Lehilli, and my family inspires my art and each of my paintings is an extension of my identity and culture' (interview, 29 October 2013, author's translation)

Of importance to Abbock is the visual differentiation of his images from those produced by other practitioners. Since 2013 he has crafted his own canvases, using a mixture of calico, glue and white acrylic paint (Fig. 42) providing him both an economical working material and a point of difference within the local artworld. Coupled with this, he incorporates *kastom* as subject matter in his paintings to ensure that local audiences recognise his outputs. He explains, 'Contemporary art is a way for us to share our stories and cultures – it is a way to show the traditions of different islands. Art has always been an important part of life in Vanuatu and this now includes contemporary paintings and sculptures' (interview, 5 November 2012, author's translation). Being from one of the smaller islands of the archipelago, Abbock's heritage is central to his artistic aesthetic and ideology.

In his acrylic on canvas, *Stori blong Paama* (Fig. 53), he conveys a *kastom* story that celebrates indigenous wisdom. Relayed to the artist by his elders, the narrative rationalises the small number of people from his home island. The lower section of the painting is dominated by the motif of a turtle, rendered in muted tones of plum, grey and pink, the same colours that comprise and unite the elements of his overall image. Alongside the turtle stands a translucently bodied figure. His oversized head, three eyes and menacingly outstretched fingers indicate that he is the deathly spirit of a devil. The proximity of the two icons visually conveys that the ghoul has infiltrated the body of the marine creature and taken possession of its soul. The relationship between the supernatural and the world of mortals is denoted by way of four men aboard a canoe, returning to Paama after a fishing expedition during which they discovered and captured the turtle. Abbock notes that 'the men sing the whole way home to celebrate their catch. The more they catch, the louder they sing' (interview, 29 October 2013, author's translation). Taking their haul to the *nakamal* upon their arrival ashore, the

men prepare a feast of *laplap* (pudding) using the flesh of the turtle.⁹¹ The resultant pudding however, is tainted by the poison of the devil. Portions of food are offered to each family in the hamlet and some households are overcome by greed: rather than being perceptive to the harmful ingredient of the *laplap*, they instead choose to eat, consequently succumbing to a fate of death at the hands of the devil. Abbock explains, ‘When all the people died it was a very sad time. Although Paama now has fewer people, we are wise. Our ancestors knew better than to eat the *laplap* so their strength and insight resides in our blood today’ (interview, 29 October 2013, author’s translation).

It is not only established artists such as Natuoivi, Busai and Abbock who take *kastom* stories as subject matter. Younger, emerging practitioners also utilise oral histories, thus showing the intergenerational relevance of spoken word traditions. For example, Cyrus Nivwo combines mythologies from his home island of Erromango with the technical skills he acquired during his art studies at the VIT to produce canvases that visually interrogate local narratives and traditional stories. He explains

My work is inspired by the landscape around me, and the *kastom* stories and cultures of Vanuatu. People of my island share stories with me and I use these as inspiration for my drawings and paintings. My work is influenced by life on Erromango and my head is full of *kastom* knowledge that I want to share. I paint and draw what I see before me every day (interview, 8 January 2013, author’s translation).

Nivwo divides his time between Port Vila and Erromango so that, unlike many other youths of his age who reside in the capital, his ties to his island home are reinforced as is his understanding of the nuances of local *kastom* particular to his familial lineage. By regularly returning to his place of birth, Nivwo is exposed to a broader range of indigenous rituals, experiences and practices than he would otherwise encounter in Port Vila.

In his acrylic on canvas *Pis blong Erromango* (Fig. 44), Nivwo relays a story told to him by a village elder that details the historical attainment of *pis* (peace) between factional tribes of the island. His image encompasses a palette of muted tones

⁹¹ *Laplap* is a national ni-Vanuatu dish. Taro or yam are ground into a paste then combined with meat and fresh coconut cream. The pudding is wrapped in taro or spinach leaves and baked in an underground oven.

with pigments of brown, grey, white and black reflecting the natural environment in which the scene is set. The background of the painting is dominated by a large cave perched atop a cliff. The cave, standing adjacent to a reef known for its abundant supply of shellfish, provides shelter to a murderous giant who preys upon unsuspecting local men as they gather foodstuff from beneath the water's surface. Six human skulls lie visible at the entrance to the dwelling, thus reinforcing the brutality of the giant's slayings. In order to protect their people, the chiefs of the island declare that inter-tribal warfare cease and, instead, that the villages of Erromango unite as a means of killing the giant. Consequently, violent altercations such as that rendered toward the left hand side of the image, where one man holds a spear to the head of another during a moment of conflict, are relegated to the distant past. Nivwo explains, 'from that time onward it became difficult for the people of Erromango to make war with each other as they were now bound by their duty to come together to slay the giant' (interview, 8 January 2013, author's translation). At the conclusion of a public meeting attended by chiefs and warriors, a strategic plan of incursion was agreed and men from disparate hamlets made their coordinated attack on the giant. The imposingly high lattice fence erected around the perimeter of the cave proves no match for the penetrative weapons carried by the assassins as they infiltrate the evil sanctum. After executing the giant the men mount his body upon a cross erected among a cluster of tall tress, as depicted on the right hand side of the canvas. A large stain of prominent black ink representing the blood of the villainous giant monopolises the lower right hand corner of the image, acting as a visual cue that symbolises the continued peace between the tribes of the island.

While it is often difficult to definitively ascertain the precise date that a *kastom* story first emerged, it proves interesting to consider the metaphors contained within the narratives discussed above. Why do artists opt to visually represent some stories and not others? What messages do their selections convey? Janet Dixon Keller and Takaronga Kuautonga (2007: 1) make the point that, 'Traditional stories and musical performances are often unwittingly stigmatized within contemporary Vanuatu. Performed in tourist arenas or in displays of ethnic pride, or imagined as symbols of national heritage, the verbal arts are seldom plumbed for textual meanings.' The works of art made by Natuoivi, Abbock and Nivwo reference stories with a moralising logic. The religious overtones of each narrative pit good against evil, with the devil being either directly mentioned or indirectly implied. This Christianisation of *kastom* stories links to the missionary project undertaken throughout the islands, beginning in the late 19th

century. As discussed in Chapter 1, the effects of European migration to the region had devastating effects on local communities, particularly as diseases ravaged tribes, villages and hamlets. Might it be that the stories depicted in the images created by the aforementioned artists demonstrate the resilience of ni-Vanuatu? Each of the narratives centres upon the protection and longevity of the family unit and wider community, thus enacting memories of resistance against, and triumph over, foreign invaders. The reimagining of particular historical events within decidedly local contexts extends the rich bank of subject matter available to artists working in Port Vila. Island stories become embedded within a matrix of narratives that circulate throughout the capital.

CONCLUSION

The many and varied depictions of *kastom* produced by contemporary artists highlights the centrality of indigenous knowledge and heritage to current creative discourses. Given the mix of artists that comprise the local artworld, town has become a pluralistic site of production where cultural diversity is visually expressed, promoted and celebrated. Such representations highlight a passionate longing on the part of makers that *kastom* not be lost or forgotten. Port Vila's evolution from a site of temporary employment to a space of permanent residence has resulted in 'a new kind of spatial and social configuration' (Mitchell 2003: 358) in which communities strive to *holem taet kastom blong olegta* (preserve their customs). Amid anxieties about the erosion of traditional knowledge and values in the capital, the declaration of *kastom* may be just as important as its practice. For artists, images that manifest aspects of their indigenous heritage visually signify their commitment to the project of preservation. Yet, rather than exactly replicate the features of a particular figure, ceremony or story, makers instead enact creative licence to produce highly stylised forms. By doing so, their outputs reflect the urban environment of their creation – a space in which the intertwined forces of *kastom*, modernity and globalisation result in 'shifting moral codes, values and ethics' (Rawlings 1999: 72).

Just as genealogical lineage, status and gender influence the practice of *kastom*, so too do such identifiers mediate the objects produced by different artists. As this chapter has demonstrated, practitioners draw upon a multiplicity of lived experiences to make works of art that convey local beliefs, values and ideals. By doing so, makers in the capital proudly reproduce elements of *kastom* in order to share the unique characteristics and idiosyncratic legacies of their *ples*. The care and deliberation with

which Jean-Claude Touré renders the nuances of marriage particular to Ambae are in equal measure evident in Juliette Pita's depictions of dance from Erromango. Similarly, the determined dedication that informs Joseph John's representation of a village chief from the Shepherds is just as resonant in Eric Natuoivi's portrayal of a story from Futuna. The innate value of an image or form is predicated on its content. A large public mural by Jobo Lovo holds as much validity as a small acrylic by David Ambong as each adopts embedded local categories as subject matter. In the culturally diverse context of town to paint, draw or sculpt one's *kastom* is to artistically affirm one's island, urban and national identity.

CHARTER 4

KASTOM AS ICONOGRAPHY

The portrayal of indigenous traditions, customs and practices is a defining feature of much contemporary art created by local practitioners based in Port Vila. As the previous chapter demonstrated, artists take *kastom* ceremonies, rituals and knowledge as their subject matter to share the distinct heritage of their home island with viewers. Yet, closer analysis of many paintings, sculptures and carvings produced by these makers reveals that the dictums of *kastom* mediate more than just themes and narratives. The rendering of specific icons is highly codified as particular artists claim ownership of, and entitlement to, distinct motifs. During periods of fieldwork between 2011 and 2013 intellectual property relations were a topical matter of discussion among practitioners as well as artisans, chiefs, cultural officers and government officials. In an increasingly globalised marketplace authorship has become a highly prized and indignantly contested commodity. While Nawita and Red Wave encourage representations of *kastom* among their respective members, key questions emerge: who holds the right to reproduce certain symbols? Under what circumstances are reproductions permissible? How are conflicts and disputes resolved? This chapter examines the use of stylised imagery and, in doing so, exposes the customary and legislative regulations under which practitioners in the capital work.

In recent years international attention has focused on the implementation of formalised intellectual property regimes throughout the south Pacific region. Organisations such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) have initiated agreements, model laws and treaties for the protection of traditional knowledge, expressions of indigenous culture, biological diversity, plant genetic resources and intangible heritage.⁹² As a means of preserving the moral and economic rights of individuals these legislative measures are intended to safeguard against the incursions of modern technology, tourism, mass

⁹² Examples include the WTO Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS), the UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and the SPC Pacific Model Law for the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture (for detailed discussion, see Forsyth 2015).

media and capitalist commercialisation (Farren 2009: 132). For many nations the resultant mandates are a pluralist amalgamation of inherited colonial decrees, local customary principles and adapted regional policies. Throughout Vanuatu the impact on many villages has been negligible – subsistence lifestyles continue to typify the daily realities of a largely rural populace. As Ralph Regenvanu (2009: 1) notes

The traditional economy ... refers to the way in which our indigenous Pacific societies are organised to look after the concerns and resources of their members ... The objective reality of Vanuatu today is that the traditional economy is by far the most important and predominant economy in the country. Far more people participate in the traditional economy, and to a significantly greater extent, than they do in the cash economy.

The application of foreign legislation based on Eurocentric constructs of ownership has largely unaltered the priorities and concerns of self-sufficient agrarian communities.

This is not to say that tribes and hamlets of the archipelago are disengaged from such debates – the truth is much the opposite. Long before international organisations prioritised the development of intellectual property charters ni-Vanuatu relied upon *kastom kopiraet* (custom copyright) to regulate access to, and circulation of, highly codified indigenous practices, traditional knowledge and expressions of culture. Since independence the development of state insignia has signified an ideological shift in discourses relating to the public display of local iconography. The chiefly body, namele leaf and circular boar's tusk are today associated with political sovereignty and collective identity. Prior to the introduction of the country's flag and crest however, broad circulation of domestic pictorial forms was all but non-existent. Symbols, designs and patterns were instead intrinsically linked to particular islands with diverse socio-cultural groups determining production and dissemination. The creation of objects of *kastom* such as carvings, mats, baskets and effigies – along with the enactment of intangible heritage including dances, songs and stories – were, and still are, firmly entrenched by unwritten yet highly prescriptive codes.

Thus, we can ask what this means for artists working in the capital. How do practitioners navigate the undocumented rules that govern their entitlement to specific icons and motifs? Under the rubrics of *kastom kopiraet* three interconnected concepts dominate the practice of many makers: *ples* (place), *raet* (right) and *rispek* (respect).

Together these terms dictate the use of local icons in contemporary art formats. *Ples*, an identity marker that signifies entitlement to particular forms of knowledge, is a socially and spatially constructed category of indigenous personhood (see Chapter 1). As Lissant Bolton (2003a: 67) notes, ‘Ideas about place (*ples*) are crucial to the formulation of *kastom* in Vanuatu . . . *Kastom* refers to what people know and do in the archipelago, it is itself framed by that knowledge and practice.’ For artists in Port Vila *ples* represents a duality that encompasses both island heritage and urban culture. The genealogical lineage of painters, sculptors and carvers legitimises their depictions of *kastom* by way of specific motifs. As Sero Kuautonga explains, ‘The idea or belief of copyright has always existed in our minds. If something is not part of my culture then it is not proper for me to paint it’ (interview, 11 October 2012). The *ples* from which one originates preordains the roles and responsibilities, along with the rites and rituals, to which an individual has both access and obligation.

By extension the *raet* to acquire and relay knowledge is strictly controlled by the constructs of *ples*. Within the framework of *kastom kopiraet* the appropriation of certain universal symbols is an entitlement afforded to all contemporary artists. The motifs of nationhood (see Chapter 1) are a recurring feature in the outputs of a number of practitioners, irrespective of their island heritage. As Emmanuel Watt reasons, ‘The pig tusk and the namele leaf are symbols that people associate with Vanuatu’ (interview, 17 January 2013, author’s translation). Artists include these icons in their paintings and sculptures for one of two reasons: to visually convey state patriotism and to metaphorically posit their practices within a definitive locale of production. Other symbols, design and patterns however, are *tabu*, their use mediated by *ples*. For example, Andrew Tovovur notes, ‘I have the right to paint about my history and the history of my island. I cannot steal symbols from other islands’ (interview, 9 October 2012, author’s translation). Depending upon the island with which an artist has ties, the accessibility of visual content is further determined by factors such as status and gender. From one island to the next, the *raet* to knowledge and its reproduction, is governed by insulated principles specific to that site. Discussing the situation as it applies to Futuna, Eric Natuoivi explains

In some areas of Vanuatu there is *tabu kastom*, but in my island there are no secrets about *kastom* so I am free to do anything so long as I know it is part of my culture. Some islands in Vanuatu are very restrictive about *kastom*. You cannot do

contemporary art and depict something from *kastom* that belongs to Ambrym or Erromango. But in Futuna there are no restrictions. It is good because we are trying to revive *kastom*. Through contemporary art we revive *kastom* (interview, 1 October 2012).

While some artists have to access extensive image banks linked to their island of heritage, other practitioners are restricted to the borrowing of particular icons.

With this in mind, one of the fundamental characteristics of the local artworld, and ni-Vanuatu society more broadly, is *rispek* – the showing of esteem and deference to others and their customary practices. In a presentation focusing on the topic of gender development in Vanuatu, Bolton noted that a survey of women fieldworkers from 46 language groups revealed that in each dialect there were at least two words for respect (see Tor and Toka 2004: 14).⁹³ While some words literally translated to mean the English equivalent of respect, others described a demonstrative action or behaviour. Thus, *rispek* is far more than a colloquy. It is an active category of social relativity that predicates notions of honour and reverence throughout the archipelago, including artists based in the capital. Explaining the applicability of *rispek*, Kuautonga states,

The *kastoms* of other islands only have meaning to people from that *ples* – a *kastom* from Pentecost does not have any meaning or value to me. This is why we respect each other's *kastoms* – we do not know the significance of *kastom* to other people. We each have different *kastoms* from our islands (interview, 17 January 2013, author's translation).

As the above statement makes clear, the significance of specific symbols is directly linked to an artist's personhood and *ples*. The visual reproduction of motifs from islands other than the practitioner's own is not only a sign of disrespect, but also a meaningless gesture that debases notions of *rispek*, a central component of the local artworld.

LAND DIVING

One of the earliest examples of contestation with regard to copyright and contemporary art was played out in the local media in 1995. Displayed as part of *Art 95*, one of a series of exhibitions organised by a committee of expatriates in Port Vila, was a

⁹³ The presentation was held at the VKS on 23 March 2004.

miniature reproduction of a land dive tower used in *kastom* ceremonies particular to villages on the southern coast of Pentecost island. Entitled *The Spirit of Man*, the mixed media form was constructed by an Australian accountant, John Simpson, from branches, string and papier maché (Fig. 45). Known as the *nagol* (body) in the Sa language of the region, the ritual is both an agrarian ceremony and male initiation rite that holds profoundly sacred ancestral meaning for local hamlets.⁹⁴ The performance, as witnessed in the village of Lonorore in 2010, centres upon a single tower (often measuring more than 20 metres in height) built by initiated men using tree branches, vines and hand-made rope. Positioned at varying intervals along the face of the wooden structure are collapsible diving boards from which boys and young men leap, their ankles bound with lianas connected to the tower as a means of breaking their fall (Fig. 46). Margaret Jolly (1994: 134) explains that, ‘The technical details of the tower’s construction and the meaning of the ritual are closely related to the cycle of yam cultivation and to the symbolic association between yams and men’s bodies.’⁹⁵ The virility of the male body is allegorically linked to the fertility of the land. As each participant prepares to jump, a female relative emerges from the chanting group of men and women who stand below. She takes her position in leading the rhythmic chorus that sings and whistles for the success of the ceremony, the yam harvest and the communal health of the village (Fig. 47).

Global interest in the *nagol* surfaced in 1960 when the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) screened footage of the ceremony as part of its series *The Peoples of Paradise*. Filmed by television personality and naturalist, David Attenborough, while travelling via the New Hebrides to Tonga (by invitation from Queen Salote to attend the Royal Kava Ceremony), the broadcaster described the *kastom* of the island as an ‘ancient ritual ... fast disappearing’ (The People of Paradise: The Land Divers of Pentecost 1960). A decade later in 1970, Hungarian-born Kal Muller documented the *nagol* as part of a 21-page feature spread entitled ‘Land Diving with the Pentecost Islanders’ for the magazine *National Geographic*.⁹⁶ Such international media coverage of the ceremony consequently extended the financial, social and political capital of the

⁹⁴ The ritual is also sometimes referred to as *gol*, *n’gol*, and *nangol*.

⁹⁵ The *nagol* is also linked to a *kastom* story in which a wife, determined to deny the vigorous sexual advances of her husband, tied lianas to her ankles before jumping from the upper branches of a banyan tree. Her husband, unaware of his wife’s cunning plan, also jumped from the tree only to plunge to his death (see Jolly 1994: 134).

⁹⁶ Muller was the first European to perform the *nagol*, having been invited by the men of Bunlap village (see Muller 1970).

ritual. As a result, the early years of the 1970s bore witness to internal conflicts between opposing clans regarding the *raet* to perform the *nagol*. Two key issues, namely, the ceremonial site and the particular months in which the dive is undertaken, informed debates. For example, in February 1972 under pressure from British agents of the Condominium, a performance was staged at Point Cross on the island of Espiritu Santo, to coincide with an official visit made by Queen Elizabeth II on the Royal Yacht *Britannia*. Against the advice of local chiefs from Pentecost, a group of inexperienced men participated in the ritual during which one, John Mark Tabi, fell to his death. Explaining the accident, Kirk Huffman (Vanuatu Daily Digest 18 May 2014) notes that ‘the time at which the rituals are done coincides with the time that the vines – if weather over the previous months has been of the right type – are in the correctly supple and not-easily breakable condition to tie around the divers’ ankles.’ In more recent years tourism operators based in Port Vila have continued to demand that *nagol* performances be staged in other areas of the archipelago, particularly the islands of Efate and Espiritu Santo, which are more accessible to foreign visitors. While some local villagers (along with development agencies and academics) argue for the financial benefits to be made from additional performances, others denounce the post-colonialist commercial appropriation and capitalist monetisation of *kastom* practices and rituals (see Cheer, Reeves and Laing 2013; Huffman 2014 – in Makin 17 May; Tabani 2010).

A case heard by Chief Justice Charles Vaudin D’Imecourt in the Supreme Court of the Republic of Vanuatu in 1992, illustrates the competing ideological, political and financial demands placed upon the *nagol*.⁹⁷ The dispute involved the export of the ceremony to the island of Espiritu Santo by the Assal clan, otherwise known as the Felora Association, a group of traditional owners to the rights of the ritual. Believing themselves to be marginalised by commercial tour operators in Efate who, it was argued, were colluding with other villages of the island, the Felora Association determined to perform the *nagol* for financial benefit on the island of Espiritu Santo instead. In defiance of the Malbangbang Council of Chiefs of South Pentecost and the Bilmavanua Council of Chiefs of Pentecost, a group of men travelled to Beleru with the intent of performing the *nagol* on the custom land of the Chief Pierre Vatu. Recalled to their home island after being dismissed by the Council of Chiefs of Santo the group returned

⁹⁷ The final ruling in the case was made on 10 July 1992 (see Civil Case No. 1A of 1992 via www.paclii.org/vu/cases/VUSC/1992/5.html).

to Pentecost and initiated civic legal proceedings. Mr Vincent Boulekon, acting on behalf of Chief Assal and Chief Vatu, petitioned the court, claiming that the two clan's constitutional rights had been breached as they were prevented from determining the circumstances under which they had the authority to perform their *kastom*.⁹⁸ Chief Willie Bongmatur Maldo, then President of Malvatumauri, represented the defendants (that being the Council of Chiefs of Santo and the Santo Regional Council) and successfully argued against the applicant's claims. Chief Justice D'Imecourt ruled that 'in conformity with custom ... the Nagol jumping should return to Pentecost' (Supreme Court of the Republic of Vanuatu 1992).

Amid such tensions, Simpson's hand-crafted sculpture reignited debate concerning the construction of the *nagol* tower by uninitiated and inexperienced men, even if only as an object deliberately created to be viewed in the context of a visual art exhibition. Chief Telkon Watas, a dominantly powerful leader from Banlap village of south Pentecost, objected to the sculpture. In an article published in the *Vanuatu Weekly* (17 June 1995: 8) it was reported that he argued

Mr John Simpson has no right to reproduce an art piece based on ... traditional culture. The way he used it has violated the traditional values which ... have been respected for years ... To let any body [sic] doing anything based on our culture is encouraging the damage of our cultural values. As owner of Nagol, I will never let any body from other places to take control of it.

With the assistance of the VKS, Chief Watas centred his complaints upon Simpson's *raet* to reproduce traditional knowledge in three-dimensional form. As an Australian expatriate in Vanuatu, the accountant did not possess any connection to the *ples* from which the *nagol* originates, nor did he hold the ancestral lineage by which highly codified information is transmitted. Consequently, the grievances aired by Chief Watas were predicated on notions of *rispik* for indigenous systems of intellectual property rights rather than Simpson's ethnicity.⁹⁹ It was the breach of *kastom kopiraet* that

⁹⁸ The petitioners claimed that their fundamental rights had been breached, citing sections 5(1)(g), (h), (i) and (k) of the Constitution (that being, respectively, their freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of movement and equal treatment under the law).

⁹⁹ Guido Carlo Pigliasco and Thorolf Lipp however, lay claims of corruption and illegitimacy against Watas. They argue that, 'He has spread the word that his ancestors were all chiefs, trying to mythologize the history of his chieftaincy and turn it into a "natural" right' (2011: 392). From this, the two conclude that, 'It is very clear that Telkon's "indigenous knowledge" is not pure, timeless, or archaic, but rather practical and benefit orientated' (2011: 394).

problematised the sculpture, particularly at a time when the *nagol* was subject to claims of protection. As local communities reacted to the commodification of the ceremony, the ritual oscillated between indigenous celebration and tourist spectacle.

In response Sero Kuautonga, as President of Nawita, published an open letter in the following edition of the *Vanuatu Weekly* (24 June 1995) in which he distanced the association from *Art 95* and the controversy surrounding the inclusion of *The Spirit of Man*. He wrote

Nawita Assosiesen i wantem mekem i klia se ino hem i bin oganasem exhibisen ia mo tu hemi no stap inseat long hem ... Nawita Assosiesen i wantem mekem i klia se hemi respektem oltaem raet blong ol kastom ona mo oltaem i gat respect long ol jif blong yumi man Vanuatu. Nawita Assosiesen I mekem klarifikeisen ia from i nogud sam man oli ting se olgeta tu oli tekpat long exhibisen blong Art '95. Art '95 hemi wan grup blong ol artist we wan long olgeta i no memba nating blong Nawita Assosiesen.

(The Nawita Association wants to make clear that we were not responsible for organising the exhibition, nor did we officially submit works of art for inclusion ... The Nawita Association always respects the rights of *kastom* owners and chiefs in Vanuatu. The Nawita Association wishes to clarify that we do not support the inclusion of the sculpture. *Art '95* does not comprise artists who are members of, nor affiliated with, the Nawita Association.)

At a time when contemporary art was viewed with some suspicion by local chiefs and community leaders, Nawita was eager to separate itself from debates specific to Simpson's sculpture. Fearful of reprisals against the association, Kuautonga's statement highlights the precarious social setting in which indigenous artists practiced their trades. Reflecting upon the conflict over fifteen years later, he notes that 'At the time it was important to bring the community together after independence so it was imperative that no one was upset or angry about what they saw' (interview, 11 October 2012). Nawita, by way of publically embracing notions of *rispek*, legitimised the outputs of its members within the framework of *kastom kopiraet*, thereby slowly alleviating public concern with regard to the appropriation and reproduction of traditional icons, motifs, themes and mythologies.

Throughout the late 1980s and well into the 1990s Nawita ensured that objects included in its annual exhibitions were formally vetted and approved. Emmanuel Watt

explains, ‘Years ago now when Nawita wanted to hold an exhibition we were required to write to the appropriate government Minister and seek permission. It was not easy to show our work. When the art was hung in the French Embassy it was then checked by chiefs from Malvatumauri before the exhibition opened to the public’ (interview, 17 January 2013, author’s translation). For example, a letter addressed to Watt (24 June 1992) reads, ‘*Ministry blong Justice, Culture mo Womans Affairs i agree blong yu some Exhibition blong Nawita Association long det we yu askem*’ (‘The Ministry of Justice, Culture and Women’s Affairs gives permission for the Nawita Association exhibition to be held on the dates requested’). While the artists were free to take *kastom* as their inspiration, the reproduction of certain iconography and subject matter was strictly monitored and any artworks considered to be in breach of *kopiraet* were effectively censored, the offending object removed from display and, in some instances, the artist fined.

Kuautonga recounts that after a research trip to Erromango, as a member of a VKS project team, he produced a painting that was inspired by the rock-art he had viewed inside limestone caves while on the island. He notes that, ‘I was once issued an infraction – it is because people do not understand the difference between the inspiration and the authentic thing ... A man from Erromango complained about my painting and I had to pay a cash fine of 20,000 vatu and destroy the work’ (interview, 17 January 2013, author’s translation).¹⁰⁰ The similarities between rock-art patterns and the motifs applied to tapa highlight the significance of these symbols to communities on the island, while also going some way to explain the opposition to Kuautonga’s canvas. The caves, used as places of refuge during times of warfare, hold ancestral knowledge in visual form. Meredith Wilson (1999: 88) suggests that women

intentionally reproduced kastom designs on the walls of the caves because they were afraid that through their displacement during war these pictures would be lost to future generations. Producing a relatively permanent record by concealing the art in the caves people could return and re-claim their kastom knowledge.

While Kuautonga believed his appropriation of the designs was in keeping with *kastom kopiraet*, these sentiments were clearly not shared by all. The subsequent financial and

¹⁰⁰ For further information relating to the rock art of Erromango see Bedford, Spriggs, Wilson and Regenvanu 1998; Wilson 1999, 2002.

professional repercussions that resulted from his assumed breach of indigenous intellectual property systems highlights the circumstances under which much contemporary art was produced in Port Vila during the final years of the 20th century.

SAND DRAWING

While public exhibitions presented by Nawita were scrutinised by government officials and members of Malvatumauri, other works of art created by practitioners for display and sale in commercial environments were not. As such, recourse relating to the inappropriate use of *kastom* was often played out in private domains. A watercolour created by Joseph John in 1999, entitled *Traditional Knowledge*, provides a case in point (Fig. 48). Atop a background of vibrant blue are overlaid decorative geometric patterns painted in hues of aqua, yellow and pink. The centre of the picture plane is dominated by a group of figures – a middle aged man sits among a circle comprising nine young boys, one female and one village elder. The central male figure kneels on the ground, his extended index finger touching the earth below. The gaze and attention of each onlooker are firmly centred upon the actions of the protagonist. As the title of the image suggests, the group is engaged in an activity by which ancestral knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another. The central figure, while recounting a *kastom* story to his audience, draws upon the ground to illustrate the narrative. The scene depicts a common practice in urban and rural settings throughout Vanuatu, known as *sandroing* (sand drawing), whereby clans, hamlets and families join together to relay both matrilineal and patrilineal kinship stories, histories, values and customs to offspring. At first glance, John's picture appears innocuous as it presents a modest scene that celebrates a dynamic form of indigenous cultural expression.

The ephemeral art of *sandroing* is predominantly found across the central and northern islands of the archipelago. Estimates suggest that there are over 300 individual designs (Zagala 2004: 33), with specific islands owning the rights to particular styles and motifs. The complex patterns are a unique means of retaining and transmitting traditional indigenous knowledge. The act of creation involves the use of a single finger as practitioners trace a continual line over a grid in sand, dust or ash to create geometric images that exhibit proportions of ideal symmetry (Fig 49). Often produced in *nakamals* (meeting places) and *nasaras* (dancing grounds), the intricate graphics visually communicate coded messages to restricted language and cultural groups. Symbols vary from island to island, and the status of a design, public or protected,

determines when and where a drawing may be reproduced. A single image contains multiple layers of meaning, the disclosure of which is highly dependent upon the context in which it is drawn: partial revelation of the story associated with a design will be made to uninitiated onlookers, while *kastom* knowledge will be transmitted to those of appropriate island lineage, natal affiliation and social rank. As a form of expressionistic exchange, each *sandroing* acts as a temporal mnemonic device that conveys encyclopaedic volumes of information equal to that of any written word. The themes of local history, kinship systems, indigenous rites and agricultural techniques dominate many designs, thus providing a record of established rituals, practices and mythologies.

In order to protect and promote the long-standing tradition, *sandroing* was officially inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2008.¹⁰¹ In doing so, the organisation notes that ‘As attractive symbols of Vanuatu identity, the drawings are often showcased as a form of decorative folklore for tourists and other commercial purposes. If left unchecked, this tendency to appreciate sand drawing on a purely aesthetic level may result in the loss of the tradition’s deeper symbolic significance and original social function’ (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation). In consultation with community leaders and fieldworkers, the VKS compiled a database of 215 designs from among 80 language groups of the Malampa, Penama and Torba provinces for submission to the register.¹⁰² In keeping with the tropes of *kastom*, and so as to avoid *kopiraet* infringement, each selected drawing had previously appeared in the international public domain by way of documentation and publication by researchers, anthropologists and ethnographers such as Jean-Pierre Cabane (1994), Bernard Deacon (1934b), Alfred Haddon (1934), John Layard (1942) and Henri Tailhade (1983).¹⁰³ While *sandroings* are produced by men, women and children (thereby negating any bias based on gender or age), the advent of new technologies, globalisation and formal education has resulted in the demise of master practitioners. Thus, the inclusion of the act on the UNESCO register evidences concerted efforts to revive and reiterate the national significance of the artistic

¹⁰¹ The practice was originally proclaimed on the register in 2003.

¹⁰² The VKS database contains 105 designs from Malekula, 46 designs from Pentecost, 25 designs from Ambrym, 19 designs from Ambae, 9 designs from Paama, 6 designs of unknown island origin, 4 designs from Maewo and 1 design from Mere Lava.

¹⁰³ Huffman (1996: 248) notes that Deacon collected 118 different designs from Malekula, Ambrym and Ambae, while Layard amassed a collection of more than 100 designs from north east Malekula.

expressions. A permanent display at the National Museum of Vanuatu, where staff share drawings with visitors and teach local children public designs, is complemented by the *Nasonal Sandroing Festivol* (National Sand Drawing Festival) which has been held on different islands of the archipelago since 2004.¹⁰⁴

So, what then of John's painting? The VKS database provided legal safeguarding for the traditional owners of different *sandroings* by making explicit the four provinces to which the practice belongs – Malampa, Penama, Sanma and Torba.¹⁰⁵ John's image, therefore, was problematised given his heritage as *man Shepherds* – a group of small islands situated in the Shefa province that does not claim *kastom kopiraet* to *sandroing*. Discussing his watercolour, John explains that, 'The elder is transmitting knowledge of sand drawing to the children. He draws as they watch. At the time I painted the image [in 1999] sand drawing was seen as a national symbol of Vanuatu, so that is why I depicted it in my work even though I am from the Shepherds. Sand drawing is not only confined to Pentecost and Ambrym, it is also found in the Banks and on Paama. It was considered a national practice' (interview, 16 October 2012). His use of identifiable designs protected by the UNESCO register however, became a cause for concern and complaint by local hamlets given John's *ples*. Three examples from *Traditional Knowledge* highlight the claims of copyright breach made by different community groups. Rendered in pink ink at the lower right of the image is the *Netundong* (Oyster) design belonging to the Nahava language group of Seniang village, south west Malekula (Fig. 50); at the upper centre of the composition in yellow ink is the design *Vatangele* (Sacred Rock of the Pathway of the Dead) particular to the Sa language group, of Martelli Bay, south Pentecost (Fig. 51); in pink ink at the upper left of the scene is the *Nevul* (Moon) design owned by the Larevat language group, from Lambumbu village, north west Malekula (Fig. 52). Despite John's presentation of these designs in the form and materiality of contemporary art, the case exemplifies the impact of bureaucratically progressive indigenous intellectual property regimes upon ni-Vanuatu artists.

Yet, the appropriation of designs by artists with genealogical ties to a *ples* of *sandroing* is far from straightforward. The corpus of Tony Bruce, *man Ambrym* from

¹⁰⁴ The festival was first held on Malekula in 2004. More recently, Ambrym hosted it in 2008 and Epi in 2010.

¹⁰⁵ While designs from the Torba province were not included in the VKS database, community discussion identified the islands of Espiritu Santo and Malo as holding *kastom kopiraet* of the practice.

the village of Toak (located in south east of the island) provides an illustrative example. Bruce utilises the natangora nut in his practice to create intricate small-scale carvings. His artworks oscillate between carvings that are inspired by the natural environment (Fig. 53), upon which he often applies Indian ink as a means of exaggerating the details of his piece (Fig. 54), and those that represent *kastom* stories and activities particular to Ambrym. Of the latter category Bruce explains, ‘I include *kastom* symbols and sand drawing designs in my work, but I only use icons that I have the right to reproduce. If I do not have the right to certain motifs I do not include such things in my work as this is taboo and against *kastom*’ (interview, 26 October 2012, author’s translation). For example, his carving *Maten* takes its title from the name of the *sandroing* rendered on the surface of one side of the nut (Fig. 55). Used to notify kinsmen of the death of a relative or *wontok* Bruce thus juxtaposes the graphic with a scene on the surface of the opposite side of the nut in which two men mourn their loss (Fig. 56). While one of the figures inscribes his message onto the earth below, another sits close by, consumed with grief. Similar narrative devices are enacted in Bruce’s carving *Vivial* – a *sandroing*, again delicately carved upon the surface of one side of the nut, which is used to announce an impending ceremony or celebration, such as a dance performance or pig killing ritual (Fig. 57). Discussing the corresponding image on the opposite side of the nut (Fig. 58), Bruce notes, ‘This design is drawn by the village chief. He wears a special flower in his hair when he makes the drawing. Here the chief is accompanied by a younger man who looks on while the drawing is completed’ (interview, 31 December 2013, author’s translation).

While Bruce’s island lineage determines his *raet* to use *sandroing* designs, the artist maintains that the materiality of his creations has been criticised by some big men from the *maghe* (graded society) of north Ambrym.¹⁰⁶ He explains

Some people from my island support my work and are happy that I am producing new visual forms that represent Ambrym. There are others, though, who do not support my work and they are jealous of my success. Some elders from north Ambrym see my work as a threat – they believe I am taking money away from them and that my works detract attention from their traditional carvings. Some of the men believe that I am

¹⁰⁶ Whether this claim is true remains unsubstantiated. Of interest for the purposes of this research however, is Bruce’s perception of the relationship between claims to copyright and social relations based on his paternal genealogy and island lineage.

killing the *kastom* of our island and that I am challenging their status (interview, 26 October 2012, author's translation).

Having been born in Toak village, a *ples* in which inherited carving traditions do not exist, Bruce was not taught his technical skills by his father or paternal uncles as is customary. Rather he received instruction from his cousin who is *manples* from Fonteng village located on the north of the island. The act of carving, however, is strictly codified and fiercely protected by initiated men from the northern region of Ambrym. As Chief Isaac Worwor, an expert on Ambrym *kastom* as a member of the Malmemele Council of Chiefs of Ambrym, and as Chairman of the Port Vila Town Council of Chiefs, elaborates, 'On Ambrym you must be of a certain rank to own and make certain objects. You must be recognised in the *nakamal* [men's meeting house]. If you are not a man of status then you must not produce carvings' (interview, 14 December 2012, author's translation).¹⁰⁷ Thus, the practice of carving, and its consequent products are both intrinsically linked to notions of authority, hierarchy and title that dominate intricate social relations and mediate individual knowledge, efficacy and power.

CARVINGS

This is nowhere more evident than in the artistic corpus of Chief Johanin Bangdor, whose carvings oscillate between those that he refers to as *tradisonal* (traditional) and those that are *kontempri* (contemporary) (interview, 5 February 2013). The former category – which Bangdor holds the *raet* to produce given his chiefly status – includes large anthropomorphic creations made from wood or black palm that act as public manifestation of his individual rank, while his multi-faced *tamtams* correspond with his standing in the graded society. Since 2000 his 'contemporary' creations have taken the history of the country and his island as their central themes, thus enabling Bangdor to visually reappropriate *kastom* legends and mythologies in new material form. He explains

If you only make traditional art then you are limited in the stories that you can tell and the ways that you can express yourself. Contemporary art is different to traditional art –

¹⁰⁷ The right to produce a carving may be bought by an uninitiated man, just as the owner of a design may commission an artisan to produce a carving (see Geismar 2005: 443).

it is another way that artists can express themselves. Contemporary art is original. Contemporary art is about ideas and creativity rather than being about rights and restrictions. Contemporary art is about making works based on the ideas in your head – you create something new by mixing progressive thoughts with traditional heritage (interview, 5 February 2013, author's translation).

For example, at the top of his large sculpture, *Vanuatu et le France* (Fig. 59) which stands in the grounds of the Alliance, Bangdor juxtaposes the Eiffel Tower alongside the finial of an *atingting kon*, a vertical slit gong synonymous with the island of Ambrym (Fig. 60). Having earned the *reat* to produce the *tamtam* in carved formation as a result of his progression through the *maghe*, the artist incorporates the motif in his commissioned work to represent the long-standing relationship between the two nations.

We might well question the means by which the production and circulation of iconography and objects from Ambrym are legitimised and controlled. For Bruce, fears of reprisal and retribution against himself and his family in the form of *posen* (sorcery), inform his decisions with regard to the natangora nuts that he exhibits in Port Vila. He recounts an incident in 2006, after which he ceased displaying and selling his *kastom* story carvings in Port Vila (personal communication, 1 November 2013). While attending a Nawita exhibition opening at the *Espace Culturel Français*, in which he was showing a selection of these artworks, his wife was taken ill at their home and was rushed to the local hospital. Bruce resolutely attributes his wife's sudden turn to *majik blong Ambrym* (magic of Ambrym), believing that powerful men from his island had deliberately inflicted hurt upon her as a means by which to punish the artist for his appropriation of *kastom* in carved form.¹⁰⁸ Regarded as an epicentre of *majik*, unexpected and unexplained illnesses and deaths involving the Ambrymese are most often suspiciously attributed to *posen*.¹⁰⁹ Through fear, intimidation and innuendo the threat of supernatural retaliation against those deemed to be encroaching *tabu* knowledge, acts as a compelling deterrent to uninitiated men.

¹⁰⁸ It is impossible to substantiate Bruce's claim. For, as Tonkinson (1981: 77) notes, 'The question of whether sorcery was or is actually practiced is not pursued, since the social consequences of belief are what mainly concern an outside observer.'

¹⁰⁹ Claims of *majik* and *posen* are not only linked to the misfortune of ni-Vanuatu. For example, in 2008 the sudden death of Australian art dealer David Baker was attributed to *posen*. Talk in Port Vila centred upon the fact that he had visited Ambrym shortly before his passing, during which time he had been involved in an altercation with local chiefs regarding the purchase of carvings from the island.

TURTLES AND FISH

For other artists from islands that are home to multiple practitioners, the stylistic properties of shared iconography become markers of both individual creativity and respect for *kastom kopiraet*. For example, within the visual language of Erromango two generic motifs are widely utilised by diverse practitioners: the *fis* (fish) and the *totel* (turtle). Explaining the historicity of representation on his island, Chief Jobo Lovo, of the *Lowuhen umah* clan, notes

Our symbols date back many generations and can be found drawn on the walls of caves on the island. The caves in which chiefs have been buried have very important symbols drawn inside. Each symbol carries a message – the turtle represents the woman and the fish represents the man – these things are a part of the language of my island. We have traditional copyright laws in Vanuatu that govern what we can paint. Vanuatu has many different customs and cultures, so we must look after our heritage and protect our knowledge and traditions’ (interview, 1 October 2012, author’s translation).

In his canvas *Navu Im Nomu*, Lovo renders the fish and turtle, fins intertwined, to illustrate a marital relationship between the two sexes (Fig. 61). The elongated shape of the body of the fish and the pointed tips at either end of the turtle’s shell are typical of Lovo’s working style, as is his use of corresponding colours when rendering the marine creatures. Set against a dark background of black and blue hues, the vividly bright orange and yellow pigments that comprise the two animals provide the central focus point of the painting. As an established artist and acknowledged community elder, Lovo claims the representational elements of his canvas both as an artistic trope and a marker of his island heritage. He argues, ‘Vanuatu has many different customs and cultures so we all must look after our own heritage and protect our knowledge and traditions. My work is about my identity as a ni-Vanuatu man from Erromango – I mix my heritage with my contemporary identity’ (interview, 2 October 2013, author’s translation). By enacting his claim to *ples* Lovo assimilates his knowledge, *raet* and status within his practice.

Similar sentiments are echoed by Juliette Pita, sister of Lovo and fellow member of the *Lowuhen umah* clan. Throughout her corpus, Pita appropriates the motifs of *kastom* as a means of representing her island heritage. She notes

Sometimes I create designs with *kastom* patterns. I only use symbols from my island. The use of these symbols is governed by *kastom* copyright and I respect this system. I must not mix my *kastom* symbols with those from other islands. I use the symbols from Erromango in my art as they are an expression of my identity. My work is informed by *kastom* as it is a part of life here in Vanuatu. The painting controls my hand and determines the symbols that I use' (interview, 28 September 2012, author's translation).

Consequently, the fish and turtle are recurring themes in her paintings. A large triptych, *Ol Man blong Erromango*, makes use of both motifs as the artist celebrates the people and customs of her island (Fig. 62). The figure of a chief, rendered in hues of rich brown, yellow, and red, dominates the centre panel of the canvas. He is flanked by the two motifs that represent the population of the island, each painted in strikingly bright colours of green, blue, yellow and red, to his right is the turtle, and to his left the fish. Pita reinforces the gendered affiliations of her icons, and their relationship to one another, through her use of colour, form and composition. Contained within the body of the turtle is the shape of a fish that is bordered by a pair of highly stylised eyes. The accentuated eyelashes emphasise the feminine attributes of the motif, as do the thin, elongated figures that are posed at either side of the panel. The green tint of the fins that delineate the shape of the turtle is repeated in the outline of the fish that fills the third panel of the work. Here, the space inside the fish is decorated with two sets of circles that are separated by a horizontal block of green pigment. Atop the dividing line are represented the male testes, while below are rendered the female breasts: again, the interconnectedness of the two genders being made apparent through the use of codified symbols specific to Pita's island heritage.

As kin, Lovo and Pita enjoy a collaborative artistic relationship that ensures their mutual use of similar symbols without dispute. The same however, cannot be said for younger artists who hold patrilineal affiliation with one of the other tribes of Erromango. As discussed in Chapter 2, periods of historical tension between interlinked clans are, to this day, antagonistically enacted as a means of reinforcing individual and collective power relations. For example, David William, a member of *Iouhen lobo*, has at times been actively discouraged from incorporating shared island iconography within his paintings. He explains

Juliette and Jobo make art that is inspired by *kastom* specific to the area of Erromango from which they are descendants. They say that I do not have the right to make work that is in anyway similar to their paintings. Although we are from the same island they have laid claim to particular *kastom* stories and motifs from Erromango. As they are older artists, and Jobo is a chief, I must respect this and produce art that is visually very different to theirs. There are universal symbols that belong to the island of Erromango – the fish and the turtle – that I am entitled to use, but Juliette and Jobo insist that my work look different to theirs. We have a special system of copyright that is dictated by *kastom*. Our knowledge is based on many things including our age and gender. What you can paint is based on your knowledge, if I do not know the meaning of a symbol and I do not have the right to that knowledge then I must not reproduce the symbol. This led me to experiment with different styles of representation. I had to find a new visual language to depict the same motifs as them’ (interview, 19 November 2012, author’s translation).

An acrylic on canvas exemplifies the stylistic properties that differentiate William’s work from that of Lovo and Pita. In *Totel mo Fis* (Fig. 63) the motifs of each marine creature fill the picture plane. The left of the image is dominated by a turtle, her fins, head and body intricately detailed by juxtaposing hues of dark blue and white. Corresponding patterns in a matching palette delineate the body and fins of her companion, the fish, who monopolises the right of the composition. Limiting his colour scheme to four complimentary pigments, the two central icons are contrasted against a violet background intersected with thin bands of pink – a recurring visual device that William uses throughout his corpus to define the borders of his paintings. The highly graphic mode of his representation incorporates precise line-work and finely executed brushstrokes which subsequently act as visual markers of authorship. By distinguishing his corpus from that of other artists from Erromango, William circumvents any breach of *kastom kopiraet* while also showing *rispek* for the power structures that govern social relations particular to the island.

COPYRIGHT AND RELATED RIGHTS ACT 2000

In the year 2000 the Government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Barak Sope and the Melanesian Progressive Party, began implementing reforms to codify the tropes of *kastom kopiraet*. A prerequisite of the country joining the WTO, to which it was admitted on 24 August 2012, was the passing of a range of intellectual property right

Acts of Parliament, including the *Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000* (hereafter the Copyright Act), that came into effect after being published in the Government Gazette dated 8 February 2011.¹¹⁰ Based in part upon the *Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988* of the United Kingdom, the *Copyright Act 1968* of Australia and, the *Copyright Act 1994* of New Zealand, the legislation in Vanuatu makes provision for economic and moral rights relating to a range of art forms including dramatic works, literary works and musical works. For the purposes of this thesis the definition of a contemporary work of art is important. Section 1(1) of the Copyright Act makes clear that an ‘artistic work’ is:

- (a) a painting, sculpture, drawing, engraving, lithography, tapestry, photograph and other work of fine art whether of artistic quality or not; or
- (b) a building or a model of a building, whether the building or model is of artistic quality or not; or
- (c) an illustration, map, plan, sketch and a three-dimensional work relating to geography, topography, architecture or science; or
- (d) a work of applied art.

Although the characterisation of an ‘artistic work’ is derivatively European, the definition nonetheless provides broad representation for local artists. As a result their outputs are incorporated within the bureaucratic framework of protection offered by the state.

Of greater significance is the fact that the Copyright Act dictates special resolutions for the protection of expressions of indigenous culture, thus making the policy one of the most progressive in the region. As a *sui generis* law, the legislation is ‘of its own kind, that is, it is a unique law complete unto itself ... created when current and existing laws are inadequate’ (Anderson 2010: 34). Derived in part from the *Pacific Model Law for the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture* that was developed by the SPC in consultation with UNESCO and Pacific Island Forum member countries and territories, the edict provides a legal framework that extends

¹¹⁰ The *Copyright and Related Rights Act* was part of a suite of legislation introduced by the Government. The other laws passed include the *Geographic Indications Act*, the *Design Act*, the *Patents Act*, the *Trademarks Act*, the *Circuits Layout Act*, and the *Trade Secret Act*.

beyond conventional intellectual property paradigms.¹¹¹ The mandate responds to the increasing exploitation and inappropriate commercialisation of traditional knowledge and expressions of indigenous culture, thus defining ‘indigenous knowledge’ as:

- (a) created, acquired or inspired for traditional economic, spiritual, ritual, narratives, decorative or recreational purposes; and
- (b) whose nature or use of which has been transmitted from generation to generation; and
- (c) that is regarded as pertaining to a particular indigenous person or people in Vanuatu.

In doing so, the Copyright Act redresses threats imposed upon indigenous knowledge systems by the legacies of colonialism and globalisation. By offering an alternative approach to the hegemonic laws of the West, the bill prevents the further loss, misappropriation and inappropriate public release of *tabu kastom* knowledge. The legal plurality of the bill, whereby ‘two or more legal systems coexist in the same social field’ (Merry 1988: 870), ensures that both customary institutions and state authorities are repositories of regulatory power in Vanuatu.

Complex indigenous practices are also afforded protection under the statute. In acknowledgement of the multiple facets of *kastom*, the Copyright Act makes specific mention of ‘expressions of indigenous culture’ and categorically safeguards both material and intangible forms that manifest local knowledge, including

- (a) all material objects; and
- (b) names, stories, histories and songs in oral narratives; and
- (c) dances, ceremonies and ritual performances or practices; and
- (d) the delineated forms, parts and details of designs and visual compositions; and
- (e) specialised and technical knowledge and the skills required to implement that knowledge, including knowledge and skills about biological resources, biological resource use and systems of classification.

¹¹¹ Member states and territories of the Pacific Islands Forum are: Australia; Cook Islands; Federated States of Micronesia; Kiribati; Marshall Islands; Nauru; New Zealand; Niue; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Samoa; Solomon Islands; Tonga; Tuvalu; Vanuatu.

As a contextually localised statute, the Copyright Act recognises that the value of indigenous knowledge is inversely related to the number of people with access to it. The social, political and economic capital of inherited forms of wisdom are intrinsically linked to networks of access and entitlement. Lamont Lindstrom (1990: 251) makes the point that, 'The power of knowers depends on the extent to which they are able to control the production and exchange of knowledge.' By protecting local modes of transmission the inherent *raet* to knowledge is recognised in the statute, as are the diverse means of distribution within the public domain.

Although definitions of an artistic work, indigenous knowledge and expressions of indigenous culture are kept deliberately broad to allow for multiple representations of *kastom*, the penalties for breach of copyright are made explicit. Section 35(2) of the Copyright Act states that 'A person who intentionally and for profit making purposes infringes a right protected under this Act is guilty of an offence punishable on conviction by a fine not exceeding 2,000,000 vatu or imprisonment for not more than 2 years, or both.' Similarly, Section 41(1), dealing with non-commercial violations, specifies that should an individual reproduce a carving without permission, for example, and the person

- (a) is not one of the custom owners of the expressions; or
- (b) has not been sanctioned or authorised by the custom owners to do the act in relation to the expression; or
- (c) has not done the act in accordance with the rules of custom.

then 'the person is guilty of an offence punishable on conviction by a fine not exceeding 1,000,000 vatu or a term of imprisonment not exceeding one year, or both.' In either circumstance the Supreme Court holds jurisdiction with regard to criminal and civil matters arising under the Act. The legislation, by allowing for the provision of collective ownership, recognises the legitimacy, entitlements and authority of local communities, thereby bestowing intellectual property rights to a plurality of persons. Thus, tribes, hamlets, clans, and families are vested with exclusive rights to control the circulation of knowledge as a means of ensuring cultural autonomy, representation and self-determination.

While individual and collective *kastom* owners are empowered to bring legal action against defendants for breach of copyright, so too are afflicted parties offered the

option of having the Vanuatu National Cultural Council, or the Malvatumauri, act on their behalf. Similarly, both institutions are vested with the power to initiate court proceedings (Section 42(4)):

If it is not possible to identify the custom owners or there is a dispute about ownership, the National Cultural Council or the National Council of Chiefs may institute proceedings under section 34 as if it were the owner of the copyright or other right. Any damages awarded to the National Cultural Council or the National Council of Chiefs must be used for the purposes of indigenous cultural development.

By endowing the two bodies with the capacity for legal recourse, the legislation reinforces the indigenous authority of each agency with regard to the protection of ni-Vanuatu culture and heritage. Given that customary laws continually evolve, the Copyright Act acknowledges and encourages ongoing dialogue mediated by community leaders whereby *kastom* is recognised and reinforced by traditional structures. As Haidy Geismar (2005: 439) notes, ‘the Copyright Act marks one of the few times the state has acknowledged traditional entitlement within an internationally recognized framework.’ Rather than concerning itself with prescriptive frameworks, *kastom* law is licenced to dynamically respond to events and disputes on a needs driven basis.

Under the auspices of a Ministerial Order issued in March 2012, the Vanuatu Intellectual Property Office was established, with lawyer Marilyn Leona Temakon appointed to the position of Registrar. With a limited operating budget and no provision for further staff until the following year, the Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Industry charged Temakon with two tasks: to organise a central administrative space and to draft a five-year action plan for the effective implementation of the country’s intellectual property reforms. Discussing the fundamental directive of her position, Temakon notes that, ‘the ongoing project of melding *kastom* and Western law is a complex and challenging task’ (interview, 7 December 2012). Working with the WIPO, Temakon conceptualised the foremost aim of the newly established office in Port Vila, which was to promote and protect artistic talent and integrity. She argues that, ‘for the first time since independence, we now have an umbrella of protection for our arts and heritage’ (personal communication 2 February 2013). With the allocation of additional government funding in 2013, the human and material resources, office infrastructure, and enforcement capabilities of the department were strengthened. Alongside Temakon,

a legal officer and two trademark officers gained employment, each of whom have engaged in community consultations with regard to issues including dispute settlement, compliance and clauses of ownership. Consequently, the Vanuatu Intellectual Property Office represents a bilateral polity in which both state and *kastom* institutions (such as the Vanuatu National Cultural Council and Malvatumauri) equally share legislative governance of the public domain.

MOUNT BENLOW, AMBRYM

To date the Copyright Act has not been used in any official capacity, nor have any claims of breach been submitted to the Supreme Court for hearing. This is not to say however, that the legislation has not been cited at a community level in disputes regarding *kastom kopiraet*. In the case of contemporary art, the cancellation of a proposed exhibition provides an illustrative example. For several months Chief Johnanin Bangdor had been planning a display that was to be opened in December 2013 at the Espace Culturel Français, to commemorate the centenary of the Mount Benlow volcanic eruption that destroyed the village of Dip Point, Ambrym.¹¹² Bangdor invited artists from both Nawita and Red Wave to create works of art that took the volcano as their central subject matter. He assured each association that he had discussed the display with other chiefs from his island, and that permission had been granted for artists from different provinces of the archipelago to visually engage with the tragic natural disaster. As the date of the exhibition approached however, tensions began to surface, among both artists in Port Vila and chiefs in north Ambrym. As with many historical events in Vanuatu, a *kastom* story attached to the incident gave cause for concern. The eruption was intuitively linked to the *mal* of the district: a mythological protagonist believed to hold benevolent powers. Rio (2002: 138) explains that

In the *mage* [*maghe*] hierarchy of sacred fires, the life of the highest man, the *mal*, was led in isolation because of the strong power that he embodied. Through many grade initiations and pig sacrifices and his ascetic lifestyle, he had embodied so much secret knowledge and manly power that he in many instances now represented the very principle of *abio* [magic], having power and influence over all people and creations within his district.

¹¹² The eruption, which lasted two days, began on 6 December 1913. Along with property loss, the explosion claimed the lives of 21 people.

Local legend holds that the *mal* who controlled Mount Benlow had incited the volcano's force as a means of conveying his displeasure with the expatriate use of, and disrespect for, his land. At the time of the devastation, the base of the volcano was the site of a Presbyterian mission station that included a hospital under the direction of Dr Bowie, a church and two residential dwellings (Sydney Morning Herald 1929), all of which were annihilated in the explosion by molten lava, fire, powdered rock, ash and acidic rain.

With this in mind, speculation and trepidation came to inform chiefly discussions concerning Bangdor's exhibition. *Toktok* (talk / gossip) among Ambrymese in the capital suggested that the men of the *maghe* were disinclined to again tempt the wrath of the *mal*, even if only by the display of paintings and sculptures that depicted the might of the volcano. By extension many artists were weary of upsetting the chiefs, both in Port Vila and on the islands. By analogising local entitlement with notions of national copyright, the chiefs claimed exclusive ownership of the volcano, its actions and its history. During an informal meeting held in the hush of one of the capital's kava bars, the viability of the exhibition was discussed and debated.¹¹³ In attendance were a range of engaged parties including local and expatriate artists, staff from both VKS and the Alliance Française and a representative of the yet to be opened Suzanne Bastien Foundation. The vested interests of members of the assembled group were many and varied. Practitioners sought to alleviate collective *fraet* (fright / concern) regarding the potential repercussions of creating images that depicted the volcano, while Alliance Française employees were eager to confirm the display schedule of their exhibition space. Meanwhile cultural agents from VKS recognised that the meeting was an opportunity to mediate conflicting interpretations of *kastom kopiraet* and the Copyright Act.

Conversation centred upon the rigidity of ownership claims to Mount Benlow asserted by the chiefs of Ambrym. While Bangdor had not received any direct complaints or formal letters (a common means of communicating displeasure throughout Vanuatu) that opposed the exhibition he was aware of disquiet among some of his peers. The problem, as the chief saw it, was threefold: the volcano was their land, *mal* was their ancestral spirit and the eruption was their history. This last point of contention, that a historical event could be arrogated from the rest of the country, was

¹¹³ The meeting was held 15 November 2013.

particularly vexing for those at the meeting. One attendee commented, *olgeta oli no gat raet long onem histri* (they do not have the right to own history). The indigenisation of an environmental disaster led some to speculate that the distinction between history and *kastom* was being deliberately blurred by the chiefs as a means of securing financial compensation from exhibition organisers and participants. Were they, in fact, evasively arguing that they should be paid for allowing representations of the volcano to be displayed? Although never resolved, this question highlights the financial capital attached to different forms of *kastom*. By alleging copyright of Mount Benlow and the mountain's subsequent volcanic activity the chiefs were, in effect, attempting to codify their temporal engagement with the landscape.

For Bangdor and the artists he had invited to participate in the exhibition, this situation proved problematic. Some practitioners agreed with the chiefs that only those from Ambrym should visually depict the volcano. Whether these sentiments were expressed as an act of *rispek* or a fear of *posen* is difficult to ascertain. Other practitioners however, argued that Mount Benlow was not a *kastom* symbol and therefore negated the tropes of *kopiraet*. Rather than being intrinsically linked to a particular island the events of 1913 were regarded as national history. As one artist noted, *hemi duti blong me long pentem histri long kantri blong yumi* (it is my duty to paint the history of our country). In the days following the meeting, concerted efforts were made to reach a compromise. Bangdor initiated further dialogue with the chiefs, practitioners discussed the exhibition among themselves and the VKS implemented strategies to alleviate tensions (including the drafting of a letter of public support for the display, a radio segment to explain the benefits of the exhibition and a list of potential VIP guests to be invited to the official opening ceremony). Despite these initiatives a resolution proved elusive and the exhibition at the Alliance was ultimately cancelled.¹¹⁴

Incidents such as that described above have led scholars and commentators to debate the effectiveness of *sui generis* laws. Miranda Forsyth (2012: 14) argues that, 'An optimal regulatory framework for cultural industries should ... ensure widespread access to traditional knowledge by all community members, rather than allowing aspects of it to be cordoned off in perpetuity by certain segments of the population as would be done in the *sui generis* legislation.' Advocacy for such a viewpoint centres

¹¹⁴ An exhibition focusing on volcanoes more generally in Vanuatu was subsequently staged at the Suzanne Bastien Foundation.

upon the exclusionary nature of presumed rights and the extended financial capital afforded to presupposed copyright owners. Yet the Eurocentric expectation of a decentralised ni-Vanuatu knowledge market negates the nuanced complexities of *kastom kopiraet*. The unauthorised use of certain traditional cultural expressions, particularly those that are *tabu*, violates the very sanctity provided by initiation rites and rituals. In support of *sui generis* legislation Jane Anderson (2010: 33) notes that, ‘if indigenous knowledge is to be respected and protected then attention needs to be given to the manifold indigenous laws and governing structures that historically and contemporarily exist for regulated knowledge use.’ In Vanuatu, intellectual property legislation consolidates customary entitlement by formalising indigenous agency, political economy and social status. As a result, the Copyright Act, as a locally conceptualised framework, encourages restorative processes of conflict management.

CONCLUSION

The long-term benefits or otherwise of the Copyright Act for contemporary artists in Port Vila is yet to be seen. Arguing the merits of the legislation, Ralph Regenvanu asserts

We added the section on expressions of indigenous culture. If the law has any effect on contemporary art it is going to make contemporary artists have to have more consideration for the sources they draw from in traditional culture. An artist from the Banks won’t be able to use an image of an Ambrym *tamtam* face in any of his work. I think this is a good thing. It will make artists have to go into their own heritage and find their own designs from their own heritage to use in their art work (interview, 28 December 2012).

As an enforceable bill under the remit of the Vanuatu Intellectual Property Office the mechanisms of the Copyright Act seek to empower artists and creators by protecting indigenous cultural property rights. Yet, the rigidity of implemented regulations fails to adequately recognise the many and varied nuances of local heritage frameworks. The predilection of international organisations to measure the success of legislation against a standardised Eurocentric checklist denies local flexibility. In a society that has long relied upon oral histories and spoken word traditions, the implementation of formalised

statutes signifies a shift in socio-political discourses relating to claims of ownership, including those relating to contemporary art.

Those which remain central to the local artworld however, are the ongoing traditions of *kastom kopiraet*. Before the introduction of legislative intellectual property regimes, contemporary artists assented to the unwritten yet binding tropes of indigenous entitlement. As Jobo Lovo notes, ‘Artists look at each other’s work to make sure everyone is abiding by the *kastom* laws. Vanuatu has many different *kastoms* and cultures so we all must look after our own heritage and protect our knowledge and traditions’ (interview, 2 October 2012, author’s translation). The continued relationship between individual artistic integrity and the constructs of *ples*, *raet* and *rispek*, among practitioners and the community at large, highlights the unmitigated dominance of indigenous ways of being. As Emmanuel Watt poignantly notes, ‘We have our copyright that is based in *kastom*. The value of culture in Vanuatu does not need to be written down or made into a law’ (interview, 18 January 2013, author’s translation). Through their use of specific iconography practitioners visually affirm their heritage, differentiate their outputs from those of other makers and posit their creations within the trajectory of ni-Vanuatu cultural heritage.

CHAPTER 5

AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

Today in Port Vila the circulation of contemporary art that incorporates aspects of *kastom* is a common occurrence. The portrayal of indigenous culture, tradition and heritage – whether by way of subject matter or iconography – is a defining feature of the outputs of many artists based in the capital. There is no question that these works of art are made to be seen. What we might ask, however, is how different aesthetic experiences influence local readings of such objects. As has been demonstrated in previous chapters, practitioners create forms that explore identity relations, indigenous cosmologies and customary practices. While the pictorial means by which makers communicate their messages are analysed and explained, more often than not public reception of these paintings, sculptures, drawings and carvings goes undocumented. With this in mind, a new line of enquiry rightly emerges: is contemporary art recognised, understood and appreciated by the very audiences it purports to represent? Are particular objects considered more appealing than others? Do viewers acknowledge such visual expressions as markers of indigeneity? In seeking answers to these questions this chapter moves beyond the confines of the artist's workshop or studio to evaluate local reactions to the display of contemporary art. Taking as a case study the inaugural exhibition witnessed at the National Library and Archives of Vanuatu (NLAV) during fieldwork in 2013, this chapter examines the correlation between artistic intent and viewer response to contextualise particular objects within ni-Vanuatu aesthetic discourses.

The conceptual applicability of aesthetic regimes in non-Western societies has been debated by scholars since the late 1970s. During this time the Kantian model of disinterested connoisseurship (see Bourdieu 1984; Kant 2007) was replaced by approaches that privileged the phenomenological basis of value judgements. In his seminal text on the topic Jacques Maquet (1979: 14) argues that 'contemplation comprises a broad spectrum of values of what may be considered a single type of relation to a subject with the world. It is a state of awareness of the object.' As a cognitive process of qualitative evaluation, aesthetic systems were deemed social constructs that bridged 'the chasm between the rational, empirical world of material objects and the non-rational, subjective world of experience in its intuitive immediacy'

(Sharman 1997: 183). Commentators championed the notion that ‘objects should be analysed in the context of the society that produces them’ (Morphy 1998: 206), thereby expanding the criteria by which works of art were evaluated. Key local factors such as symbolic significance, historical importance, cultural uniqueness and social relevance were brought to the fore. With this in mind, Howard Morphy (1998: 208) asserts that ‘An aesthetic response reflects the human capacity to value the properties of form independently of any particular function.’ By acknowledging the presence of autochthonous value systems, such a theoretical framework moves beyond the restrictive criteria of Eurocentric aestheticism to privilege indigenous ‘ways of seeing’ (Berger 1972).

How does this relate to the display of contemporary art at the NLAV? Foremost, a ni-Vanuatu perceptual system by which aesthetic criteria are assessed reveals the cultural capital afforded to these objects. Morphy (2007: 92) notes that ‘Context influences perception, and cultural context no less than any other ... People are socialized into aesthetic systems just as they are into other aspects of culture. Relativity lies in the interpretation but also in the emotional affects that are engendered.’ Responses to the exhibited paintings, sculptures and carvings thus highlight two factors that contribute to the outputs of practitioners. On the one hand, audience agency articulates collective moral values that stimulate visual representations. As Jeremy Coote (1992: 266) observes, ‘what is morally good is expected to display valued aesthetic qualities, and what displays valued aesthetic qualities is expected to be morally good.’ On the other hand, public opinion is cognisant of broader socio-political constructs that influence artistic production, particularly those that may not be immediately apparent to the uninitiated onlooker. The aesthetic value attributed to different works of art presented at the NLAV thus provides insight into the centrality of deeply entrenched local practices, beliefs and values.

NATIONAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES OF VANUATU

The Port Vila Public Library first opened in 1962, under the auspices of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. As discussed in Chapter 1, the organisation was formed to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Anglo-French Condominium. Upon its relocation to purpose-built facilities in 1995, the resources of the library were divided in two. General collections open for public access remained at the original site on the main street of Port Vila, while reference material and documents of national significance

were transferred to the new site. Resultantly, in 2004, the National Library of Vanuatu was officially established as an autonomous department within the VKS. The remit of the library was threefold: to specifically maintain and develop collections pertaining to Vanuatu and the Pacific region more generally; to act as a legal depository for items published in and about Vanuatu; and, to provide research and reference services for local and international students, scholars and members of the general public (see Naupa and Norman 2008).

With a collection comprising more than 22,000 books, pamphlets and documents relating to Vanuatu (Cullwick: 2013) the social capital of the National Library attests to the means by which the organisation harnesses nationalistic sentiment among not only patrons, but the community at large. Focusing on chronicles relating to the post-colonial contact period, the National Archives ensures for prosperity ‘all papers, documents, or records of any kind whatsoever officially made or received by any Government office ... including registers, books, maps, plans, drawings, photographs, cinematography films, and sound recordings’ (Government of the Republic of Vanuatu 1992: Part 1.1). In 2010 the National Library and the National Archives became two separate institutions, with the latter focusing solely upon the acquisition, inventory and preservation of non-classified state dossiers (15 years or older) pertinent to the history of the nation. As a repository for the memories of the nation, the National Archives bridges the divide between the past, the present and the future.

To celebrate the occasion of 30 years of independence the Government of Australia gifted funds to the Government of the Republic of Vanuatu for the purpose of erecting a building specifically to house the collections of the National Library and Archives of Vanuatu (Fig. 64). The official opening of the building, held on 23 August 2013, was attended by over 600 individuals including Ministers and Members of Parliament, church leaders, chiefs, diplomats, cultural officers and the general public. Speeches made by VKS Director Marcelin Abong and the Minister for Internal Affairs Patrick Crowby Manarewo during the ceremony are here worth noting, as they emphasise the role of *kastom* throughout the archipelago.¹¹⁵ Abong, first to take to the podium, provided an overview of the work of the VNCC and VKS. He noted that, ‘The

¹¹⁵ Speeches were also made by Prime Minister Moana Carcasses Kalosil and the Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu Jeremy Bruer.

achievements of Vanuatu today are steeped in history’ and that ‘despite our struggles as a nation the National Library and Archives will remain a strong institution for the country ... We will ensure that our children continue to learn the *kastom*, cultures and traditions of Vanuatu.’ His comments further focused upon the indigenous agency that has come to define both institutions. Most tellingly he stated, ‘During the 1960s and 1970s the Vanuatu Cultural Centre was a western institution with a western outlook ... Today we play a leading role in the cultural development and cultural preservation of Vanuatu ... The Vanuatu National Cultural Council works at the grassroots level to establish connections between post-colonial modern structures and traditional governance systems that promote and protect *kastom*.’ Following on from Abong was a short address by Crowby, during which the Minister extolled the role of art, language and literature in the future development of the country. He told the assembled crowd that ‘Without our identity we are nothing in the world’ and explained that the collections of the NLAV were ‘a bounty for those interested in our traditional and contemporary arts ... and are fundamental in educating our younger generations.’ By emphasising the link between history, nationhood and identity in their speeches, Abong and Crowby positioned the NLAV as a site in which the legacies of tradition and modernity are explored, mediated and contested.

INAUGURAL EXHIBITION

To commemorate the opening of the new NLAV building, an exhibition of indigenous contemporary art was held in the reception area immediately adjoining the entrance to the space (Fig. 65). A call to artists from both Nawita and Red Wave was issued by NLAV staff for the temporary loan of paintings, sculptures and carvings to be included in the display. In all, the exhibition contained 13 works of art by ten practitioners: one painting each by Joseph John (Fig. 66), Alvaro Kuautonga (Fig. 67), Nikiyatu Kuautonga (Fig. 68), Taitu Kuautonga (Fig. 69), Juliette Pita (Fig. 70), and Andrew Tovovur (Fig. 71); two paintings each by Matthew Abbock (Fig. 72 and Fig. 73) and Sero Kuautonga (Fig. 74 and Fig. 75); one sculpture by Eric Natuoivi (Fig. 76); and, two carvings by Emmanuel Watt (Fig. 77 and Fig. 78). NLAV staff relied upon the national art collection along with professional reputations, local seniority and industry

experience when sourcing objects for inclusion.¹¹⁶ A range of artists were consulted: Sero Kuautonga given his previous position of employment as Curator at the National Museum of Vanuatu and as current President of Nawita; Eric Natuoivi and Joseph John given their roles at the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education; and, Juliette Pita and Andrew Tovovur given the commercial enterprises respectively managed by each at the seafront and in town. As a result, the display was not representative of every artist participant in the local artworld but, rather, highlighted the outputs of colleagues closely connected to key practitioners whose advice had been sought.

The very fact that an exhibition of contemporary art was selected to inaugurate the new NLAV building attests to the national significance of the objects contained therein. The display, in a publically accessible space under service to the government, legitimated multiple visions of indigenous identity. With no thematic accordance requested by the NLAV the subject matter of each painting, sculpture and carving varied widely. Topics such as dance, legends and chiefs featured in some objects, while others focused on the environment and local history. Rather than present homogenous artefacts belonging to a particular cultural group of the archipelago (such as totems from Ambrym or headdresses from the Banks Islands) the diversity of forms included in the exhibition negated hegemonic discourses. Just as contemporary art was intrinsically linked to the new nation state at the time of independence, here again it provided an arena for ongoing negotiations relating to the political rhetoric of national unity. Emmanuel Watt makes the point that, ‘Our art comes from our independence as a nation. We have had independence in Vanuatu for over 30 years now and this has brought us closer to our traditions’ (interview, 18 January 2013, author’s translation). The discernible link between nationhood, contemporary art and collective identity thus acted as the impetus for a broad survey of local responses to the exhibition.

¹¹⁶ The exhibition included one object from the National Museum of Vanuatu collection, that being Sero Kuautonga’s canvas *Fiuja*. The painting *Kaljoral Heritage blong Lapita* by Matthew Abbock was gifted to the NLAV by the Australian High Commission in Vanuatu to commemorate the opening of the building. A dedicated label explaining the bequest read: ‘This painting was purchased with the kind agreement of Mrs Chrissy Strickland using funds from the Roger Strickland Trust account. Roger Strickland died in 1991 while serving as an Australian diplomat in Vanuatu. He was 27 years old. Roger strongly supported the protection and promotion of Vanuatu culture.’ The NLAV also commissioned three permanent murals painted by Juliette Pita.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

It was originally intended that questionnaires would be completed in situ with visitors to the NLAV. However, this proved difficult given the small number of people accessing the building. Over the course of four days the NLAV display received only five viewers. The reasons for this are two-fold: the relatively recent opening of the building and the operations of the site. Although the NLAV is built in an architectural style similar to that of the VKS, the organisational functions of the institution are not clearly understood by the local community. There has been little communication relating to the publically accessible facilities and resources provided by both the library and archives. During periods of fieldwork it was not uncommon to see individuals accessing the VKS building with the primary focus of browsing a newspaper or book in the library. After the relocation, however, requests for all collection material must be lodged with a librarian and this, it seems, has deterred borrowers. Similarly, while the exhibition space of the National Museum of Vanuatu is frequented by men and children, in particular, who congregate to watch indigenous documentaries, socialise, and discuss relevant issues of the day, the NLAV is yet to acquire the status of communal meeting place (and, of course, it must be acknowledged that the library encourages silent study). Although the building is recognised as a national structure that houses documents of relevance to ni-Vanuatu, the NLAV is presently regarded as a site specific locale that is only visited for the particular purposes of undertaking research and enquiry.

In order to acquire adequate data to evaluate local reactions toward the works of art included in the exhibition it was necessary to move beyond the bounds of the building. Consequently, each object included in the display was photographed to allow for engagement with questionnaire participants who had not visited the NLAV. Such an approach entailed both benefits and drawbacks as, while a greater number of responses were captured than might otherwise have been obtained, a photograph cannot adequately replicate an original painting or sculpture. As Walter Benjamin (1968: 220) argues, ‘Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.’ The size, craftsmanship, form and colour may be obscured in a facsimile, while the emergent visual and narrative relationships established between material forms in the exhibition space are made obsolete. Despite such limitations, the use of reproductions proved an effective methodology. Questionnaires were enthusiastically completed by

participants in a range of locales including the Department of Women, Fest' Napuan, NLAV, the seafront market, Transparency International, Vanuatu Financial Services Commission, Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education, VKS and Youth Challenge Vanuatu, all organisations and institutions in which individuals had expressed an interest in the aims of the survey.

As a means of contextualising the images presented to participants a label, composed in Bislama to engage both Anglophone and Francophone ni-Vanuatu, was attached to the back of each photograph. The decision to include discursive supplementary data was predicated on the notion that, 'Not everything about the painting [or sculpture] is inside the frame' (Myers 2007: 53). As a consequence, the information contained therein detailed the name of the artist and their island of heritage, while also providing a brief explanation of the work of art which was drafted in consultation with, then approved by, each practitioner. Discussions with artists about these labels varied. While some were content with a general summary of their imagery, others emphasised specific details that should be brought to the attention of viewers. Taitu Kuautonga, for example, felt it ample that audiences understood that his painting depicted a dance from Futuna. Eric Natuoivi, meanwhile, believed it necessary that specific information about his sculpture be relayed to viewers (including the name of the dance and the reason for its performance). In order to encourage survey participants to move beyond reactive semiotic readings the provision of auxiliary information provided insight into the ideological motivations of each maker. Morphy (2007: 185) asserts that when encountering an art exhibition 'knowledge of the social and cultural background of the works enhances the viewer's appreciation of them.' Given that artists from five different islands (Ambae, Erromango, Futuna, Paama and the Shepherds) participated in the exhibition, the nuanced renditions of *kastom* expressed within each representation invited explanation.

With this in mind, the descriptions of each object provided to survey participants read:

Matthew Abbock (Paama) *Bilding Pis tru Kalja*

Penting ia hemi stap reprisentem valiu blong ol kantri blong Melanesia: pis mo yuniti.

Penting i soem kastom tinging blong ol kantri – mat, pig mo tusk, selmane, kava.

Matthew Abbock (Paama) *Building Peace through Culture*

This painting represents the values of the countries of Melanesia: peace and unity. The painting shows kastom objects from each country – mats, pigs and tusks, shell money, and kava.

Matthew Abbock (Paama) *Kaljoral Heritage blong Lapita*

Penting ia hemi gat sam simbol blong Lapita. Lef saed i reprisentem past blong Vanuatu, medel i reprisentem taem naoia, mo raet saed I reprisentem fiuja blong Vanuatu.

Matthew Abbock (Paama) *Lapita Cultural Heritage*

This painting shows Lapita symbols. The left side of the painting represents the history of Lapita in Vanuatu, the middle represents Lapita today, and the right side represents future Lapita artefacts that may be found in Vanuatu.

Joseph John (Shepherds) *Storian*

Penting ia hemi stap reprisentem wan apu we hemi stap talem kastom stori long ol pikinini. Afta ol pikinini olgeta save respekem kalja blong Vanuatu.

Joseph John (Shepherds) *Storytelling*

This painting shows an elder telling kastom stories to children. Learning these stories helps teach the children respect for the cultures of Vanuatu.

Alvaro Kuautonga (Futuna) *Six Provins blong Vanuatu*

Penting ia hemi stap reprisentem six province blong Vanuatu. Evri province hemi gat fulup kalja, afta penting hemi gat fulup kala i stap insaed.¹¹⁷

Alvaro Kuautonga (Futuna) *Six Provinces of Vanuatu*

This painting represents the six provinces of Vanuatu. Each province has very strong cultural traditions and this is reflected by the different colours used in the painting.

Nikiyatu Kuautonga (Futuna) *Majijiki*

Penting ia hemi stap reprisentem Majijiki. Hemi wan spirit blong Futuna we hemi go raon long ol aelan blong Pasifik.

¹¹⁷ The Bislama word *kala* can mean both ‘colour’ and ‘design’. It is here used to mean ‘colour’.

Nikiyatu Kuautonga (Futuna) Majijiki

This painting represents Majijiki. He is a spirit from Futuna who travels the islands of the Pacific.

Sero Kuautonga (Futuna) Cycle long Laef

Penting ia hemi stap reprisentem laef blong man. Lef saed long penting i soem bet, medel i soem laef, mo raet saed i reprisentem taem we leaf hemi finis.

Sero Kuautonga (Futuna) Cycle of Life

This painting represents the cycle of life. The left side shows birth, the middle shows life and the right side of the painting shows death.

Sero Kuautonga (Futuna) Fiuja

Penting ia hemi wan toktok bitwin past mo fiuja. Lef saed long penting hemi gat futprint, afta raet saed hemi gat trak blong sus. Namale lif mo laet blong doa i reprisentem peace long fiuja.

Sero Kuautonga (Futuna) Future

This painting shows the relationship between the past and the future. The left side of the painting shows a footprint, while the right side shows a shoeprint. The namele leaf and the light shining through the open door represent a peaceful future.

Taitu Kuautonga (Futuna) Danis blong Futuna

Penting ia hemi soem sam woman we oli mekem danis blong Futuna.

Taitu Kuautonga (Futuna) Dance from Futuna

This painting shows a dance performed by women from the island of Futuna.

Eric Natuoivi (Futuna) Namawia Danis

Sculpture ia hemi stap reprisentem Namawia danis blong Futuna. Hemi wan danis we man mo woman i mek lo taem we olgeta i klosem kastom selebresen.

Eric Natuoivi (Futuna) Namawia Dance

This sculpture represents the Namawia dance from Futuna. The dance is performed by men and women at the closing of kastom celebrations.

Juliette Pita (Erromango) *Jif blong Erromango*

Penting ia hemi gat simbol blong jif blong Erromango, wetem simbol blong man blong Erromango. Penting hemi wan selebren laef mo pipol blong Erromango.

Juliette Pita (Erromango) *Chiefs of Erromango*

This painting shows the symbols for chiefs and men, used on Erromango. The painting is a celebration of the people of the island.

Andrew Tovovur (Erromango) *Untitled*

Penting ia hemi stap reipresentem taem blong bifo mo fujia blong Vanuatu. Botom hemi gat oknaet we hemi simbol blong darkness, medel i soem rij fujia, mo tu pig tusk long top i reipresentem otoriti blong ol jif blong Vanuatu.

Andrew Tovovur (Erromango) *Untitled*

This painting represents the past and future of Vanuatu. At the bottom of the painting is an owl that symbolises the darkness we lived in before Christianity. The middle section of the picture shows our rich future. The pig's tusks at the top represent the authority of the chiefs of Vanuatu.

Emmanuel Watt (Ambae) *Duti*

Kaving ia hemi stap reipresentem duti blong ol man, woman, mo pikinini. Olgeta i mus makem gud laef mo fujia blong evriwan long Vanuatu.

Emmanuel Watt (Ambae) *Duty*

This carving represents the duties and responsibilities of all men, women and children. We must each live a good life to ensure the future of Vanuatu.

Emmanuel Watt (Ambae) *Mas blong Solwata*

Kaving ia hemi stap reipresentem wan tingting blong solwata. Bourao wud blong kaving hemi bin karem long solwata blong Port Vila.

Emmanuel Watt (Ambae) *Mask of the Ocean*

This carving represents the creatures of the ocean. The burao wood used to make the carving was found washed ashore on a beach in Port Vila.

DATA SET

In all, 148 questionnaires were voluntarily completed with the guarantee of anonymity. Participants were asked to specify their island of heritage, age and gender, which are all

common group identifiers used in Vanuatu. The purpose of the survey was explained to each respondent, as were the questions to which answers were sought. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65, with the median age of respondents equalling 27 years. This figure is reflective of general demographic trends in the country given that ‘young people, defined using a broad age grouping of 10 – 30 years, account for about two-in-five people (39%) of Vanuatu’s total population’ (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2012: 8). More specifically, the average age of residents in Port Vila stands at 22.8 years (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2010b: iv) thus closely corresponding with the outcome of the survey. A total of 65 men and 83 women completed questionnaires. All six provinces of the archipelago were represented in the collected data by way of 17 different islands:

Province	Respondents
Malampa	37
Penama	38
Sanma	15
Shefa	31
Tafea	22
Torba	5

Table 1: Questionnaire participants by province

Island	Respondents
Ambae	8
Ambrym	12
Aneityum	2
Banks	5
Efate	9
Erromango	2
Futuna	2
Maewo	4
Malekula	23
Paama	2
Pentecost	26
Santo	15
Shepherds	22
Tanna	16

Table 2: Questionnaire participants by island

QUESTIONNAIRE AND RESPONSES

The questionnaire, compiled in Bislama, comprised four questions:

1. *Yu laekem wan / sam samting we hemi stap insaed long exibision? Yu save telem why yu laekem?*

Is there one / some works of art in the exhibition that you like? Why?

2. *Yu no laekem wan / sam samting we hemi stap insaed long exibision? Yu save telem why yu no leakem?*

Is there one / some works of art in the exhibition that you dislike? Why?

3. *Yu tingting se ol samting we olgeta stap insead long exibision olgeta impoten samting blong Vanuatu?*

Do you think the works of art included in the exhibition are important to Vanuatu?

4. *Yu save putum eni nara tingting blong yu?*

Do you have any other comments?

Each question was designed to encourage participants to engage in discussions that would illuminate pertinent trends regarding the aesthetic reception of contemporary art. By asking respondents to complete an anonymous questionnaire the survey aimed to extract opinions that may not have been offered in a more formal or public setting.

The first question of the survey asked participants to select a work (or works) of art to which they were most attracted. The intent of this question was three-fold: was there a particular work of art included in the exhibition that most appealed to respondents? Do gender, age or island of heritage impact upon individual preferences? How resonate are the visual, narrative, or ideological properties of a work of art upon local audiences? The table below highlights the objects most commonly cited:

Artist	Title	Number of responses
No preference		49
Joseph John	<i>Storian</i>	33
Eric Natuoivi	<i>Namawia Danis</i>	9

Table 3: Positive responses to works of art

As can be seen from the results above, a significant proportion of respondents did not prefer a specific work of art but opted instead to comment generally on positive

aspects of the exhibition as a whole. Several participants, for example, noted that each object communicated different tropes of *kastom* and were therefore comparably valid:

‘Mi laekem evry somting insaed ia. From hemi reflectem wanem we hemi kastom mo picter oli picterem plante ol legend story mo credibility blong ol artis blong Vanuatu.’

‘I like everything in the exhibition. Every artwork is a reflection of *kastom* and all the pictures show the legends and stories of Vanuatu. Our artists have great credibility.’

- Male, Ambrym, 34 years of age

‘Ol ekshibisen ia hemi impoten blong rivivem ol kalja blong yumi we i stap lus bigwan long aelan blong yumi long evri provins.’

‘The exhibition is important because it is reviving our cultures that are being lost on every island of every province.’

- Female, Malekula, 41 years of age

‘Mi laekem everi samting we hemi stap inside long esibision. From se oli representem custom, culture mo identity blong yumi ol man Vanuatu. Oli remindem yumi about way blong laef blong yumi.’

‘I like everything in the exhibition. Each work represents the customs, cultures and identity of the people of Vanuatu. The art reminds us of our traditional ways of life.’

- Female, Efate, 28 years of age

We might well probe the reasons for this trend. Why were participants disinclined to favourably nominate a particular object? The answers to this question reveal communal traits that inform indigenous aesthetic systems. The continuing legacy of Melanesian Socialism presupposes the equality of diverse expressions of indigenous culture. Given that any particular *kastom* dance, story or ritual is just as significant as any other, the egalitarian acceptance of regional differences eliminates ‘the problem of choice and emphasis in deciding what aspects of culture are selected for preservation or promotion, whether the aim is to preserve aspects of an island’s cultural history or to maintain and foster or revive particular skills and arts’ (Meleisea 1980: 22). The logic that all works of contemporary art included in the NLAV exhibition merit commensurable recognition attests to the dominance of libertarian ideologies that bind different communities within Port Vila.

Similarly, the constitutional edict that espouses ‘cherishing our ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity’ (Government of the Republic of Vanuatu 1979: Preamble) undoubtedly informed the perceptions of other survey participants. Since the late 1970s national political rhetoric in Vanuatu has constructed notions of collective identity within the rubrics of socio-cultural heterogeneity. The great diversity that characterises *kastom* throughout the country is posited as a unifying feature inherent of indigenous personhood. The subsequent view that the NLAV exhibition be appreciated as a reflection of national heritage was expressed by a number of respondents:

‘Mi laekem plante samting insaed long exibision ia from se plante lo wok I kat I promotem true identity, custom mo culture for yumi ol man Vanuatu.’

‘I like many things in the exhibition because the works promote the true identity, customs and culture of the people of Vanuatu.’

- Female, Ambae, 24 years of age

‘Exibision ia hemi givim big advantages long ol people we oli lusum custom mo culture blong olgeta tede. So tingting blo mi, mi ting se hemi ol main samting we yumi mas save from hemi play big rol insaed long country blong yumi. Yumi mas tekem seriously bifor yumi lusum every valu blong yumi.’

‘The exhibition has big advantages for people who are losing their customs and culture today. I think we must value the role that art has for the country. We must think about these things seriously before we lose the values of the country.’

- Male, Pentecost, 19 years of age

‘Mi laekem ol picture from se oli representem right blong wan wan citizen insaed long country. Nogat any stranger i save kam controlem country blong yumi from se yumi independent. Ol picture ia oli stret gud nomo mo oli se yumi evriwan i equal.’

‘I like all the pictures because they represent the rights of the citizens of our country. Outsiders cannot control Vanuatu because we are independent. The pictures show that everyone here is equal.’

- Female, Malekula, 24 years of age

‘Ol eksibisen olsem i gud tumas blong putum aot sam wok mo creativity blong ol man ples blong yumi save luk mo praod long ol culture blong yumi we oli depicted long ol pictures ya.’

‘The exhibition is a good thing as it shows the work and creativity of our artists. We must be proud of our cultures that are depicted in these pictures.’

- Male, Ambae, 30 years of age

While it might have been expected that island genealogy would inform participant’s perceptions and opinions, the opposite is seen to be true. Rather than identifying with objects produced by artists of provincial affiliation or geographic familiarity, respondents instead praised the overall miscellany of subject matter apparent in the exhibition. The dutiful sense of patriotism embedded within the majority of objects – either by way of explicit representation or implicit iconographic allusion – was acknowledged by viewers as a means by which to assert national difference in a world of global polities. Therefore, the differential properties of each painting, sculpture and carving were seen by survey participants as representing the very essence of collective unity that has come to define the post-independence state.

Where respondents did provide feedback relating to a specific work of art there was an overwhelmingly positive response to Joseph John’s canvas *Storian*. The highly figurative style of representation adopted by the artist appealed to survey participants, as did the decidedly local subject matter of the image. John depicts a male village elder reciting *kastom* stories to a group of eight children. Each figure wears a loincloth and sits in a circle around a burning wood fire. The black background in the centre of the image is offset by patterning and symbols, rendered in lighter hues, which decorate the edges of the canvas. Each icon represents a *kastom* story originating from a different province or island of the archipelago. Several survey responses centred upon the cultural relativism of the canvas and, more particularly, the intergenerational sharing of indigenous knowledge:

‘Painting ia hemi stap showem wan olfela i stap storian lo ol pikinini. Hemia hemi wan samting we i stap lus nao ia lo society blong yumi long Vanuatu.’

‘The painting shows an old man telling a story to the children. This is a tradition that we are losing today in Vanuatu.’

- Male, Paama, 47 years of age

‘Hemi stap representem wan apu we hemi stap talem kastom stori long ol pikinini. Hemi representem ol values blong yumi long Vanuatu long saet blong kastom, mo from hemi save helpem ol pikinini blong oli save respectem kalja blong Vanuatu.’

‘The painting is of an elder telling a *kastom* story to the children. This represents the values of the people of Vanuatu and the place of *kastom*. This helps children learn to respect the culture of Vanuatu.’

- Male, Santo, 22 years of age

‘Hemi soem se apu i stap stori long ol pikinini mo sem taem tu transferem sam information blong ol value olsem respect towards ol pikinini.’

‘The old man tells a story to the children and transfers information about our values to teach them respect.’

- Female, Pentecost, 33 years of age

‘Mi lakem penting blong Joseph John, we i shoem wan apu we i stap talem kastom stori blong ol pikinini. Kastom stori hemi wan importen samting long laef blong wan wan man Vanuatu. Tudei spos yu no save kastom stori blong yu, bae yu neva save wanem ples yu kam mo bae yu neva save stret rus blong yu mo wanem histri blong yu.’

‘I like the painting by Joseph John that shows an elder telling a kastom story to the children. Kastom stories are an important part of life in Vanuatu. Today, if you do not know your kastom stories, you can never understand the place from which you descend or know your roots and history.’

- Female, Malekula, 24 years of age

The depiction of children undoubtedly strengthened the legitimacy of John’s canvas for survey respondents. The educational overtones of the image, combined with the traditional setting of the scene, encouraged positive readings of the painting. In the urban context of Port Vila fears of cultural dislocation and erosion centre upon the homogenising influence of formal schooling, encroaching new technologies, youth displacement and inappropriate traditional knowledge transmission. As the comments above highlight, such concerns transcend age and gender barriers as both men and women alike, of varying ages, implicitly identified with the underlying messages contained within John’s image.

For other respondents the iconographic elements of John’s painting proved important. As discussed in Chapter 4, the use of specific symbols by artists in Port Vila visually references preconceived local knowledge. Two survey participants made specific comments about the motifs that fill the perimeter of the canvas:

‘Penting ia hemi soem kastom long pikinini. Ol samting blong en oli gud fasin long repringen ol kastom stori blong Vanuatu.’

‘The painting shows kastom to children. The icons around the edge are a good way to represent the kastom stories of Vanuatu.’

- Male, Shepherds, 42 years of age

‘Mi laekem hemia blong Joseph John from i simpol mo i klia. Mi laekem tu from i tok abaot kalja we ol pikinini oli nid blong save from i important.’

‘I like the painting by Joseph John because the meaning is simple and clear. I like that it talks about culture and teaches children that they need to have this knowledge.’

- Male, Paama, 26 years of age

The rat and octopus that occupy the lower right of the scene, for example, reference a *kastom* story from Ifiria, a small island adjacent to Efate, in the Shefa province. The narrative, widely recited in and around Port Vila, encapsulates local imaginings of the surrounding natural environment. A rat walking along the water’s edge stumbles upon a group of birds preparing to cross the ocean that separates Ifira and Efate islands. The flock are hard at work fashioning a canoe from a large banana leaf that will provide them a safe journey. The rat, excited by the prospect of joining the adventure, seeks the birds’ approval to accompany the party. He is informed that at first light the following morning the group will set sail and that he, like the rest of the pod, must bring his own lunch to consume during the pilgrimage. The rat hurries home in eager anticipation of his forthcoming expedition. The next day the rat and the birds set off, rowing enthusiastically toward their destination. After some time the group stop to eat. As the canoe floats adrift at sea the rat and the birds eagerly digest their snacks. However, a bird pecks at the floor of the vessel to retrieve crumbs of food and, in doing so, causes a large hole through which water begins to seep. As the canoe sinks the birds fly away, leaving the rat to fend for himself. With large waves crashing around him the rat hopelessly tries to navigate his way. An octopus, noticing the rat’s distress, swims toward the small mammal. The rat climbs onto the cephalopod’s back and the two continue toward the safety of land. Reaching their destination, the rat springs ashore whereupon he mocks the awkward swimming style of the marine creature. The octopus, in a fit of rage, angrily whips one of his tentacles in the direction of the rat and strikes

the animal's behind, thus accounting for the long tail that now distinguishes the rodent (Mezzalana 2005: 208-209).

While survey respondents identified with the narratives suggested in John's canvas, it was the portrayal of practiced *kastom* activities in the sculpture *Namawia Danis* created by Eric Natuoivi that appealed to other participants. In his mixed-media creation Natuoivi depicts a celebratory dance specific to the island of Futuna in which men and women perform together. Six carved wooden figures – three male and three female – stand on top of a burnished circular ceramic pot. The group dance in unison, each with their right arm outstretched, to convey the physical gestures of the routine. Questionnaire responses centred upon the authenticity of Natuoivi's representation as his three-dimensional form references an acknowledged indigenous dance:

'Samting we mi laekem long exhibition is hemi way we man ia i kafem. Hemi wan traditional art and crafts blong ol pipol blong Futuna.'

'I like the way the artist has carved the figures. The sculpture shows the traditional arts and crafts of the people of Futuna.'

- Male, Pentecost, 23 years of age

'Sculpture ia hemi very creative mo hemi really reflectem culture blong ol man Futuna. Mi laikem how ol stickman oli really showem glad heart blong olgeta mo how oli really expresseem olgeta long ol actions blong ol.'

'The sculpture is very creative and really reflects the culture of the people of Futuna. I like that the figures really show that the people have a happy heart and that their movement is expressed.'

- Male, Pentecost, 38 years of age

By differentiating his representation from other images that generically depict dances performed in Vanuatu, Natuoivi firmly positions his sculpture within the cultural traditions of the island of Futuna. The notion that his creation holds an essential truth – a tangible link to *kastom* practices that contemporarily define indigenous identity and agency – demonstrates the authoritative status conferred upon the object by survey participants. The belief that the value of a work of art is embedded in the depiction of actualised categories of *kastom* knowledge or practice highlights the relativity of established indigenous norms and codes to the perception, and acceptance, of contemporary visual forms.

The symbiotic relationship that Natuoivi depicts between the sexes particularly appealed to female respondents. Abby McLeod (2005: 2) observes that throughout Melanesia ‘segregation of the sexes is relatively common ... men and women continue to maintain fairly strictly defined gender roles.’ In the highly structured context of *kastom* rituals the spatial positioning of men and women is, more often than not, sacralised. The achievement of contiguous sanctity relies upon the partition of the masculine and feminine domains. However, Natuoivi’s sculpture negates such traditional constructs to highlight the interconnectedness of men and women during particular ceremonial occasions. Survey participants noted the embodied equilibrium of gender relations present in *Namawia Danis*:

‘Mi laekem sculpture we hemi stap reipresentem Namawai danis blong Futuna. From hemi wan danis we man mo women long taem we olgeta i klosem selebresen.’

‘I like the sculpture that shows the Namawai dance from Futuna. It is a dance that men and women perform together to close a celebration.’

- Female, Tanna, 28 years of age

‘Mi laekem sculpture blong Namawia danis because hemi representem wan traditional danse blong Vanuatu. Hemi wan identity we i representem country blong Vanuatu too. Mi laekem presentensen blong hem from yu luk se hemi representem cooperation too blong ol people long country.’

‘I like the sculpture of the Namawai dance because it represents a traditional dance of Vanuatu. It shows the identity of the country. I also like that when you look at the sculpture you see the cooperation between people of the country.’

- Female, Santo, 30 years of age

Bolton (2003: 53) notes that, ‘*kastom* in Vanuatu until the early 1990s referred to male practice. The political disputes of the 1970s were predominantly a male affair, and the practices instantiated as *kastom* and performed on the radio and at the arts festival were primarily male.’ Where once customary knowledge, rituals, practices and ceremonies were considered the exclusive dominion of men, the conceptualisation that ‘women have *kastom* too’ (Bolton 2003: 172) significantly altered the socio-cultural power structures of local communities. Natuoivi’s sculpture then promotes the equal inclusivity of men and women in the formation and celebration of *kastom*, island heritage and communal identity.

Just as the previous question sought to capture positive responses to works of art included in the exhibition staged at the NLAV, the second question of the survey asked respondents to comment upon objects to which they had a negative reaction. The table below summarises the key findings of the questionnaire:

Artist	Title	Number of responses
No preference		73
Emmanuel Watt	<i>Mas blong Solwota</i>	8
Sero Kuautonga	<i>Cycle long Laef</i>	7

Table 4: Negative responses to works of art

The statistics cited above highlight that a significant proportion of survey participants did not negatively nominate a particular work of art. Much like responses to Question 1, the individuality and differential properties of each object were privileged by local audiences. As two participants noted:

‘Mi ting se evri samting insaed long eksibisen bae yumi no save talem se yumi no laekem wan from wan wan artist i gat way blo hem blo representem wan samting.’

‘We cannot say that we do like something in the exhibition because each artist has their own style of representation.’

- Female, Tanna, 33 years of age

‘Evri wok i representem creativity blong wan wan man mo yumi no save judgem idea blo wan man from hemia nao hemi percievim samting ia.’

‘Every work represents the creativity of each artist so we cannot judge the perceptions of others.’

- Male, Ambrym, 30 years of age

Just as the conventions of Melanesian socialism, and the celebration of indigenous diversity, informed opinions about the positive qualities and attributes of objects included in the NLAV display, so too did such socio-political convictions influence adverse evaluations. The fact that no one particular work of art was overtly criticised by survey participants supports the claims of artistic integrity made by practitioners based in the capital. By adhering to collective aesthetic codes artists intuitively negotiate representations of tradition in contemporary formats.

Although the number of negative responses was negligible, a convergence of sentiment did emerge on one key point, that being the narrative clarity of each object. General criticisms levelled against the paintings, sculptures and carvings included in the exhibition focused upon the illegibility of eschewed meanings and messages. The inherent aesthetic value of contemporary art for many survey respondents centred upon the comprehensibility of ideological themes and visual content. Objects that incorporated abstruse concepts or abstract modes of representation found disfavour among participants:

‘Mi no understandem olgeta mo mi no luk save hemi minim wanem long laef blong mi, hemia nao mi no laikem.’

‘I do not understand some of the art and it does not have any meaning to my life, so these are the things I do not like.’

- Female, Ambrym, 28 years of age

‘Mi no andastandim mo mi no laikem esibision wea ikat skill blong man lo hem ia from mi no save wokem aot wanem nao stori blong hem. Emi meaningless lo mi.’

‘I do not understand or like things in the exhibition where the artist has skill but the story he is telling is not clear. This is meaningless to me.’

- Male, Efate, 33 years of age

‘Sam design oli no some gud or oli hard tumas blong kasem wanem oli stap describem.’

‘Some of the designs are hard to understand and need to be explained.’

- Male, Meawo, 23 years of age

‘Mi no laikem sam from mi no understandem olgeta mo mi no luk save se hemi minim wanem long laef blong mi.’

‘I do not like art that I cannot understand and where I cannot relate the meaning to my life.’

- Female, Ambae, 25 years of age

As discussed in previous chapters, the prominence of contemporary art in Port Vila has steadily increased over the years. However, when compared with customary artefacts the visual content and subsequent narrative function of some paintings and sculptures eluded local audiences. Identification and recognition of *kastom* objects pervade

dominant understandings of indigenous material culture. The ritualistic uses and values of carvings and mats, for example, are bound by notions of *ples*, *raet* and *tabu*. Claims of ownership to particular physical forms by specific language groups, tribes and moieties denies broad accessibility and engagement – while one might know that a *tamtam* originates from the island of Ambrym *rispek* prevent further knowledge being sought by individuals lacking sufficient entitlement. By contrast, works of contemporary art were supposed by survey participants to negate categories of customary classification. The accessibility of subject matter to a broad viewership was considered essential when ascribing value to the NLAV exhibition.

The carving *Mas blong Solwata* by Emmanuel Watt provides a case in point. Crafted from bourao wood found washed ashore on the coastline of Port Vila, Watt takes the natural form of the large branch as his inspiration. Each element of the sculpture represents an aspect of the marine environment of Vanuatu. A large face, reminiscent of an octopus, features dominantly – the large circular eyes of the creature exaggerated by way of pearl shell inlays. On top of the prominent head floats a turtle, holding a piece of coral in its right fin. The dense lower section of the sculpture details the rich habitat of the ocean environment. At the bottom right of the carving sits an *ilfis* (eel), behind which is a *bichlamar* (sea cucumber). Watt utilises the natural concave of the wood at the bottom centre to depict an underwater cave, the legs and flippers of a diver visible as he moves into the abyss beyond. The forms of a *fis* (fish) and a *pupu* (triton shell) take shape at the bottom left of the carving. In combination the iconography highlights the relationship between humans and nature, the fragility of marine ecosystems and the centrality of the sea to everyday life in Vanuatu (as a source of food, a place of exploration or a site of leisurely pursuit). For some survey respondents, however, the carving lacked appeal given its imprecise narrative and absence of reference to *kastom*:

‘Me no likem picture ya from mi no understandem wanem noa picture ya sta talem. Be lo way we man ya i kavem hemi nice mo creative. Hemi showem ol difren animal blo solwota be me no save wanem noa meaning blong hem.’

‘I do not like the carving because I do not understand what it is trying to say. The way it is carved is nice and creative. It shows different animals of the ocean but I do not understand its meaning.’

- Female, Pentecost, 21 years of age

‘Mi no laekem tumas, from kaving ia, hem i nogat wan (tru) stret mining blong hem.’

‘I do not like this carving because it does not have true meaning.’

- Female, Shepherds, 20 years of age

‘Mi no laekem sam samting inside lo eksibisen olsem Emmanuel Watt. Hemi hard blong understandem mas blong solwota from hemi no real samting.’

I do not like the work in the exhibition that is by Emmanuel Watt. It is hard to understand what a mask of the ocean is because it is fictitious.’

- Female, Ambrym, 25 years of age

Although survey respondents, in some instances, recognised particular motifs present within the carving, the artistic intent of the maker was not regarded as easily identifiable or relatable. As a result, the object was repudiated by viewers based upon its perceived detachment from the realities of lived indigenous experience.

For other survey participants a misconception of Watt’s iconography resulted in negative feedback. Respondents commented upon the obscure visual properties of the carving, particularly the face of the octopus. The motif was mistaken by some for an *oknaet* (owl) and, as a result, the object was perceived as problematic:

‘Hemi look like wan oak naet. Hem scary too taem mi look mi no save too wanem kaen tingting blo solwota kafing ia i representem.’

‘It looks like an owl. It is scary and when I look at it I cannot see things from the ocean represented in the carving.’

- Female, Shepherds, 23 years of age

‘Mi no likem kaving from hem sign blong ol demon mo witch craft.’

‘I do not like the carving because it has signs that represent demons and witchcraft.’

- Female, Pentecost, 21 years of age

‘Mi no laekem wan picture insaed long esibisen ia from hemi representem wan simple burao we hemi flot lo solwata. Emi nogat wan importance about culture blong Vanuatu. Mo tu because hemi scary taem man i looklook. Hemi no relate wetem kastom.’

‘I do not like the carving because it is simply some burao wood that normally floats in the ocean. The carving does not have any importance to the culture of Vanuatu. It is also scary to look at. It does not relate to *kastom*.’

- Female, Malekula, 24 years of age

A *kastom* story that references Maewo and Pentecost islands illuminates the reasons for resistance to Watt’s misconceived imagery. A young girl lives with her family in a small village on Pentecost, while her uncle, with whom she shares a loving bond, lives on the island of Maewo. The girl misses her uncle, just as he misses his niece. Each evening he traverses the ocean that separates the two. However, rather than travel by boat or canoe the uncle makes use of *kastom* magic to transform himself into an owl, a mysterious creature of the night. Flying under the cover of darkness he must be careful to navigate his route so as to circumvent any churches on the land below, for fear of being struck by invisible shards of energy. Upon safe arrival at his destination, the uncle perches upon the branch of a breadfruit tree outside the bedroom window of his niece, from where his distinctively melodic hooting comforts the girl as she falls into peaceful slumber (Montgomery 2004: 65).

While the premise of the story clearly demonstrates the importance of kin relations and family bonds, we might ask why churches are mentioned. What relevance does religion have to the narrative? How are these conceptions linked to the perceived iconography of Watt’s sculpture? As discussed in Chapter 3, the project of Christian missionisation in Vanuatu has resulted in traditional stories incorporating gospel rhetoric. The owl symbolises both the power of *kastom* magic and the demonstrative darkness of particular religious tenants. Biblical references to the nocturnal creature analogise the silent and swift hunting skills of the bird with the evil powers of Satan. As Isaiah (14:22-23), quoting the Lord in the Old Testament, states, ‘I will wipe out Babylon’s name and survivors, her offspring and descendants. I will turn her into a place for owls and into swampland; I will sweep her with the broom of destruction.’ The prominence of Christian theology in the narrative highlights the influence of religious beliefs upon the reconceptualisation of indigenous mythologies. Where once, perhaps, the owl symbolised wisdom and stealth the bird now conjures feelings of abject fright and fear. The misappropriation of Watt’s imagery therefore illuminates the many and varied factors that contribute to the reception of contemporary art by local audiences. In some instances the ascendancy of both church and *kastom* may mitigate

responses – just as one viewer will liken the face of the creature to that of an octopus, another will attribute the features of the carving to that of an evil spirit.

Similar conceptions pervaded reactions to Sero Kuautonga's canvas *Cycle long Laef*. Three stick figures fill the middle ground of the painting, each representing a different stage of life. For some survey participants the depiction of death, as illustrated by the inverted human form at the centre right of the image, induced concern:

'Mi no laekem wan nomo we in title "Cycle long laef" from si i stap rimindem mi long ded. Taem mi luk mi filim se mi fraet.'

'I do not like the painting titled "Cycle of life" because it reminds me of the dead. When I look at the picture I feel frightened.'

- Female, Ambae, 22 years of age

'Mi no laekem penting ia from se hemi mekem man i fraet from ol kala blo hem i some danger or tet.'

'I do not like the painting because it causes fear and the colours imply a danger or threat.'

- Female, Malekula, 23 years of age

The stylistic qualities of the picture were also analysed by respondents. As noted in the comments above, the colours that dominate the scene – hues of bright orange, muted yellow and various shades of brown – were chided, particularly when associated with representations of the afterlife. The mortal passing of a loved one in Vanuatu brings with it the observance of funerary rituals specific to the *ples* of the deceased. As experienced during periods of residency and fieldwork in Port Vila, communal public mourning entails the presentation of food (rice, yam and taro) and goods (mats and calico) to the family of the departed. While kinswomen sit in a circle around the *ded bodi* (dead body) and wail for their loss, men take their place at the perimeter of the gathered congregation. As gifts are exchanged and condolences paid, time is spent in silent contemplation as a mark of respect. After burial some days later, during which *kastom* and Christian rites are amalgamated, communities obey an extended period of bereavement (often lasting some 100 days). Kuautonga's imagery and style of representation, therefore, rendered a situation of grief and loss that, for some survey participants, conjured negative emotional responses.

The third question of the survey asked participants if the works of art included in the exhibition were important to the nation. The responses were resoundingly affirmative. In addition to responses to Question 1 and Question 2, that identified representations of *kastom*, culture and tradition as key features that contributed to the inherent value of the paintings, sculptures and carvings, the visual scope of objects presented in the display also warranted praise. The depiction of similar subject matter by way of distinctive visual styles particular to individual artists was seen to reflect the amalgamation of regional difference within the rubrics of nationhood. As two respondents noted:

‘Ol art work ya i representem livelihood, custom and beliefs blong ni-Vanuatu. Hemi important blong yumi kat ol kaen work olsem blong putum some myths into a form of realistic being. Ol man blong nara kantri i save kat wan picture long Vanuatu even sapos oli luksam long ol art work ya.’

‘The art represents the livelihoods, customs and beliefs of ni-Vanuatu. It is important that we have all kinds of art that can translate our myths into a form of realistic being. People from other countries can learn about Vanuatu by looking at this art.’

- Male, Ambrym, 30 years of age

‘Ol art long exibision ia oli soem ol kalja blong Vanuatu. Som penting oli representem sam sumting (danis) be oli luk deferen. Penting blong Alvaro Kuautonga mo Taitu Kuautong oli soem danis be oli gat deferen style.’

‘The art in the exhibition shows the cultures of Vanuatu. Some of the paintings are of the same thing, like dance, but they look different to each other. The paintings by Alvaro Kuautonga and Taitu Kuautonga are both about dance but they are different in style.’

- Female, Tongoa, 43 years of age

The fact that contemporary artists reject visual standardisation encourages aesthetic diversity. As discussed in Chapter 4, *kastom kopiraet* governs both the themes and modes of representation adopted by different practitioners. The internal logic that demands each artist negotiate a pictorial style by which to differentiate his or her practice from that of others reinforces the significance of individual creative agency within the functions of the artworld. By extension, recognition by local audiences of the visual diversification that has come to define the outputs of makers based in Port Vila

attests to the multiple aesthetic viewpoints brought to bear by patrons of contemporary art.

As mentioned in the comment above, the paintings by Alvaro Kuautonga and Taitu Kuautonga, for example, provide a case in point. The former, in his canvas *Six Provins blong Vanuatu*, utilises the motif of the dancing figure to represent the distinct customs and traditions of the six provinces of the nation. The many colours adopted by the artist here correlate to the varied expressions of indigeneity that typify *kastom* throughout the archipelago. He explains

The *kastom* of Vanuatu is unique. Our culture is what differentiates us from others. Every island of Vanuatu has *kastom* and this is what forms our identity. My art promotes Vanuatu. I do not focus on one island or province but represent the country as a whole so people from outside can see our many cultures (interview 28 November 2013, author's translation).

By way of comparison, the latter canvas *Danis blong Futuna*, takes as its subject matter the Tanitatau dance, a routine performed exclusively by widowed women from the southern island (Taitu Kuautonga, interview 28 November 2013). The four female figures that comprise the canvas have each observed a period of mourning. With the arrival of the new season's yam harvest the women participate in a ritualistic cleansing during which they bathe in the ocean and apply coconut oil to their body and hair. Having symbolically washed away their sorrow the women, as rendered in the painting, enact the dance with their breasts exposed to convey their newly conferred matrimonial availability to other eligible men of the village. The juxtaposition of island and country as portrayed in the two pictures attests to the dual paradigms under which artists in Port Vila locate their works of art. Taken together, the inclusion of images in the NLAV exhibition that explored both local and national aspects of contemporary ni-Vanuatu identity appealed to survey participants for two reasons: on the one hand viewers were exposed to the traditions of islands other than their own, while on the other hand constructs of state sovereignty were publically conveyed.

The reliance of artists upon a bank of localised themes and imagery also encouraged audiences to regard the paintings, sculptures and carvings in the NLAV exhibition as an extension of indigenous material culture. Contemporary art was not

seen as a derivative of imported Western practice but, rather, internalised as an expression of national heritage. As survey participants noted:

‘Ol next generation blong yumi bai oli mo influense long ol European kalja mo forgetem kalja blong yumi, be i tru long ol eksibisen ia nao bai i stap rimindem olgeta about kalja mo fasin blong yumi.’

‘The next generation of ni-Vanuatu is being influenced by European culture and they are forgetting our heritage, but the exhibition reminds them about our culture and way of life.’

- Female, Tanna, 33 years of age

‘Sometimes yumi forgetem abaotem sam long ol customs, mo culture mo way of living blong yumi from Western influence hemi kam antap tumas. Be taem yumi luk ol samting inside long exibision ia hemi remindem yumi about ol roots blong yumi.’

‘Sometimes people forget about some of our customs, culture and way of life because Western influences are increasing. Looking at the art included in the exhibition reminds us of our roots.’

- Female, Efate, 28 years of age

‘Mi ting se naoi a sam long ol man Vanuatu oli turn to forget custom, so oli mas olem tait kalja blong olgeta. Oli stap adoptem Western life stael.’

‘I think people in Vanuatu are forgetting our customs, so we must protect our culture and not adopt a Western lifestyle.’

- Male, Tongoa, 24 years of age

In the case of Matthew Abbock’s canvas *Kaljoral Heritage blong Lapita* the depiction of historical forms legitimised the authority of the image. Dividing his painting into three interconnected visual planes Abbock represents the past, current and potential future relationships between Lapita culture and ni-Vanuatu identity. Since the early 1970s ancient archaeological sites dating to 900 BC have been discovered throughout the archipelago. Beginning with the excavation of a large settlement found on the northern island of Malo (Hedrick 1971), the discovery of Lapita has informed post-independence constructs of ancestry, tradition and nationhood. More recently, in 2004, a Lapita cemetery was formally identified at Teouma, on the south east coast of Efate (see Bedford, Spriggs and Regenvanu 2006). The presentation of remnant pottery from

these sites, by way of a permanent display at the National Museum of Vanuatu and temporary exhibitions at international institutions (such as *Lapita: Oceanic Ancestors* at the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, in 2010) highlights the centrality of Lapita to national identity constructs.¹¹⁸ Abbock's incorporation of ancient forms, designs and patterns thus exemplifies the means by which contemporary artists' appropriate heritage and, as a consequence, find favour among ni-Vanuatu audiences.

Comments specifically about the painting affirm the aesthetic appeal of Abbock's canvas:

'Mi laekem ol symbol blong Lapita we i stap represetem past mo taem naoia mo fiuja blong Vanuatu. From hemi stap kivim long yumi sam design we hemi relate long custom blong yumi long ol past years mo taem naoia mo stap kivim picture long yumi how nao yumi save live fiuja taem.'

'I like the symbols of the Lapita painting because they represent the past, time now and the future of Vanuatu. The designs relate to our customs from the past, show our lives today and teach us how we will live in the future.'

- Male, Tanna, 22 years of age

'Mi likem penting blong Matthew Abbock, from lo penting ia i kat ol diffren colour mo hemi talem out life inside lo Vanuatu, how ol diffren colour oli representem ol samting long Vanuatu.'

'I like the painting by Matthew Abbock because it uses different colours to show life in Vanuatu. The different colours used in the painting represent things that belong to Vanuatu.'

- Female, Malekula, 20 years of age

'Mi laekem "Kaljoral Heritage blong Lapita" from hemi soem identity blong yumi man Vanuatu. Mo tu ol colour mo message blong penting ia hemi gud tumas.'

'I like "Kaljoral Heritage blong Lapita" because it shows the identity of the people of Vanuatu. Also, the colours and message of the painting are very good.'

- Male, Santo, 25 years of age

¹¹⁸ The exhibition (11 September 2010 – 1 September 2011) was jointly curated by Christophe Sand from the New Caledonia Institute for Archaeology and Stuart Bedford from the Australia National University.

By rendering motifs specific to the country Abbock firmly posits his painting within the collective consciousness of the wider Port Vila community. The temporal link he establishes between the past, present and future clearly appealed to viewers, particularly when expressed using the motifs of traditional material culture. Discussing ni-Vanuatu conceptions of historical consciousness, John Taylor (2008a: 5) notes that, ‘patterns are not static, but demonstrate emergent and regenerative processes connecting ideas of place and time through biological idioms of movement and growth.’ Consequently, Abbock’s juxtaposition of periods of pre- and post-colonial contact, emphasised by his transition of colour from a pallet of brown to blue, testifies to the resilience of indigenous heritage both before and after the project of Christian missionisation. The enduring legacies of Lapita upon contemporary manifestations of indigeneity, as evidenced by the comments made about Abbock’s canvas, thus extend understanding of local aesthetic systems.

Responses to the final question of the survey reinforced the positive reception afforded to contemporary art by survey participants. Again, the objects displayed in the NLAV exhibition were confirmed as authentic expressions of indigenous culture, and as vehicles for the promotion of tradition, heritage and *kastom*. The legitimacy of the paintings, sculptures and carvings was further validated by several respondents, each of whom commented upon the structures necessary to support the continued development of the local artworld:

‘Ol artis blong Vanuatu oli nid encouragemet mo sapot. Gavman mus giv mone long ol artis lo helpem ol man.’

‘Our artists must be encouraged and supported. Funding from the Government is needed to help our artists.’

- Male, Mataso, 30 years of age

‘I mo gud se bai yumi mas kat wan bilding we bai yumi save putum ol olfala eksibisen blong yumi lem blong kipim gud blong ol next generation blong yumi.’

‘It would be good if we had a building in which to show exhibitions and to keep the art safe for the next generation.’

- Female, Tanna, 33 years of age

‘Hemi identity blong yumi so yumi mas supportem mo encouragem ol artis blong country i develop.’

‘Art shows our identity so we must support and encourage the artists to help the country develop.’

- Female, Pentecost, 22 years of age

‘Mi ting se i shud kat plante exhibition blong ol local painters mo ol man blong carving long Vanuatu. Mo Gavman I shud lukluk blong exportem olgeta painting ia internationally.’

‘I think we should have many exhibitions of paintings and carvings from Vanuatu. The Government should invest in exporting the paintings internationally.’

- Male, Ambae, 30 years of age

Calls for a dedicated gallery space and ongoing fiscal government support echo the sentiments expressed by artists based in the capital, as discussed in Chapter 2. The notion that works of contemporary art must be permanently displayed, preserved and protected highlights the prominence and permanence of such objects to the communities of Port Vila. Recognition of the category of art by local audiences thus separates such visual creations from the artefacts and relics that have commanded significant museological attention over the years. Public consensus that contemporary art be presented in a site-specific locale testifies to the socio-cultural perception that paintings, sculptures and drawings materially embody indigenous identity and, subsequently, ought be viewed not in a museum or library setting, but in a public gallery.

CONCLUSION

The interrogation of aesthetic experiences in Port Vila reveals much about the relationship between socio-cultural values and collective visual perception. No longer sceptically regarded as a colonial import, contemporary art is today embraced by local audiences as being of, and for, the country. As this chapter has demonstrated, several factors contribute to the public legitimacy afforded to objects included in the NLAV display. Foremost, representations of *kastom* resonated with viewers. Just as practitioners assert an acute sensibility that their outputs relay the heritage of their home islands, audiences correspondingly favoured these works of art. Joseph John’s canvas *Storian* and Eric Natuoivi’s sculpture *Namawia Danis* were esteemed for their explicit portrayal of traditions from a particular *ples*. In town, where the mandate to protect and

promote indigenous heritage is regarded as a collective responsibility, these ascriptions of value exemplify the commitment of artists and viewers alike. Such sentiments also extended to depictions that adopted national identity as subject matter. References to shared practices and history, as in Alvaro Kuautonga's painting *Six provins blong Vanuatu* or Matthew Abbock's canvas *Kaljoral Heritage blong Lapita*, highlight the means by which artists convey messages of unification and solidarity.

Within this framework, however, island difference influenced readings of particular forms. On the basis of inherited knowledge certain viewers ominously evaluated Emmanuel Watt's carving *Mas blong Solwata* – a *kastom* story from one *ples* influencing perceptions of an object presented in another. The preference for clarity and cohesion resulted in the favouring of figurative imagery. This too was the case with Sero Kuautonga's abstract expression *Cycle long Laef*. For many audience members easily identifiable imagery was regarded a more authentic embodiment of indigeneity. The adoption of internalised content such as the chiefly body, dance, storytelling and marriage contextualises objects of contemporary art within a schema recognised and acknowledged by ni-Vanuatu. As a consequence, when evaluated in its entirety, the NLAV exhibition was overwhelmingly praised as an exemplar of the diversity of cultures and customs that comprise the nation.

CONCLUSION

As has been shown throughout this thesis, the relationship between contemporary art and *kastom* in Port Vila is one of fluidity and negotiation. The outputs of artists are regarded as material embodiments of the distinct characteristics that exemplify indigenous identity. While a number of artists paint with acrylics, inks and watercolours, others sculpt with clay or found materials and some weave with wool. Supports vary from canvas, banana leaf paper and wood to mesh, calico and tapa. Palettes comprise colourfully rich hues, sombre earthly tones and monochromatic tints. There is no single style of representation that binds artists to one another – depictions oscillate between the figurative, abstract and allegorical. Subject matter ranges from mythology to modernity as artists confront issues such as urban and village life, gender roles and responsibilities, customary traditions, colonial history, the global economy, technology and the environment.

Key historical and social circumstances were crucial to the emergence of this vibrant visual language. Vanuatu's achievement of independence in 1980 provided the political background against which innovative forms of indigenous expression were championed and celebrated. After decades of indecisive colonial rule under the Condominium, the new nation state encouraged the renaissance and revival of local practices and traditions. Unlike other countries in the region, the attainment of sovereignty was no easy feat for ni-Vanuatu. Vested French interest in the archipelago induced local divides and conflicts – the armed standoff at the Vanua'aka Pati headquarters in 1977 being but one example of the fractious tensions. Yet, by way of Melanesian Socialism, the incumbent government and Prime Minister Walter Lini created a national space in which regional difference was equally recognised and validated. Political doctrine held that both Christianity and *kastom* were essential elements of an inclusive national identity. As Lini (1980: 62) himself metaphorically noted, 'We are moving into a period of rapid change rather like a canoe entering a patch of rough water: God and custom must be the sail and the steering-paddle of our canoe.' The promotion of *kastom* as unifying rhetoric brought together the culturally diverse islands of the archipelago. With time, cantankerous divides based upon island lineage, colonial affiliation and religious denomination were replaced by a mood of enthusiastic patriotism that continues to this day.

Amid the embracement of this hard won freedom, Port Vila was a hub of excited activity – the mood one of optimism. For engaged youngsters in the capital the opportunity to train as artists presented an unprecedented opportunity. Aside from the exhibition staged by Emmanuel Watt at Devil’s Point in 1978, the production of contemporary art had been a decidedly expatriate affair. Access to materials and training had been all but non-existent for emerging local practitioners. However, the founding of the art department at the Institut National de Technologie du Vanuatu in 1979 was to have a profound impact on indigenous modes of representation. Under the guidance of Jacqui Bourdain and Henri Thailade students including Joseph John, Juliette Pita and Fidel Yoringmal became the first of many to develop their talents. Alongside new national symbols such as the chiefly body, *namale* leaf and boar’s tusk that adorned the country’s flag and coat of arms, these pupils introduced figurative motifs to the visual landscape of town. With the support of the Vanua’aka Pati and key political figures including Sethy Regenvanu, their outputs were synonymised with the emergent nation state. The First National Arts Festival provided an occasion for the students to create a wide range of designs. From letterheads and banners to the large mural that adorns the exterior of the former parliament building, the work of these young artists was central to imaginings of collective ni-Vanuatu identity.

Over the years, however, the priorities of the government shifted. Funding that had once been allocated to the arts was redistributed. Investment in areas such as infrastructure, roads and sanitation became a pressing concern for political leaders. As a result, teaching of the course at INTV ceased. Artists were left with no professional training, little financial support, few public commissions and limited exhibition opportunities. Yet, the absence of an educational institution and gallery space did not deter practitioners. Recognising their precarious situation, artists came together to form the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association in 1989. Makers including Sylvester Bulesa, Michael Busai, Sero Kuautonga and Jobo Lovo joined John, Pita, Watt and Yoringmal as founding members of the organisation. Nawita became an important vehicle by which artists legitimated their careers and received critical attention, in both local and international contexts. As the contemporary artworld expanded so too did the number of artists working in Port Vila. The founding of the Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association by Jean-Claude Touré in 2005 attests to the growing preoccupations of artists. Red Wave came to be seen as an alternative means of group affiliation that artists could use to promote their work. Makers such as Matthew Abbock, David

Ambong, Tony Bruce and Eric Natuoivi rescinded their Nawita memberships in favour of Red Wave and, in doing so, established the organisation as a locally embedded entity. The presence of two associations has not only spurred competitive collegiality, but also confirmed Becker's (1982: 39) assertion that 'Before people can organize themselves as a world explicitly justified by making objects or events defined as art, they need sufficient political and economic freedom to do this.'

With this in mind, a direct correlation exists today between the often concealed costs of making art and the socio-economic status of current practitioners. Makers must have the funds to purchase materials, stage exhibitions and embark on travel at their own expense while simultaneously managing the very real financial pressures of life in town. Rent and loan repayments, utilities and school fees are but a few recurrent monetary obligations. Much to their frustration, most practitioners thus hold positions of waged employment rather than devoting their time fully to the production of art. For emerging artists seeking formal training the situation is much the same. Admittance to either the Vanuatu Institute of Technology or the Vanuatu Institute of Teacher Education is highly competitive. Along with stringent entry requirements, tuition rates of between 62,000 vatu and 127,500 vatu are beyond the reach of many ni-Vanuatu families. These trends suggest that a local middle class is emerging in Port Vila – a demographic category to which the majority of artists may be ascribed. The subsistence lifestyle of the islands is here replaced by processes of conspicuous consumption. To have a job and an income, live in a secure house with basic amenities and engage in the cash economy highlight the relatively privileged domestic conditions of a growing number of ni-Vanuatu.

The rapidly accelerating circumstances of life in town gives rise to fears that *kastom* will be forgotten. The advent of new technologies, modes of communication and capitalist markets has profoundly altered the Port Vila's 'spatial and social configuration' (Mitchell 2003: 359). When once the capital was regarded as a colonial space in which indigenous agents were tolerated rather than welcomed, today it is home to an ever increasing number of ni-Vanuatu. Yet, town is rarely regarded as one's *ples*. Instead, island lineage is overtly expressed as a mark of identity. To be *man Paama* or *woman Tanna* is to maintain connections to ancestral land, rites and knowledge. As a result, inherent practices and cultural differences are vehemently protected and promoted. *Kastom* is not being lost or eroded but, rather, adapted to the withstand the demands of the urban environment. The inescapable forces of globalisation are

strategically amalgamated with traditional ways of being. As a fluid category of constant negotiation ‘custom has always changed with people’s ideas and it must continue to do so’ (Lini 1980: 62). Rather than exist as sites in which modernity is resisted or rejected, communities innovatively assert claims to *kastom* within the plural matrix of town.

This is nowhere more evident than in the objects produced by contemporary artists. A central preoccupation of both Nawita and Red Wave members is that their outputs embody a sense of indigenous identity. As a result, representations that adopt *kastom* as subject matter are a common feature of the artworld. Makers take great pride in presenting aspects of their distinct cultural heritage to viewers. The agency of such depictions is two-fold: on one hand these images and forms testify to the rich and varied traditions of the nation; on the other hand, they are a means by which artists differentiate their creations from others working with similar materials. As Becker (1982: 49) notes, ‘Artistic innovators frequently try to avoid what they regard as excessive formalism, sterility and hermeticism of their medium by exploiting the actions and objects of everyday life.’ Paintings, drawings, sculptures and carvings encapsulate lived realities. From the role of chiefs throughout the archipelago to the specifics of marriage on certain islands, practitioners provide a visual record of diverse practices, values and beliefs. The choice of thematic content is no accident. Dances and stories that are rendered in paint, ink or clay highlight the very real significance of customary performances and narratives to the nation as a whole. Whether from Futuna or Malekula, Erromango or Ambae, the inherent worth an artist ascribes to a particular object is a reflection of its spiritual truth. The rendering of activities, ceremonies and rituals that have avoided appropriation as tourist spectacle speaks to the highly self-referential nature of much contemporary art.

It must be noted, however, that the imagery and iconography that artists adopted is mediated by strict intellectual property regimes. *Kastom kopiraet* is bound to highly regulated codes of indigenous ownership, authority and entitlement. While emblems associated with the state are openly adopted by artists, other symbols and patterns are vehemently protected by traditional owners. The *raet* to knowledge, and by extension its reproduction, is bound to the concept of *ples*. Island lineage, natal affiliation and customary status each influence the motifs that artists incorporate within their visual vocabularies. As the artworld has expanded so too have the responsibilities of makers. When once Joseph John included sand drawing designs in his paintings and

watercolours today his identity as *man Shepherds* prevents his rendering of such representations. By way of comparison, Tony Bruce's heritage as *man Ambrym* confers his use of these stylistic elements in his natangora nut carvings. Yet, other forms from his island are the exclusive domain of initiated men. The appropriation of *tamtams* and *namages* that characterises the practice of Johnanin Bangdor is, for example, sanctified by his standing within the *maghe*. The title of chief bestows certain privileges upon individual artists. Whether earned or inherited the eminence attached to the role enables makers to assert their dominance. In the case of Erromango, where the turtle and fish are shared icons among different clans, Jobo Lovo's claims to power support his demand that other practitioners from the island stylistically differentiate their outputs from his own. Taken together, the complex web of *kastom kopiraet* is predicated on the notion of *rispek* – a crucial aspect of ni-Vanuatu society more broadly.

Such community values are reflected by way of response to the inaugural exhibition held at the National Library and Archives of Vanuatu in 2013. Of the 13 objects included in the display public sentiment favoured those that embodied different aspects of indigenous identity. Representations of *kastom*, as practice and as ideology, resounded with viewers. Becker (1982: 46) reasons that this is because 'Conventions known to all well-socialized members of a society make possible some of the most basic and important forms of cooperation characteristic of an art world. Most important, they allow members who have little or no formal acquaintance with or training in the arts to participate as audience members.' For ni-Vanuatu in Port Vila the symbiotic relationship between image and *ples* affirmed the relativity of particular works of art. Subject matter that was easily comprehended was most appreciated as viewers ascribed greater validity to encapsulated representations of lived experiences. Depictions of cultural heritage particular to both the islands and the nation were held as visual decrees of unity and *rispek*. The traditions of dance, the conventions of storytelling and the legacies of Lapita were but some of the themes privileged by local audiences.

So, what does all this mean? The findings of this research suggest that the customary capital of contemporary art in Port Vila is evolving. Data collected during fieldwork by way of participant observation, interviews and surveys attests to the fact that the outputs of makers are in a state of transition. Once regarded as foreign imports associated with wealthy colonial administrators and expatriate hobbyists, today artworks are locally embraced as representations of local history, identity and culture. In town tradition and modernity, island and urban, unite to give rise to new ways of

being. While local agents have not labelled paintings and sculptures as objects of *kastom* there is a distinct intimation that, with time, such a shift may occur. The efficacy of contemporary art is undeniable. It is prominently and proudly displayed in town: murals adorn public buildings; paintings welcome visitors to Parliament House and the offices of the Melanesian Spearhead Group; the walls of the Reserve Bank are decorated by the work of local artists; and, the National Library and Archives displayed these very objects in celebration of its official opening. Makers are prominent community leaders: Michael Busai and Ralph Regenvanu hold positions of employment with the government; Johanin Bangdor and Jobo Lovo are chiefs; and, Sero Kuautonga and Eric Natuoivi lead the Futuna Cultural Association. Artists act as representatives of the nation: they attend both the Melanesian Arts Festival and the Pacific Arts Festival as official delegates; their outputs are exhibited internationally; and, they are commissioned to produce imagery for the country's banknotes and stamps.

Paintings, drawings and sculptures are today acknowledged as powerful expressions of indigeneity by political and traditional institutions. Like others forms of *kastom* contemporary art is formally protected by the terms of the *Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000*. This recognition, however, also means that images and forms are open to the same scrutiny as customary material culture. The proposed exhibition to commemorate the Mount Benlow volcanic eruption provides a case in point. Chiefs from Ambrym objected to the display on the grounds that artists did not have the *raet* to render representations of the mountain. Of pressing concern was the possibility that the *mal* of the area may show his displeasure by way of another natural disaster. This example lends itself to the conclusion that the status of contemporary art is currently in flux. If the outputs of practitioners were not regarded as vehicles of *kastom* then the chiefs might well have approved the display. During fieldwork it was often heard that *kontempri art olgeta gat kastom we i stap insaed* – there is *kastom* inside contemporary art. Such assertions highlight the fluidity of *kastom* as a conceptual category. The urban environment provides makers with a setting in which to extend the currency of their creations.

The methodological approach adopted during this research may act as a guide for other studies of contemporary art in Melanesia. At present, artists based in Honiara, Solomon Islands, have yet to receive scholarly attention. Having successfully hosted the 11th Festival of Pacific Arts in 2012, during which 22 countries and territories from the region showcased their cultures and heritage, the country's international profile was

indisputably elevated. A vibrant art scene has existed for many years and makers based in the capital produce paintings and sculptures that attest to the rich traditions of the nation. Artists such as Brian Feni, Casper Hairiu and Luke Douglas Rae provide but a few examples of practitioners whose outputs are ripe for exploration. Alongside the National Museum and Cultural Centre there also operates the Solomon Islands Arts Alliance and the Artists Association of Solomon Islands, all of which are vehicles for the promotion of local contemporary art. Most recently, the non-profit community hub Art Haus provided a space for makers to collaborate in a participatory environment of knowledge and skill exchange. As an experimental 12-month project, Arts Haus opened in July 2014. During its year of operation the organisation initiated programmes, activities and projects designed to develop the creative industries of the country and provide meaningful employment for artists. Such developments highlight the ample organisations, institutions and artists that might form the basis of potential academic investigations.

Similarly, contemporary art production in Papua New Guinea has not received sustained academic attention in recent years. While Susan Cochrane and Pamela Rosi undertook seminal studies relating to artists based in Port Moresby during the 1980s and 1990s, the situation today is far different from that which is presented in the literature. Many of the practitioners with whom the two worked, such as Timothy Akis, Jakupa Ako and Mathias Kauage have since passed away and a new generation of painters and sculptors has emerged. In Port Moresby and Goroko (the capital of the Eastern Highlands Province) artists are exploring issues as diverse as indigenous identity, political corruption and urban modernisation. The practices of makers such as Jeffry Feeger, Pax Jakupa, Albert Joseph and Nelsen Lae Tsosi are evidence of the rich array of possible scholarly enquiries. Although the circumstances particular to Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and PNG differ there are compelling reasons for a comparative study of the region as a whole.

This thesis has sought to privilege indigenous voices, experiences and realities. With this in mind it seems fitting to here quote the late Grace Mera Molisa, a revered ni-Vanuatu politician, writer and female rights activist. In her poem *The Role of the Artist*, Molisa's timeless words capture the passionate foundations, enduring legacies and prosperous future of contemporary artists in Port Vila:

The Artist is responsible
to his or her conscience.
The Spirit of Creativity
Which moves him or her
to express what his or her
mind's eye sees.
The Artist has the responsibility
to highlight
the integrally intrinsic
features of the Community.
The Artist is a Thinker.
The Artist is a Medium
The Artist is a Channel
The Artist is a Vehicle
The Artist is a Catalyst
The Artist is an Actor.
The Artist is an Activist.
The Artist is an Instrument.
The Artist embodies the Spirit
And Soul of the Community
Whose Essence he expresses.

(Molisa 1994: 30)

FIGURES

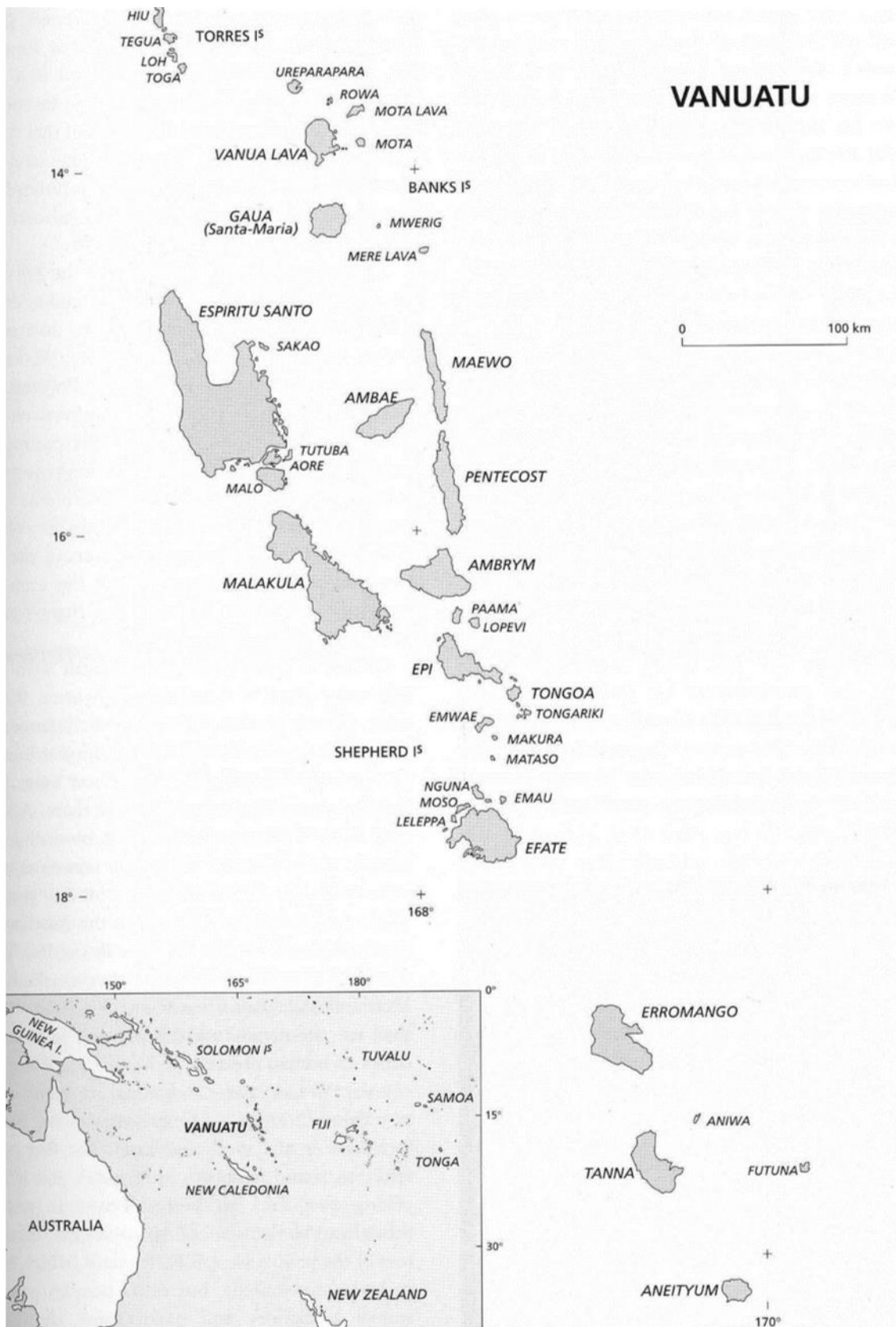


Fig. 1 Map of Vanuatu (Bonnemaïson 1996:9)

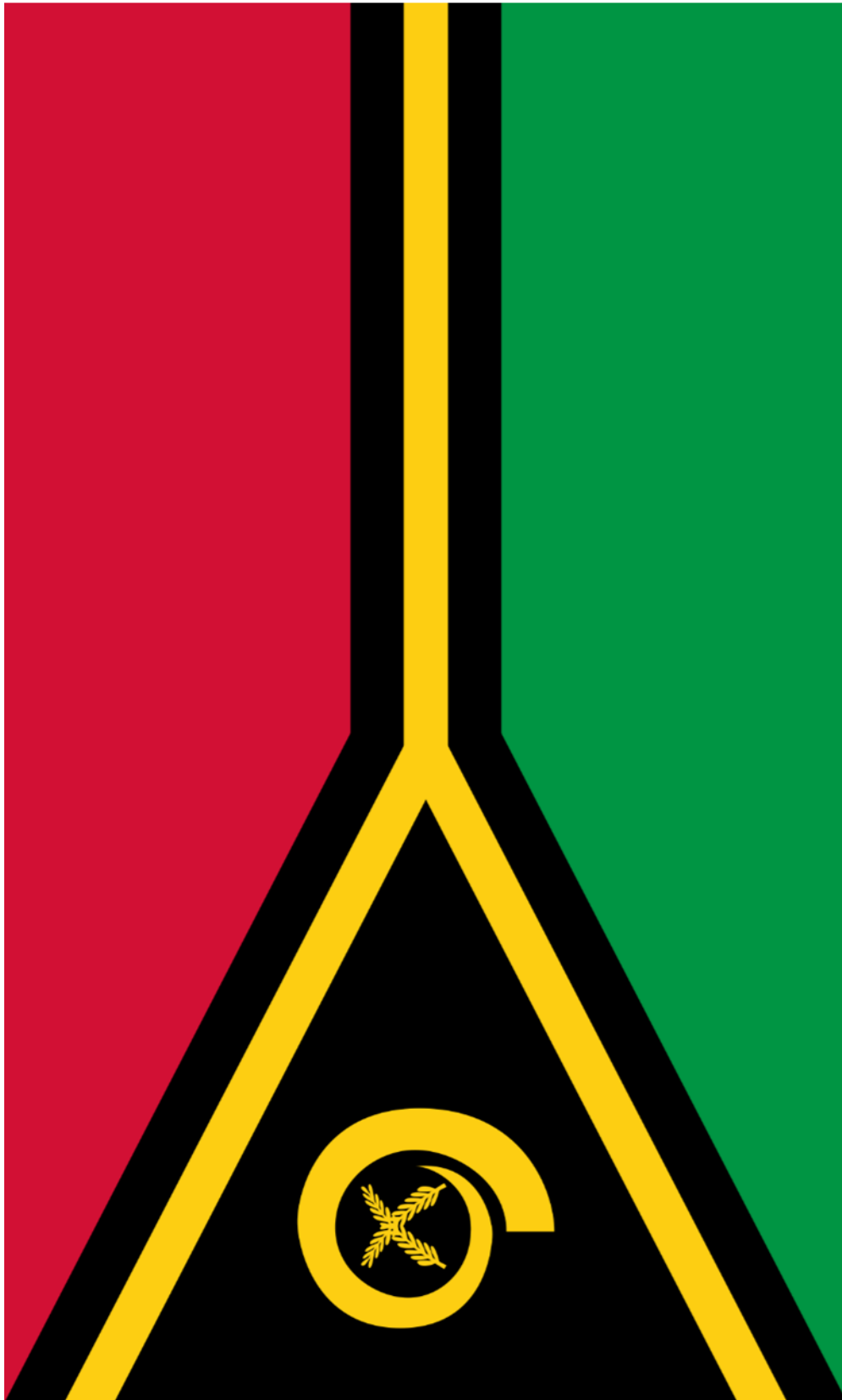


Fig. 2 Flag of Vanuatu



Fig. 3 Coat of Arms of Vanuatu, as displayed in Parliament House
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 4 Workshop of the late Nicolai Michoutouchkine and Aloï Pilioko
(Photograph: L. McDonald)

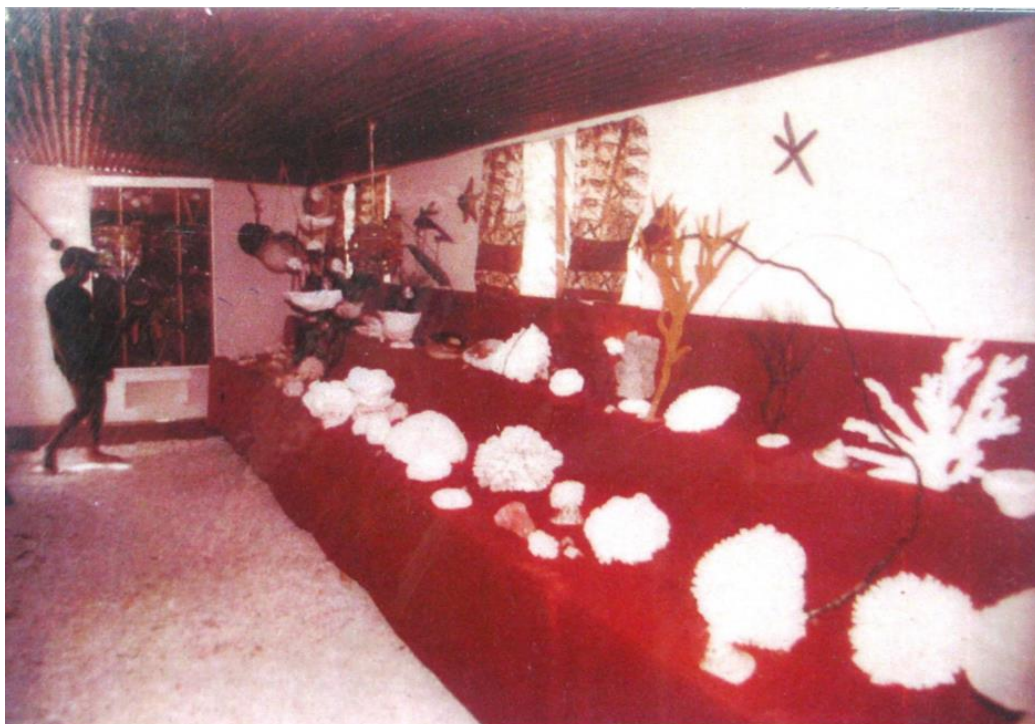


Fig. 5 Exhibition of the art of Emmanuel Watt, 1978 (Photograph: E. Watt)



Fig. 6 Exhibition of the art of Emmanuel Watt, 1978 (Photograph: E. Watt)

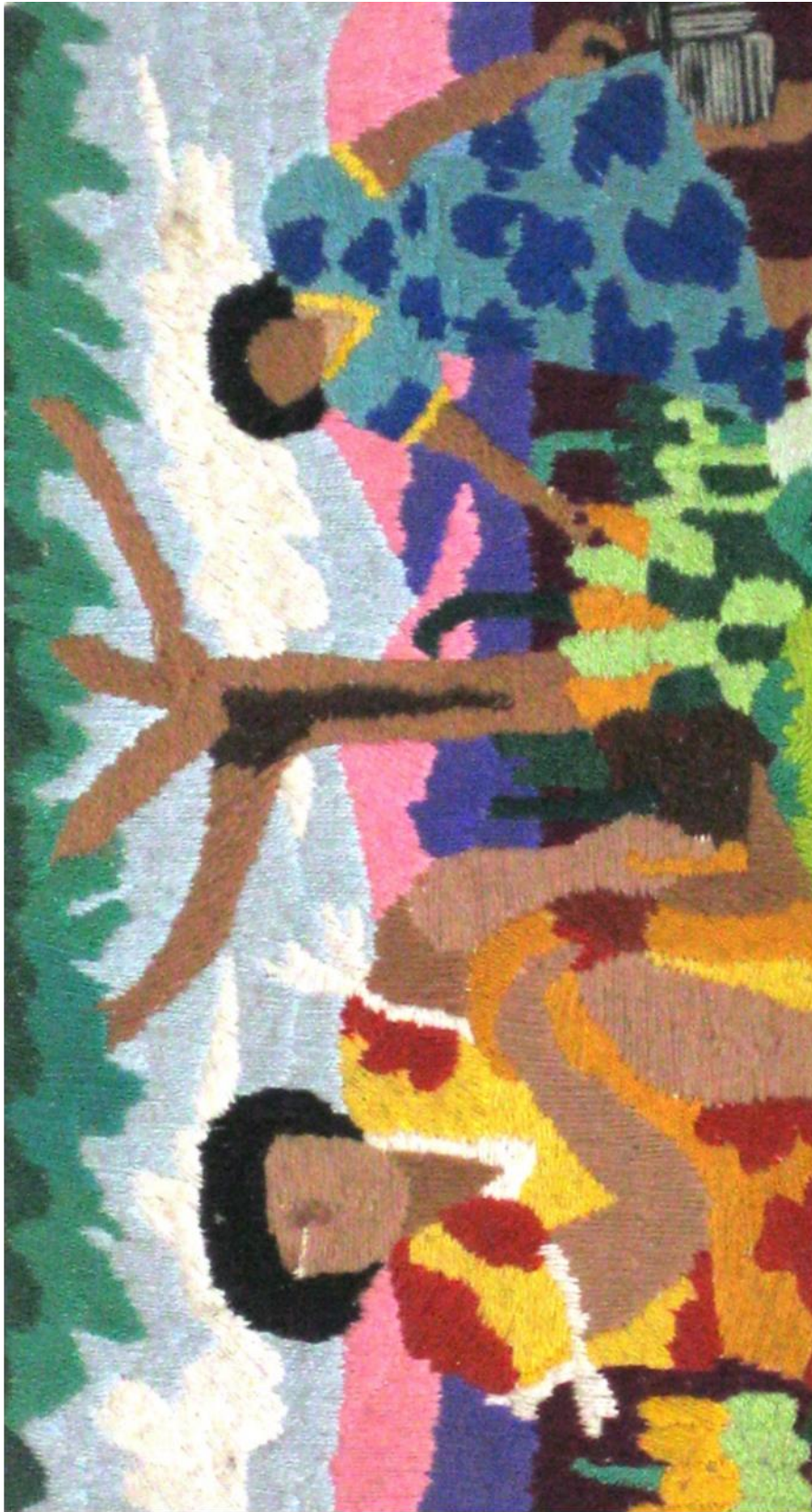


Fig. 7 Juliette Pita, *Women at the Market*, 1979 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 8 Joseph John, *Man with Pipe*, acrylic on board, 1979 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 9 Independence mural, 1979 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 10 Independence club, 1979 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 11 Independence club (detail), 1979 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 12 Logo of the Nawita Contemporary Arts Association



Fig. 13 Alvaro Kuautonga, stencil made from x-ray film, 2013 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 14 Taitu Kuautonga, kava cups, acrylic on coconut shell, 2013 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 15 Andrew Ulus, *Turtle*, kava on paper, 2011 (Photograph: L. McDonald)

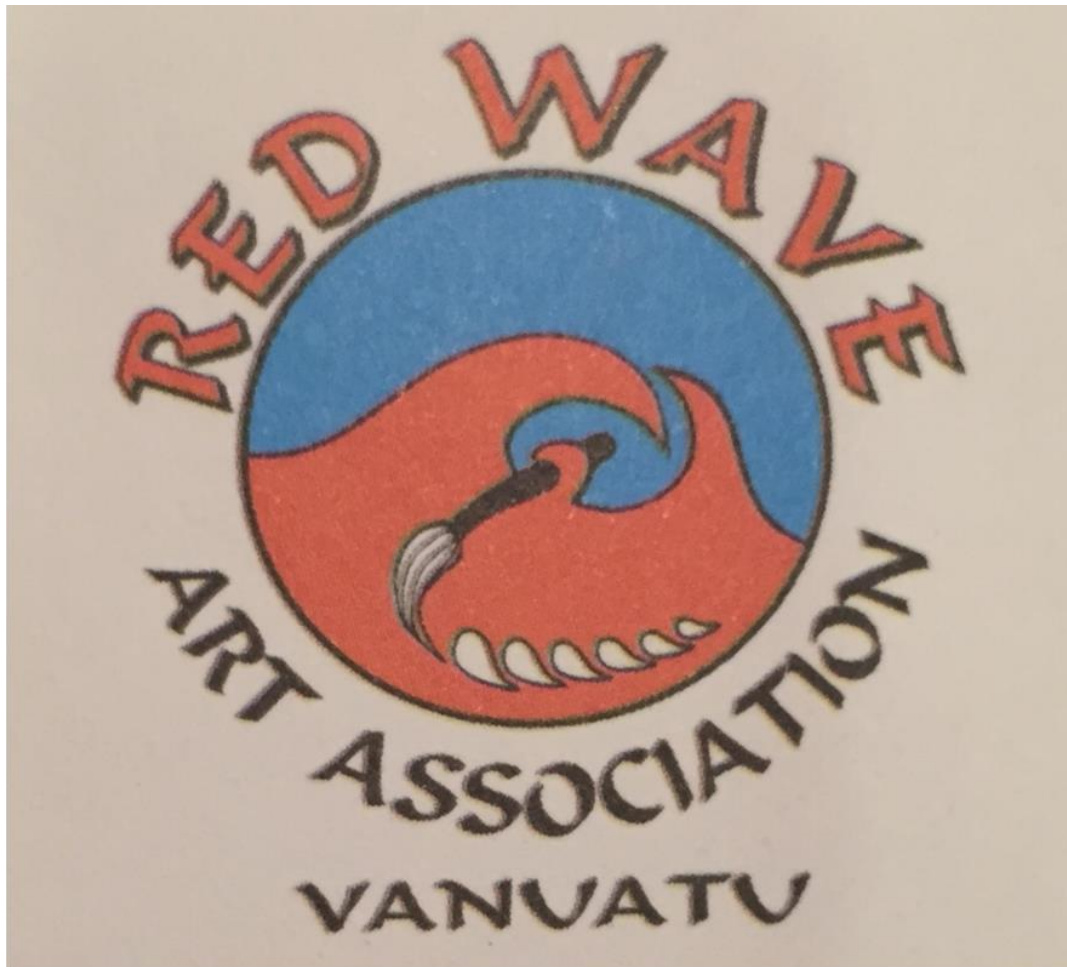


Fig. 16 Logo of the Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association



Fig. 17 Andrew Tovovur, mural on utility shed (detail) (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 18 Andrew Tovovur, mural in restaurant (detail) (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 19 Andrew Tovovur, mural for guesthouse (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 20 Francois Yoringmal, *Malekula Treasure 1*, acrylic on canvas, 2012
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 21 Francois Yoringmal, *Untitled*, watercolour, 2012 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 22 Philimon Natato, *Graphic 2*, acrylic on canvas, 2012 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 23 Vatahe Ian, *Mosaic Flowers*, tiles on board, 2012 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 24 Joseph John, *The Village Forum: The Chief and His People*, oil on canvas, 1993
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 25 Jobo Lovo, public mural, date unknown (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 26 Juliette Pita, *Mothers*, acrylic on paper, 2012 (Photograph: L. McDonald)

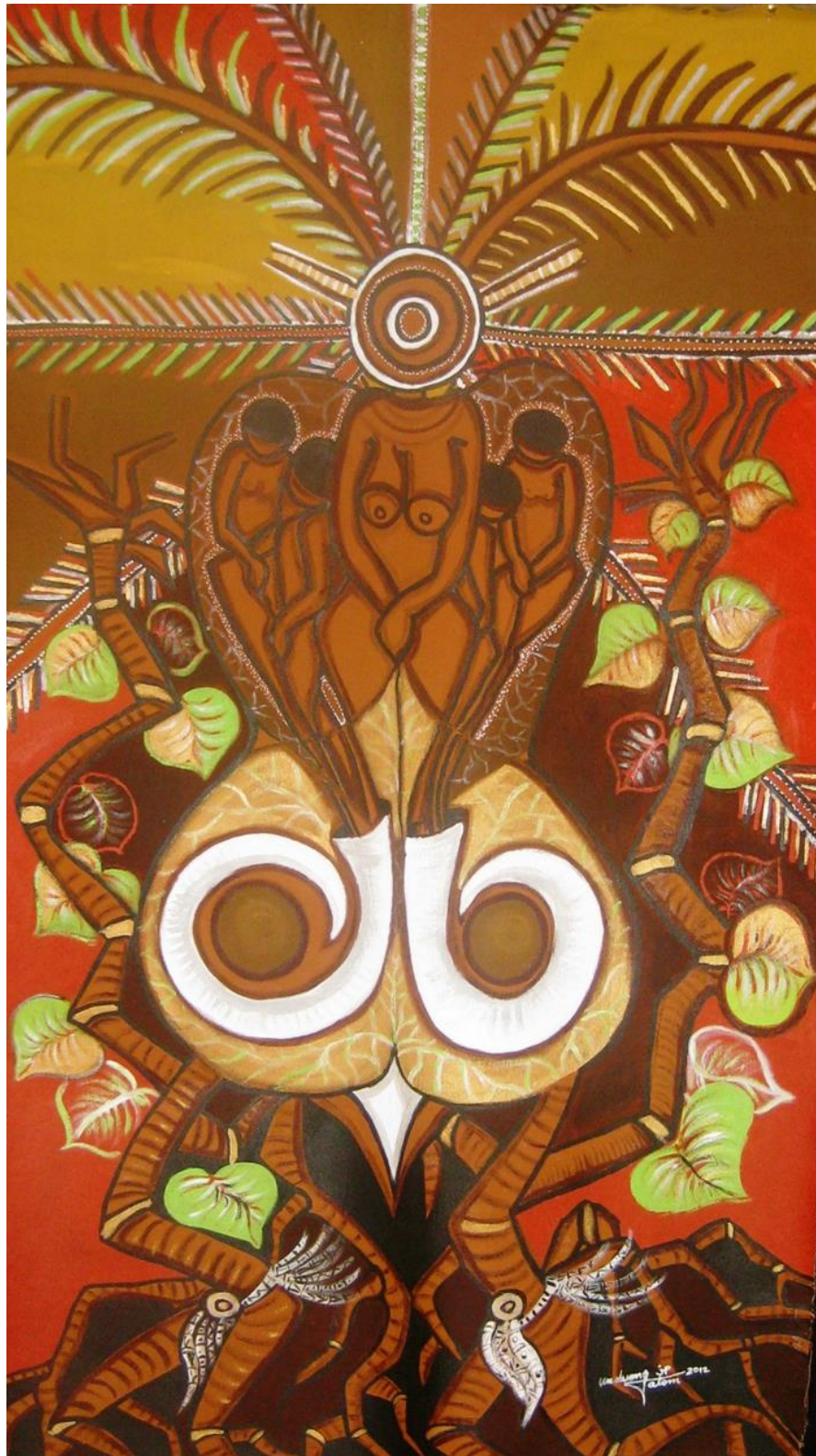


Fig. 27 Juliette Pita, *Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 2012

(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 28 Juliette Pita, *Kastom Danis blong Erromango*, acrylic on canvas, 2013 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 29 Amelia Lovo, *Napennapen*, acrylic on paper, 2013

(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 30 Amelia Lovo, *Toka*, acrylic on paper, 2013
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 31 Toka dance, Tanna, 2010 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 32 Toka dance, Tanna, 2010 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 33 David Ambong, Fest' Napuan logo, 2007 (Image: D. Ambong)



Fig. 34 David Ambong, Fest' Napuan logo, 2012 (Image: D. Ambong)



Fig. 35 David Ambong with Fest' Napuan stage backdrop, 2013 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 36 David Ambong, *Natawan Danis*, acrylic on canvas, 2012 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 37 Andrew Tovovur, *A Traditional Marriage*, acrylic on canvas, 2012
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 38 Jean-Claude Touré, *A Traditional Ambae Marriage*, acrylic on canvas, 2012
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 39 Eric Natuoivi, *Rescue Mission*, woodblock print, 2010 (Photograph: L. McDonald)

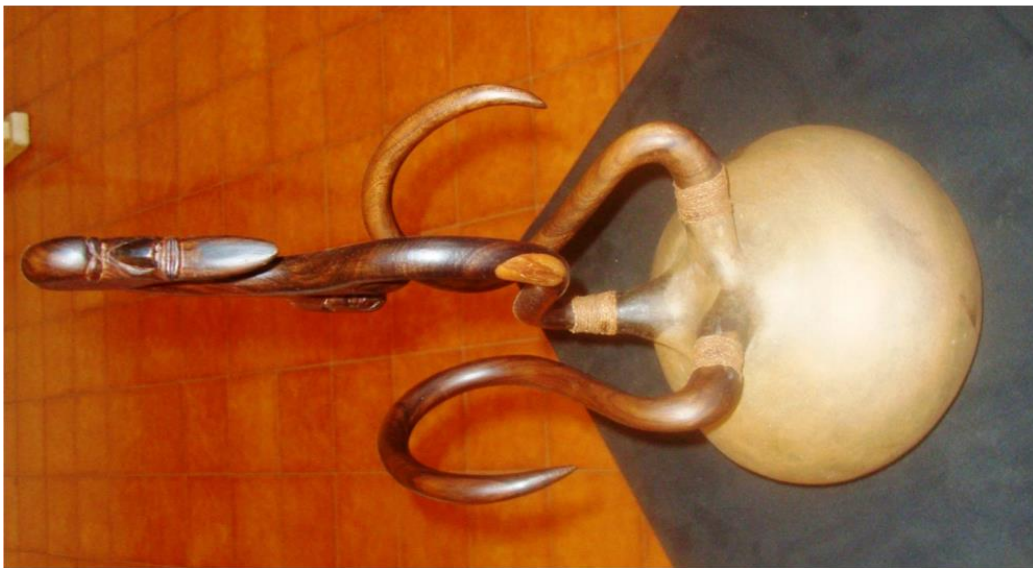


Fig. 40 Eric Natuoivi, *Bunga, Sina and their Twin Sons*, mixed media, 2012 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 41 Eric Natuoivi, *Bunga, Sina and their Twin Sons* (side view), mixed media, 2012 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 42 Matthew Abbock, handmade canvas (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 43 Matthew Abbock, *Stori blong Paama*, acrylic on canvas, 2013 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 44 Cyrus Nivwo, *Pis blong Erromango*, acrylic on canvas, 2012 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 45 John Simpson, *The Spirit of Man*, mixed media, 1995
(Photograph: J. West)



Fig. 46 Land diving, Pentecost, 2010 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 47 Land diving, Pentecost, 2010 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 48 Joseph John, *Traditional Knowledge*, watercolour, 1999 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 49 Edgar Hinge, sand drawing, 2012 (Photograph: L. McDonald)

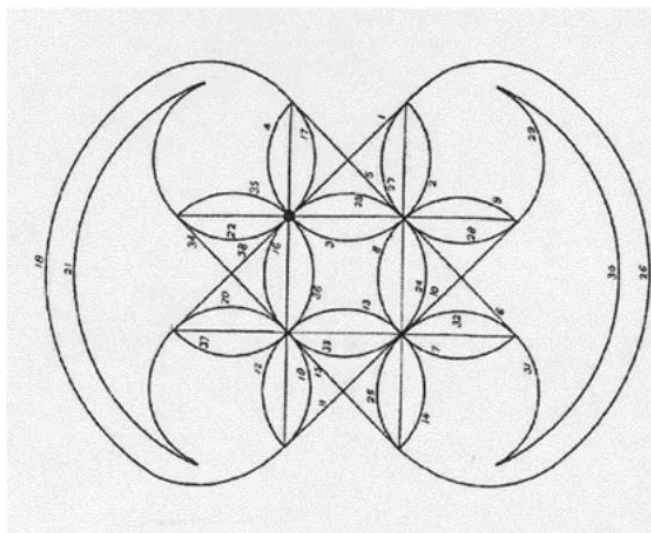


Fig. 50 *Natundong*, sand drawing design
(Image: Vanuatu Cultural Centre)

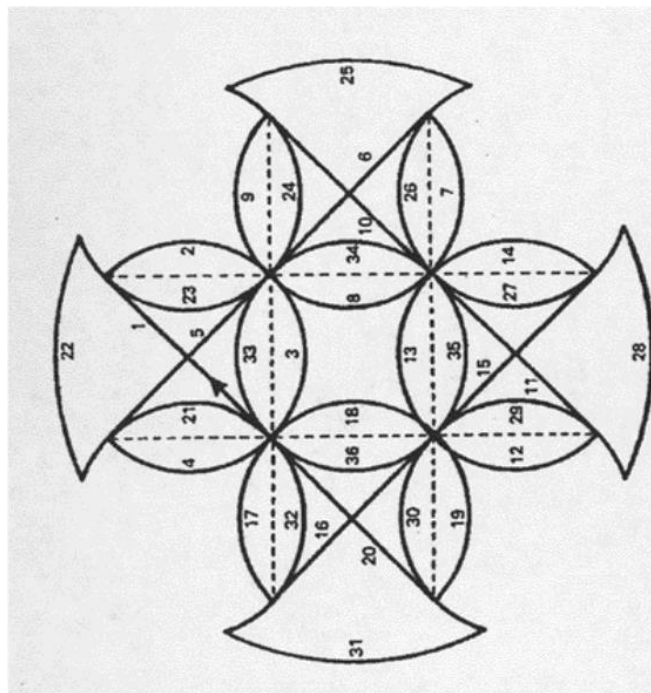


Fig. 51 *Vatangele*, sand drawing design
(Image: Vanuatu Cultural Centre)

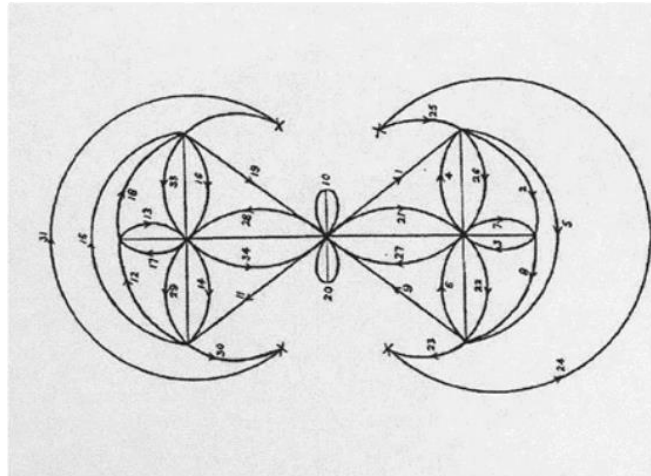


Fig. 52 *Nevul*, sand drawing design
(Image: Vanuatu Cultural Centre)



Fig. 53 Tony Bruce, natangora nut carving, 20
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 54 Tony Bruce, natangora nut carving
with Indian ink, 2012 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 55 Tony Bruce, *Maten* (detail), natangora nut, 2013
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 56 Tony Bruce, *Maten* (detail), natangora nut, 2013
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 57 Tony Bruce, *Vival* (detail), natangora nut, 2013
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 58 Tony Bruce, *Vival* (detail), natangora nut, 2013 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 59 Johanin Bangdor, *Vanuatu et le France*, wood, 2010
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 60 Johanin Bangdor, *Vanuatu et le France* (detail), wood, 2010 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 61 Jobo Lovo, *Navu Im Nomu*, acrylic on canvas, date unknown
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 62 Juliette Pita, *Ol Man blong Erromango*, acrylic on canvas, 2013 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 63 David William, *Totel mo Fix*, acrylic on canvas, 2013 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 64 National Library and Archives of Vanuatu (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 65 National Library and Archives of Vanuatu, foyer (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 66 Joseph John, *Storian*, watercolour, 2013 (Photograph: L. McDonald)

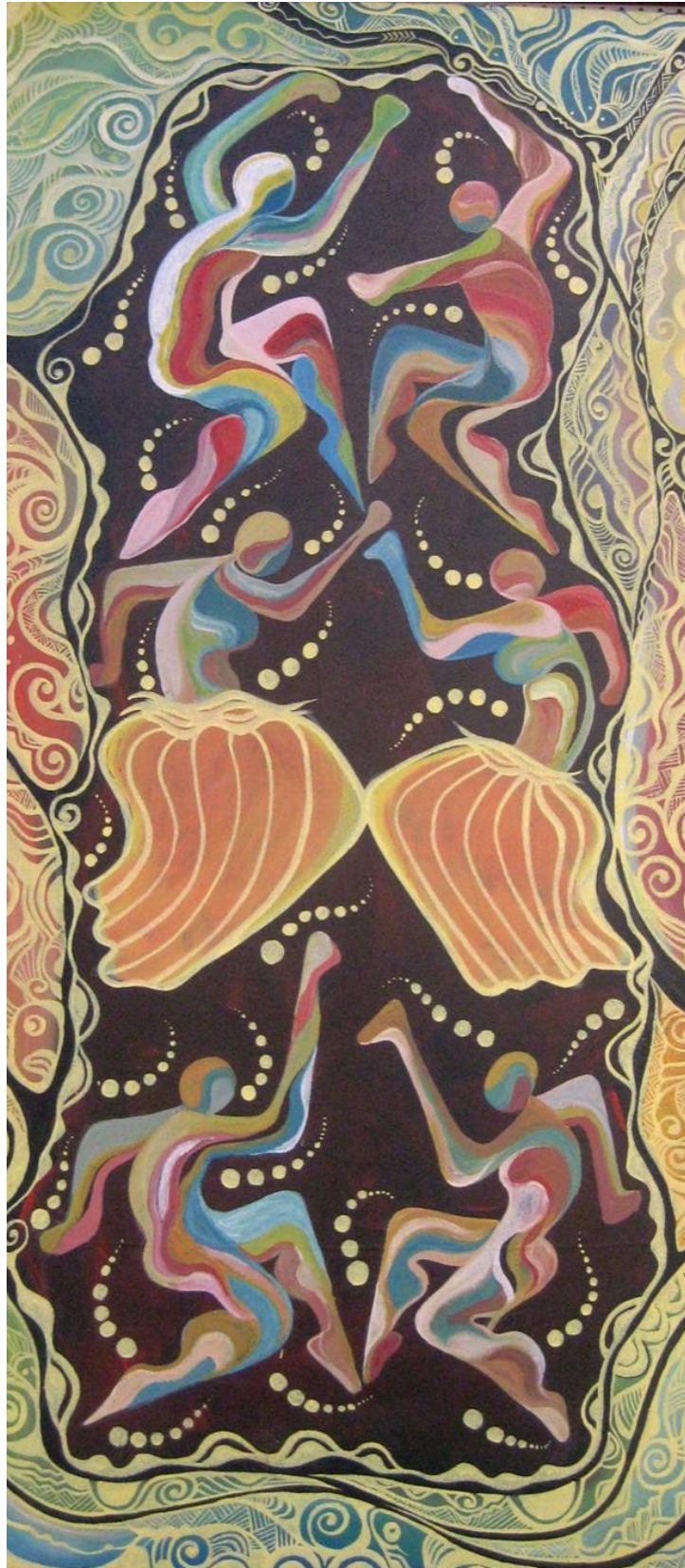


Fig. 67 Alvaro Kuautonga, *Six Provins blong Vanuatu*, acrylic on board, 2008 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 68 Nikiyatu Kuautonga, *Majijiki*, acrylic on canvas, 2008 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 69 Taitu Kuautonga, *Danis blong Futuna*, acrylic on canvas, 2010 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 70 Juliette Pita, *Jif blong Erromango*, acrylic on canvas, 2013 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 71 Andrew Tovovur, *Untitled*, acrylic on canvas, 2012
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 72 Matthew Abbock, *Bilding Pis tru Kalja*, acrylic on canvas, 2008 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 73 Matthew Abbock *Kaljoral Heritage blong Lapita*, acrylic on canvas, 2010 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 74 Sero Kuautonga, *Cycle long Laef*, acrylic on canvas, 2010 (Photograph: L. McDonald)

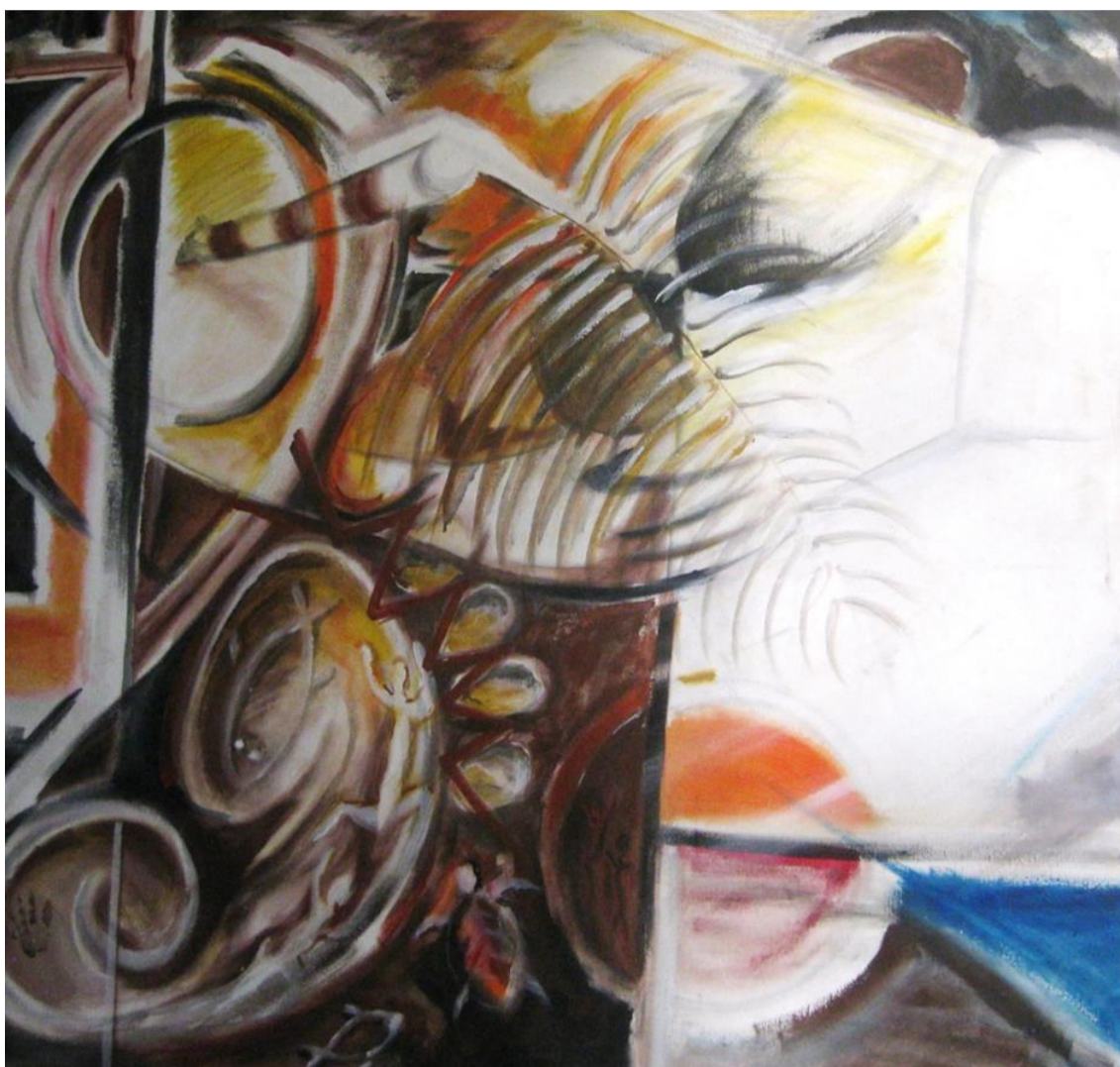


Fig. 75 Sero Kuautonga, *Fiuja*, acrylic on canvas, 1999 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 76 Eric Natuoivi, *Namawia Danis*, mixed media, 2012
(Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 77 Emmanuel Watt, *Mas blong Solwata*, wood, 2010 (Photograph: L. McDonald)



Fig. 78 Emmanuel Watt, *Duti*, wood, 2005 (Photograph: L. McDonald)

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APPENDIX 1

VANUATU CULTURAL CENTRE RESEARCH POLICY



VANUATU NASONAL KALJORAL KAONSEL
Vanuatu National Cultural Council
Conseil National de la Culture de Vanuatu

VANUATU KALJORAL SENTA
Vanuatu Cultural Centre
Centre Culturel de Vanuatu

P.O. Box 184, Port-Vila, Vanuatu Tel: 22129 Fax: 26590 vks@vanuatuculture.org

VANUATU CULTURAL RESEARCH POLICY

- (1) The researcher has to apply to the Council to do research work in the Republic of Vanuatu, and must agree to the conditions placed upon her/him in this document and to compliance with the intent of the ethics described in this Vanuatu Cultural Research Policy.
- (2) The Council will allow the Researcher to do such research, and will agree to the obligations placed upon it by this document and by the Vanuatu Cultural Research Policy.
- (1) The researcher will have to pay an authorization fee of 25,000 vatu to cover all administrative costs incurred in the setting up and implementation of the research venture or this fee has been waived by the Council.
- (2) The right to the products of research shall belong to the Researcher shall be entitled to reproduce them for educational, academic or scientific purposes, provided that traditional copyrights are not compromised and the permission to use material has been obtained, through the Traditional Copyright Agreement, from copyright holders. The products of research shall not be reproduced or offered for sale or otherwise used for commercial purposes, unless specified under section 12 of this agreement.
- (3) Copies of all non-artifact products of research are to be deposited without charge with the Cultural Centre and, where feasible, with the local community. Two copies of films and videos are to be provided, one for public screening and the other for deposit in the archives. In the case of films, a copy on video is also required. Any artifacts collected become the property of the Cultural Centre unless traditional ownership has been established in the Traditional Copyright Agreement. The carrying of any artifacts or specimens outside the country is prohibited as stipulated under cap.39 of the Laws of Vanuatu. Artifacts and specimens may be taken out of the Country for overseas study and analysis under cap.39(7). The conditions for the return of the following materials are:
(Specify artifacts/specimens/other materials and conditions for return)

The Researcher must either

- (a) provide a letter from the institution to which they are affiliated guaranteeing the researcher's compliance with the above conditions, and

fill the “Application form for Research in Vanuatu” (available on www.vanuatuculturalcentre.vu/application-forresearch-in-vanuatu/)

- (b) provide a retrievable deposit of 40,000 vatu to ensure their compliance with these conditions.
- (4) The Researcher will be responsible for the translation of a publication in a language other than a vernacular language or one of the three national languages of Vanuatu into a vernacular or one of the national languages, preferably the one used in education in the local community. They will also make the information in all products of research, subject to copyright restrictions, accessible to the local community through such means as audio cassettes or copies of recorded information, preferably in the vernacular. The Researcher will also submit an interim report of not less than 2000 words no later than 6 months after the research languages and in “layman’s terms” so as to be of general use to all citizens.
- (5) There will be maximum involvement of indigenous scholars, students and members of the community in research, full recognition of their collaboration, and training to enable their further contribution to country and community. The Council nominates the following individuals to be involved in research and/or trained.
- (6) A product of immediate benefit and use to the local community will be provided by the Researcher no later than 6 months after termination of the research period.
- (7) In addition to their research work, the Researcher will, as a service to the nation of Vanuatu, undertake to: (section 3 (viii) of the Cultural Research Policy suggests possible services of benefit to the nation)
- (8) In undertaking research the Researcher will:
 - (a) Recognize the rights of people being studied, including the right not to be studied, to privacy, to anonymity, and to confidentiality;
 - (b) Recognize the primary right of informants and suppliers of data and materials to the knowledge and use of that information and material, and respect traditional copyrights, which always remain with the local community;
 - (c) Assume a responsibility to make the subjects in research fully aware of their rights and the nature of the research and their involvement in it;
 - (d) Respect local customs and values and carry out research in a manner consistent with these;
 - (e) Contribute to the interests of the local community in whatever ways possible so as to maximize the return to the community for their cooperation in their research work;
 - (f) Recognize their continuing obligations to the local community after the completion of field work, including returning materials as desired and providing support and continuing concern.
- (9) In all cases where information or material data is obtained by the Researcher, a Traditional Copyright Agreement will be completed by the Researcher and the supplier of data regarding this material. The Researcher has a responsibility to make such informants fully aware of their rights and obligations, and those of the Researcher, in the signing of the Traditional Copyright Agreement.

- Signed:

On behalf of the National Cultural Council

APPENDIX 2

ARTISTIC ACTIVITY

ABBOCK, Matthew

b. 1967 (*man Paama*)

Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1999

AMBONG, David

b. 1975 (*man Malekula*)

Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1999

BANGDOR, Johanin

b. 1961 (*man Ambrym*)

Tuburin Association

Active since 2000

BRUCE, Tony

b. 1980 (*man Ambrym*)

Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 2000

BULE, Eddie

b. 1981 (*man Mataso*)

Mataso Print Collective

Active since 2004

BULESA, Sylvester

1961 – 2012 (*man Pentecost*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active 1981 – 1999

BUSAI, Michael

b. 1963 (*man Futuna*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1990

FIRIAM, Stanley

b. 1990 (*man Mataso*)

Mataso Print Collective

Active since 2006

JOHN, Joseph

b. 1964 (*man Shepherds*)

Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1979

KALO, Cyrus

1986 – 2009 (*man Mataso*)

Mataso Print Collective

Active 2004 – 2007

KOLIN, David

b. 1990 (*man Mataso*)

Mataso Print Collective

Active since 2004

KUAUTONGA, Alvaro

b. 1981 (*man Futuna*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 2007

KUAUTONGA, Nikiyatu

b. 1983 (*man Futuna*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 2000

KUAUTONGA, Sero

b. 1961 (*man Futuna*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1982

KUAUTONGA, Taitu

b. 1976 (*man Futuna*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 2000

LITÉ, Herveline

b. 1983 (*woman Mataso*)

Mataso Print Collective

Active since 2004

LOVO, Amelia

b. 1994 (*woman Erromango*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 2011

LOVO, Jobo

b. 1967 (*man Erromango*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1980

MICHOUTOUCKINE, Nicolai

1929 – 2010 (France)

Michoutouckine-Pilioko Foundation

Active 1957 – 2010

NATUM, Ben

b.1993 (*man Erromango*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 2009

NATUOIVI, Eric

b. 1964 (*man Futuna*)

Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1982

NIVWO, Cyrus

b. 1989 (*man Erromango*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 2009

PILIOKO, Aloï

b. 1934 (Wallis and Futuna)

Michoutouchkine-Pilioko Foundation

Active since 1959

PITA, Juliette

b. 1964 (*woman Erromango*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1979

REGENVANU, Ralph

b. 1970 (*man Malekula*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active 1992 – 2007

SEULE, Sepa

b. 1987 (*man Mataso*)

Mataso Print Collective

Active since 2004

SIMIX, Simeon

b. 1981 (*man Mataso*)

Mataso Print Collective

Active since 2004

THOMPSON, Roy

b. 1962 (*man Erromango*)

Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1990

TOURÉ, Jean-Claude

b. 1968 (*man Ambae*)

Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1980

TOVOVUR, Andrew

b. 1962 (*man Erromango*)

Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1980

ULUS, Andrew

b. 1972 (*man Paama*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 2000

WATT, Emmanuel

b. 1947 (*man Vila*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 1975

WILLIAM, David

b. 1988 (*man Erromango*)

Red Wave Vanuatu Contemporary Arts Association

Active since 2006

YORINGMAL, Fidel

1962 – 2011 (*man Malekula*)

Nawita Contemporary Arts Association

Active 1989 – 1999
