Haidy Geismar

Institution not given????

Introduction: Collecting during fieldwork

In 2000, just before leaving for Vanuatu to undertake doctoral research, I was awarded a small collections grant by the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (UCMMA). The making of this collection was to form an explicit part of my research: a study of the work of the Vanuatu National Museum and Cultural Centre (VCC) in the context of the steadily growing commodity market for ‘cultural property’. During fieldwork, working under the auspices of the VCC, I worked with men and women in both urban and village environments who earned their living by making and selling artefacts, investigating how they used objects to make statements about local, national, and gender identities, relationships with other places, the past, and the future. These people included expatriate and indigenous dealers, and ni-Vanuatu carvers, weavers, and contemporary artists working both in the capital of Vanuatu, Port Vila and on other islands, especially Pentecost, Ambrym and Malakula.

This essay is an account of the influence of museum artefacts and practices on the contemporary production and classification of objects in Vanuatu, told through a descriptive analysis of the objects I collected for the UCMMA. In particular, I want to emphasise the importance of international museum work in the creation of indigenous classifications of contemporary art and kastom in Vanuatu. [1] I focus my discussion on the production, collection and presentation of two kinds of objects, from two very different places: contemporary art made by members of the Nawita artists association based in the capital of Vanuatu, Port Vila, and two customary headaddresses made in the village of Lampa, Southern Malakula (North-Central Vanuatu).

Nawita – re-presenting kastom

In 1987, local artists Emmanuel Watt, Sero Kuautonga, Fidel Yoringmal, Juliette Pita and French expatriate Patrice Cujo, met in Port Vila to discuss the establishment of a formal organisation of contemporary artists. Prior to this, most visual production called contemporary art in Vanuatu was created by foreigners, exemplified by the work of Nicholai Michoutouchkine, Aloi Pilioko and Robert Tatin (see Regenvanu 1996, 1997). The meeting was also attended by several ni-Vanuatu [2] who had been at the technical training college in Port Vila during the brief period art was offered as a course, or had an active interest in creating ‘contemporary arts’ using their skills in customary artefact production. Following a suggestion by Juliette Pita they decided that the organisation would be named Nawita meaning octopus in Bislama, or form of expression, highlighting the diverse talents of the group, united in a single body.

The Nawita Association of Contemporary Artists was officially established in 1989 with sculptor Emmanuel Watt as President and painter Sero Kuaautonga as Vice-President. From the outset, the association was Francophile, supported by L’Atelier Gallery, founded in 1985 by Suzanne Bastien, a long-term French resident of Vanuatu. The constitution was initially written in French, affirming a free membership, open to expatriates and ni-Vanuatu alike, the primary condition being that the association must hold a yearly exhibition. The first showing of the association was held in the gallery space of the French Embassy in 1989, which has remained the venue ever since. During the year 2000, Nawita was involved in several projects ranging from participation in the 8th Festival of Pacific Arts, the 6th International Symposium of the Pacific Arts Association, an international Francophone exhibition in Canada, and the development of workshops and projects mainly geared at youth throughout Vanuatu. Participation in these kinds of projects ensure that the association and its members are able to participate in and mesh together local, national and international forums for contemporary arts.

The primary criteria of membership outlined by Nawita’s members emphasises the contemporary defined explicitly against the concept of kastom. Artists or art units using “traditional media and traditional principles” are formally banned from being members (Regenvanu 1996: 312). The division here between the contemporary and the customary is thus fundamentally material, tradition being tentatively, and somewhat ambiguously, marked by technological process and media. The exact reproduction of artefacts designated as kastom are usually restricted in Vanuatu: only those with natal affiliations, or in some instances, those who have been properly initiated, are entitled to reproduce the customary resources belonging to any particular place. However, in the case of contemporary ni-Vanuatu artists the creative use of customary imagery or motifs using non-traditional media is permitted. This connection of traditional imagery and non-traditional media is at the heart of the definition of contemporary art (see Cochrane 1997). It therefore stands that changes and concerns within the material domain of kastom have a vital affect on the understanding and creation of contemporary art, as artists struggle to represent, rather than reproduce, its image rather than objectify kastom. As Emmanuel Watt commented in 2000 “Before we lived in kastom, now we make it.” In rejecting the material practices of kastom, contemporary artists emphasise creativity over replication in their technological practices and discourse. However, members of Nawita are also concerned to maintain a firmly indigenous identity – one that sets them apart from other contemporary artists – in Vanuatu, in the Pacific, and beyond. 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. Artists in Vanuatu can navigate these concerns by exploiting the media of contemporary arts, claiming kastom as a style rather than as a practice. This entanglement is further complicated by the growing desire of many ni-Vanuatu to earn cash from customary production, leading to growing competition within Vanuatu’s limited art market where
We decided to pay the same price to each artist regardless of his or her relative professional successes, and the sum of money was based on the total amount I had been given by the UCMAA rather than on the current prices that Nawita artists could obtain for their work (that vary greatly from artist to artist). The social value of the fact that the collection was for a prestigious museum in England also influenced people’s desires to participate in the project. Here, I discuss seven of the eight pieces that were collected, and in each case, my descriptions are largely paraphrases of the discussions held with each artist.

Weavers, dealers and museum collectors pay a premium for objects considered to be kastom. Only two small galleries sell and display contemporary art in Port Vila. In both, contemporary arts are sold alongside more conventional traditional artefacts and tourist souvenirs. The Vanuatu tourist market is decidedly ‘low end’ and often restricts the size and material of pieces produced (i.e., they must be low cost and easily transportable for tourists). The internal market, Government, business, and a few interested expatriates, is by now virtually saturated. In this context, the main forums for the display and sale of contemporary art are ethnographic and art museums, festivals and conferences. The interest of museums such as the UCMAA has provided a very particular audience for contemporary artists in Vanuatu. In Cambridge, as in other cosmopolitan museums connected to an academy, the self-constitution of ‘authentic’ Pacific artists has become a vital part of the value of contemporary art objects. Whether they exhibit at the gallery of the French Embassy, the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, or in the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in New Caledonia, contemporary artists can never fully distance themselves from wider economic and cultural interests in ‘indigenous’ cultural production and in this way must continually negotiate values around the relationship between concepts of tradition, innovation and modernity that are established both within and outside of Vanuatu. Another important factor that mediates the relations between ‘kastom’ and ‘contemporary’ as they are both discursively and materially constituted by contemporary artists, are the tensions between locality and nation-state within the nationalised urban environment that almost all of Nawita’s members currently work. Contemporary art in Vanuatu is at present an urban phenomenon: artists need to be in town to sell their work and raise the cash to make more art, to buy supplies and to meet other artists. Yet despite the economic, social and material importance of town, it is the ‘islands’ that are considered to be the primary source of creativity and indigenous identity in Vanuatu. For this reason, even if someone was born in town and has lived there all their lives, they will draw upon natal affiliations and entitlements from the island home of their family in many aspects of their everyday life. Islands are seen as places of nurture and nourishment, the source of images and identity for contemporary artists. In this way, contemporary art can bridge the ever-growing divide between urban and rural life by consolidating connections to the islands in the urban context of the Port Vila arts scene. In summary, contemporary art objects in Vanuatu are complex hybrids, fusing together often-polarised categories of thought and spheres of ni-Vanuatu experience. Joining together the national and the local, the urban and the rural, the customary and the commercial, contemporary art powerfully represents ideas about being indigenous in contemporary Vanuatu to outside observers. More and more ni-Vanuatu are turning to the production of contemporary art, forming artist’s associations, exhibiting and selling their work (see Geismar 2000). In doing this, they materially unite ideas about kastom with the increasing incursions of urbanism and the cash economy into their everyday lives. Ni-Vanuatu artists make themselves local, national, and international simultaneously through representing and selling kastom to the outside world in national exhibitions and engendering international interest. Nowhere is this better expressed and embodied than in the diverse forms of the contemporary art objects that they are currently producing.

The Nawita Collection for the Cambridge Museum

In commissioning a collection of contemporary art from Nawita for the UCMAA I had several meetings with the association spread over the course of one year. Initially I selected the artists in conjunction with Nawita’s current president, Sero Kuautonga. We discussed the purposes of the collection and fixed the price to be paid for each piece. Usually collections are conceived as formed by the choice of the buyer alone, despite the agency of local producers. It was my intention to make the process of selection more of an explicit dialogue. I was reluctant to impose any subject matter or theme, my only instruction was: “make a good piece, one you feel will best represent your work abroad, to an audience in England.” Over the course of the following months, I met several times with members of the association to discuss their ideas about the collection, problems, progress, and meanings of contemporary art in Vanuatu today. We had a final celebratory meeting where the artists formally presented their work. The following descriptions are taken from the many discussions I had with the Nawita artists, culminating in a long night of kava and talk on 11 July 2001.

Watercolorist, Joseph John submitted a work entitled ‘Circle of Life’[Figure one]. In the centre, a traditional design, in red to symbolise the sun, from the Banks Islands radiates outwards like a clock, with numbers replaced by figures demonstrating various ‘traditional’ activities in Vanuatu: food preparation, kava making, weaving, carving, and dancing. Contemporary life in Vanuatu is portrayed as timelessly traditional, reinforced by a naturalistic painting style. Women wear grass skirts, go bare-breasted and ceremonial life is a fundamental marker of cultural identity. John himself is a dedicated Christian, he does not drink kava or alcohol and rarely leaves town. His idealised version of traditional life in Vanuatu is not about his personal practice or about his own ties to particular any particular island. He is very conscious of the fact that he can depict kastom without actually practising it. Despite an urban, Christian lifestyle that excludes most of these activities, John commented to me that “I want to show the people of England what life is like in Vanuatu; kastom life in Vanuatu, dress-up in Vanuatu, every day life in Vanuatu: Hemi diron lamus [It is completely different].” He draws an ideal version of ‘customary life’ in Vanuatu as a contrast to ‘modern life’ in England. As such, he is much sought after by expatriates and tourists to provide authentic souvenirs of their stay in Vanuatu. The UCMAA piece is a version of a larger painting commissioned by the Government of Vanuatu for the Queen of England as part of a Commonwealth bequest, and is thus part of a broader presentation of Vanuatu abroad.

Figure 1


Courtesy of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Figure 1
Emmanuel Watt, woodcarver, also uses the media of contemporary art to stylise local tradition in a more urbane, national context. He submitted a sculpture of a forthright arm to the UCMAA, standing five feet tall, holding in cupped hands a full shell of kava, the pose likening the ceremonial drinking of kava to the act of Christian prayer (Figure two). At the base of the arm is wrapped a red woven Ambae mat, a representation of the customary roots of Vanuatu. Watt's family are from Ambae and Pentecost; islands noted for their production of red mats, hence his choice of this particular material draws upon highly localised natal and familial connections. Divided by carved ceremonial armbands, the next section of the arm has incised on it the dual flags of the French and British nations symbolising the colonial period of Condominium Government (1906–1980). The final and shortest section – each section is a temporal representation as well as a visual one – is marked by an armband in the colours of the Vanuatu flag. Kava, both a natural and a cultural resource, thus runs along the entire arm’s length of the history of Vanuatu, encompassing the development of the nation-state from its roots in kastom and Christianity to the present day. An explicit syncretism of kastom and nation-state is a common theme in Watt’s work, as is the image of the outstretched arm figuratively emphasising both the passage of time as well as chiefly power.

Juliette Pita is the only female ni-Vanuatu member of the association (although there are several female expatriate members). She earns her living mainly by hand-painting designs on t-shirts to be sold to tourists, at the same time building an international reputation through her work in tapestry. She submitted to the UCMAA a stylised sewn depiction of the Pentecost land diving ceremony (Nangol), entitled ‘Land Diving’ (Figure three, Figure 3a). Four men leap to the ground, watched by the staring eyes of an Ambrym slit gong drum surrounded by the colours of Vanuatu – red for its volcanoes and blue for the sea. This piece, like the work of Watt and John, highlights the development of a more inclusive, nationalistic and generically symbolic form of kastom comprising a few iconic cultural symbols. Previously specific to particular islands, such icons are now used to represent the contemporary nation-state. The Pentecost land diving and Ambrym vertical slit-gong drums are the most popular images within this image-bank. Ambrym slit-gongs predominate as decoration in front of hotels and offices of Port Vila and are the most popular tourist commodity (see Patterson 1996), and the Pentecost Land Dive is probably Vanuatu's greatest cultural tourist attraction (see Jolly 1994). They are not only nationalised, but have also become part of an international consumer market, a fact reflected in their popularity as images as well.
as their being a vital part of contemporary local practice. The material distinction outlined above, in which the contemporary is both discursively separated from and materially combined with the traditional by the very form of the object itself, is amplified here. Pita, unequivocally indigenous, reproduces the land dive in tapestry, an unequivocally modern material.

Sylvester Bulesa, from Pentecost, also submitted a depiction of the land diving, this time in ceramic. Depicting the mythic leap from the Banyan tree rather than the contemporary event, the piece is also a metaphor for the survival of tradition. In fleeing her cruel husband, a Pentecost woman is saved when she climbs a Banyan tree, and followed by her husband Tamalie, jumps, only after having briefly paused to tie one of the vines around her ankles. Her husband, in his enraged pursuit, neglects to reinforce this bond with the natural world and by following her plumbs to his death. Bulesa's ceramic mimics the trunk of the Banyan tree, liana vines attached to the falling woman coursing down its side.

Aside from the institutional support that museums give to contemporary artists in Vanuatu, Bulesa's work introduces us to some of the deeper connections between the newly nationalised forms of kastom that contemporary artists represent and various kinds of museum practice. As I mentioned earlier, the most important inspiration for contemporary artists lies in the natural resources of Vanuatu that are traditionally equated with traditional cultural life (kava, land diving etc.). Bulesa's work shows how oral tradition is used as a fundamental conduit between nature and culture, between island life and the urban standpoint of the contemporary arts. This connection is overtly encouraged by the work of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC). There is a strong link between audio and visual media in the grass-roots work of the VCC, inaugurated in the 1970s with the establishment of the Oral Traditions Project. This project made the tape recorder (and now the video camera) an invaluable tool for both foreign and indigenous researchers (see Geismar and Tilley 2003). Similarly, long-term projects with photographers such as David Becker, and the creation of the National Film and Sound Unit directed by Jacob Kaper, have forged connections between audio-visual technologies and the documentation and preservation of traditional life (see Huffman 1996, Sam 1996).

Thus, as Pita exploits contemporary materials in a national rendering of local tradition, the National Film and Sound Unit uses film and videotape to document, conserve and present highly localised bodies of kastom, as well as using archival footage and museum objects kept in storerooms around the world to reinvigorate local practice in the present day. Both of these cases emphasise once more the importance of formal media in the construction and connection of ideas about tradition and modernity in Vanuatu and the importance of museum objects in bringing the past into the present.

Continuing this theme, Michael Busai, who works as an artist in his free time away from his full time job with the National Reserve Bank of Vanuatu, submitted a piece entitled ‘Fish Attraction’, depicting a fusion of natural icons and oral history from the past and present (Figure four). The ‘fish attraction’ is customary leaf magic from his home island of Futuna, used to entice fish into the waiting arms of ravenous fishermen, and not too uncommonly to entice women into the arms of ravenous men. Behind the brightly coloured depiction of reef fish, created by using black felt tip overlaid with oil pastel and thinly...
worked acrylic paint, we see the wide eyes of the powerful spirits along with the traditional baskets, nets, and poses of people bent at the reef and fishing from outrigger canoes. Moving away from his work in Port Vila and his broad interests in economics and anthropology, Busai chooses to focus his work upon the village environment of his early childhood. Depicting traditional life in the islands oriented towards the natural world, Busai enforces his legitimacy as a ni-Vanuatu artist by representing his bond to local places in lieu of the nation-state.

The work of Erromangan artist Moses Jobo also embodies the efficacy of Vanuatu Cultural Centre and of museum objects in reinvigorating customary practice in the present day. Jobo’s work with barkcloth was initially inspired by an Oral Traditions Project at the Cultural Centre in 1984, under the direction of Kirk Huffman, curator from 1979–89, Jerry Taki and James Atuelo, fieldworkers from Erromango. Using historic examples of barkcloth from Vanuatu housed in museum collections (mainly in the Australian National Museum), plus conversation with elder Erromangans, the technology of barkcloth production was reinvigorated on Erromango. Inspired by this project, and after a period working as an artist in Basel in conjunction with the Arts of Vanuatu exhibition (see Bonnemaison et. al. 1996), Jobo now creates barkcloth using traditional techniques, and creatively builds on ‘traditional’ designs to form innovative images, which he translates into acrylic paint and more recently barkcloth/paint collages (Figure five). Drawing on this revitalised tradition, Jobo created a large work depicting a gecko for the UCMAA — a generic symbol of intertribal warfare and kastom magic on Erromango where the lizard is traditionally a portent of malevolent intention. This work draws out the importance of museum work, both national and international, to a current (materialised) convergence of kastom and contemporary art in Vanuatu (figure six).

The Women’s Culture Project was initiated in 1993 under the guidance of Lissant Bolton, then curator of Pacific Collections at the Australian National Museum, and is currently directed by Jean Tarisse (see Bolton 2003). The barkcloth project was initiated by an exhibition at the VCC in 1984, called Tapa blong Vanuatu with Erromangan barkcloth borrowed from the Robertson collection at the Australian Museum, and initiated a series of documentary investigations and projects on the island (see Huffman 1996a).
Finally, Sero Kuautonga’s playful acrylic work on canvas iconoclastically toys with images vital to the fusion of contemporary-traditional and national-local in Vanuatu today (Figure seven). A large giant clamshell, or island, depending on your vantage point and proclivities, holds a wealth of minute detail. A procession of tiny figures marches past a banyan tree, a large cross, the national flag, and continues onwards into the future. Above them hover a series of television sets and aerials symbolising the possible presence of five channels in Vanuatu’s future technical development. A sleeping man is covered by a pandanus mat, a fusion of women’s and men’s lives. Rock art designs, canoes, and the namele leaf (traditional symbol of chieftainship) float in a sea of bright red (a mischievous poke in the eye to the cold winters of England).

Here, as for all the Nawita pieces described, artists and their artworks position themselves as (inter)national and local, establishing themselves as firmly indigenous by the depiction of local scenes using the techniques and styles of international contemporary arts.

Through this descriptive catalogue of work produced for the UCMAA by Nawita artists, we can see that the distillation of local kastom into a set of visual images is framed by the wider contexts of nationalism and internationalism within which the activities of the VCC and other museums play an important role. Each of these pieces idiosyncratically develops a version of kastom and represents it within this context — using oral history (often gathered through research projects undertaken in conjunction with the VCC), childhood experience, the natural resources of Vanuatu, and the symbolic bank of the nation state which not only includes generic symbols from kastom such as the namele leaf and kava bowl, but incorporates symbols of church and state too (flags, crosses and so on).

In this way contemporary art objects are national mediators that can consolidate vital social and temporal distinctions. As well as assisting in the formal articulation of these ideas, museums also provide a platform for the circulation and presentation of contemporary arts.

In one of several conversations, Sero Kuautonga expressed ambivalence at the disjunction he perceived between the words contemporary and traditional in the rhetoric of the 6th International Symposium of the Pacific Arts Association that we were both about to attend in 2000 (this volume is the publication of some of those proceedings). The idea of creativity and of the process of creating he suggested, was a way to supersede these categories for artists:

I think that all this talk of ‘contemporary’ comes from you white guys. When you say ‘contemporary’, what do you mean? Contemporary means ‘of today’, but for some people this applies to art only, it does not include traditional artefacts. But traditional art is contemporary, is alive. It’s the people who spend their time studying art that come up with the categories of it. All of us, who work today to make our art, we just create things.

Richard Abong, from Lamap, South Malakula, added: “[We do this] with the ideas that we get from all the traditional objects and thoughts behind us.” (Port Vila, 11/07/2001).

These comments emphasise the mutual dependency of ideas about tradition and modernity within the work of many different people creating contemporary art in Vanuatu today. In drawing these pieces together into a collection, Nawita members demonstrated collectively that their identities as contemporary artists lie in the establishment of representational links to tradition. The media of contemporary arts can help to constitute these relations. Kastom is constructed in relation to contemporary art through a series of judgements about authentic materials and technologies and the galvanisation of specific entitlements connected to local persons and places. Looking at images and objects produced by Nawita artists enables these complicated ideas to be articulated, and highlights the ways in which nation and locality, tradition and contemporaneity are mutually constituted despite their rigorous
The Abong family has been a driving force in the revival of Nimangki, the local male ceremonial complex of status achievement, initiated by the re-construction of their nasaro [dancing ground/sacred space] in the village. The Lamap area in Southern Malakula, known indigenously as Navsak, has ambivalently juggled concepts of custom and modernity over the past one hundred years. During the early days of the Anglo-French Condominium (which governed Vanuatu as the New Hebrides between 1906 and 1981) the region had a reputation for violence, both between locals and against foreigners, and many of the earliest missionaries and settlers reported feeling terrified by reports of the savage cannibalism rampant in the area. One particularly mythic character, the Namal from Bangherere, the strongest kastom chief in the area, was reported to be particularly abhorrent due to his proximity for eating human flesh for pleasure (Monnier 1987). His assassination by the navy in 1896 left the people of Lamap without a customary leader. As such, the younger part was receiving company school, to study the catechism, and to convert. Despite intense rivalry with nearby Presbyterian missions, Lamap became the regional centre for the Catholic mission, and eventually for the French administration of Malakula during the period of Condominium governance.

The Catholic Church, which during the early missionary period initiated a devastating dismantlement of traditional culture, later became a leading instigator in its revival. When a Catholic Bishop expressed the desire to see a traditional dance performed in 1984, Lamap villagers began to consider actively reviving their customary practices. Kastom dances were performed in 1984 for the Bishop, locals, tourists and interested museum spectators, and again for the centenary celebrations of the Catholic Church in 1987. After this, several older men, led by Olfala [8] Donassio Tasso decided to start to teach the younger boys the ways of kastom. None of them had ever seen the dances of Nimangki or of circumcision, but they remembered their fathers telling stories about them. They decided to resurrect their old nasaro, Proobs, which had been destroyed by the French District Commissioner to make way for a tennis court. The younger boys were put through the circumcision ceremony, and they began preparation for the taking of grades. Today, Marcellin's twin brother Hernan, at only 33, backed by his family, has reached the high rank of Meuleun, and is becoming a venerated ‘big man’. There are now three practising nasaros in the Lamap area.

Throughout Vanuatu, people will tell you with mixed feelings that kastom is hard work. Re-establishing social ties in the face of political, social and economic resistance was the easier part of the resurrection of the nasaros. The harder part was recreating the dances not danced in living memory, songs heard only through the wavering voice of an old man, and ritual paraphernalia never seen. Stemming primarily from Olfala Donassio’s assiduous recollections, traditional practice (songs, dances, as well as artefacts) could be revived again. In 1987 for the celebration of 100 years of the Catholic mission, Olfala Andre made two masks (Nalawan and Luan Veuv, from photographs Marcellin sent to Port Vila for the Pacific tour of the show). This mask making was able to recreate two masks, Kulong and Luan Veuv, from photographs Marcellin sent back to Malakula. The mask of Luan Veuv mask made by Richard currently on display in the VCC, is a second reconstruction of the masks in Lamap, alongside the revival of the associated dances and rituals according to renewed criteria of authenticity. Richard was able to recreate two masks, Kulong and Luan Veuv, from photographs Marcellin sent back to Malakula. The mask of Luan Veuv mask made by Richard currently on display in the VCC describes the role of museums in this explicit process of revival and the distinction between objects revived from photographs and from oral tradition (Figure eight).

Throughout Vanuatu, as we have already seen, formal media are crucial criteria in both marking out the customary from the contemporary and in synthesising the two. In general, throughout Vanuatu, store-bought paint is viewed as an ultimate marker of innovation and newness. In Lamap, it was initially used as a way to revive local material culture in a hybrid context: a mediator between church and village. Following on from this formal groundbreaking, in Lamap today there is a concerted effort to use only customary colour (restricted to red, black and white, and to a lesser extent green), and customary materials, the making of which is tabu to the non-initiated. This distinction has been partly instigated through interaction with international museums.

In 1996, Marcellin Abong accompanied the Arts of Vanuatu travelling exhibition from Port Vila to Paris where he was able to explore museum collections and view objects that had not been sent to Port Vila for the Pacific tour of the show. There, he found two masks from Port Sandwich dating back over one hundred years. This discovery enabled a second reconstruction of the masks in Lamap, alongside the revival of the associated dances and rituals according to renewed criteria of authenticity. Richard was able to recreate two masks, Kulong and Luan Veuv, from photographs Marcellin sent back to Malakula. The mask of the Luan Veuv mask made by Richard currently on display in the VCC, describes the role of museums in this explicit process of revival and the distinction between objects revived from photographs and from oral tradition (Figure eight). Richard Abong and the Proobs (nalawan) gave two of these masks to the Cambridge museum, one made as part of the dance Na-Gulong, the motif and story behind the dance belonging to a elder.

Collecting Kastom — Cultural revival in Lamap, South Malakula

As part of my attempt to unravel the importance of museum objects to understandings of kastom and creativity in Vanuatu, in addition to buying contemporary art, I wanted to collect contemporary traditional artefacts: objects I thought would be more rooted in localities rather than the nation, made using technologies and materials considered to be an entrenched, inalienable part of local practice and histories. However, just as I found each Nawita piece as part of the re-construction of their nasaro, I immediately introduced me to his brother Richard Abong. The Abong family has been a driving force in the revival of Nimangki, the local male ceremonial complex of status achievement, initiated by the re-construction of their nasaro [dancing ground/sacred space] in the village. The Lamap area in Southern Malakula, known indigenously as Navsak, has ambivalently juggled concepts of custom and modernity over the past one hundred years. During the early days of the Anglo-French Condominium (which governed Vanuatu as the New Hebrides between 1906 and 1981) the region had a reputation for violence, both between locals and against foreigners, and many of the earliest missionaries and settlers reported feeling terrified by reports of the savage cannibalism rampant in the area. One particularly mythic character, the Namal from Bangherere, the strongest kastom chief in the area, was reported to be particularly abhorrent due to his proximity for eating human flesh for pleasure (Monnier 1987). His assassination by the navy in 1896 left the people of Lamap without a customary leader. As such, the younger part was receiving company school, to study the catechism, and to convert. Despite intense rivalry with nearby Presbyterian missions, Lamap became the regional centre for the Catholic mission, and eventually for the French administration of Malakula during the period of Condominium governance.

The Catholic Church, which during the early missionary period initiated a devastating dismantlement of traditional culture, later became a leading instigator in its revival. When a Catholic Bishop expressed the desire to see a traditional dance performed in 1984, Lamap villagers began to consider actively reviving their customary practices. Kastom dances were performed in 1984 for the Bishop, locals, tourists and interested museum spectators, and again for the centenary celebrations of the Catholic Church in 1987. After this, several older men, led by Olfala [8] Donassio Tasso decided to start to teach the younger boys the ways of kastom. None of them had ever seen the dances of Nimangki or of circumcision, but they remembered their fathers telling stories about them. They decided to resurrect their old nasaro, Proobs, which had been destroyed by the French District Commissioner to make way for a tennis court. The younger boys were put through the circumcision ceremony, and they began preparation for the taking of grades. Today, Marcellin’s twin brother Hernan, at only 33, backed by his family, has reached the high rank of Meuleun, and is becoming a venerated ‘big man’. There are now three practising nasaros in the Lamap area.

Throughout Vanuatu, people will tell you with mixed feelings that kastom is hard work. Re-establishing social ties in the face of political, social and economic resistance was the easier part of the resurrection of the nasaros. The harder part was recreating the dances not danced in living memory, songs heard only through the wavering voice of an old man, and ritual paraphernalia never seen. Stemming primarily from Olfala Donassio’s assiduous recollections, traditional practice (songs, dances, as well as artefacts) could be revived again. In 1987 for the celebration of 100 years of the Catholic mission, Olfala Andre made two masks (Nalawan and Luan Veuv) from descriptions given by Olfala Donassio as part of the revival of the dances of the same names. These masks, seen for the first time in nearly 80 years, used vibrant colours bought from Asian merchants in imaginative ways, incorporating Christian motifs alongside the traditional imagery recollected by Donassio (see Figure eight).

6. The local name for the area’s language, called Proobk Sandwich by missionaries. 
7. Abong, which had been destroyed in the Lamap area.
8. This account has been drawn from the narratives of Lamap villagers, mainly Roman Batik, Richard Abong, Augustino Abong, and from Monnier (1987, 1993).
of Pnoab, Olfala Claude; the other a copy of the Luan Veuv mask which had been revived earlier as described above. Until their donation they were used repeatedly in dances, originally in the dancing-ground for the ceremony of which they are an intrinsic part, and then in performances to raise money from tourists. As the work to revive every step of Nimangi self-consciously takes the form of a research project, Richard has kept the masks he made for various ceremonies as “examples”, rather like museum pieces, instead of destroying them or hiding them away as past convention would demand. This allows them to be incorporated after their initial use into the tourist economy and also means that they can be shared with other museums, where they will be conserved for future generations, just like the masks Marcellin found in Paris. These masks are therefore seen as demonstrations of cultural practice not to be lost again, made not only to be used but preserved. Due to such experiences as working with the Arts of Vanuatu exhibition, many villagers in Lamap are aware that museums are ideal places to deposit such cultural valuables.

The members of Pnoab nasara are highly cognisant of the role of museum collections in ‘reminding’ them of kastom and of the role of museum directors in supporting such work. Several museum curators from France, Switzerland, and New Caledonia, all working under the guidance of the VCC have visited Lamap, filmed their ceremonies and given them support to their development of kastom. As objects, the masks given to the UCMAA literally embody previous encounters with museum collections. Despite the material distinctions made through the use of local rather than imported colours and materials, the production of the masks has been enabled by a wide variety of international encounters. Richard Abong is keen to forge strong ties between Pnoab and foreign museums and for that reason refused to accept monetary payment for the two UCMAA masks. Instead he asked for support and help when needed in future research, and for a set of wood-carving tools to be used by the entire group. This enabled any profit made through such economic interactions around kastom to be used to benefit the community.

The current revival of local kastom in Lamap must be seen in terms of the infringement of local economic and social development by national and international agents as an alternative model of development based in community, relying on the redevelopment of cultural roots in the past. It is this form of development that is explicitly encouraged by the grass-roots work of the VCC — which specifically encourages ni-Vanuatu to utilise their own customary and natural resources, in their own environments, rather than adopting potentially inappropriate international development models (see Geismar and Tilley 2003: 183–184). At the same time, this model of development and cultural production is also related to growth of international indigenous people’s movements, within which local cultural centres (or museums) are often at the forefront. In terms of artefact production, an ethic of collective reproduction rather than individual creativity is emphasised by Richard Abong and other Lamap villagers. At the same time, such definitions are marked by the same temporal and political distinctions between tradition and modernity, and in this process the interests of, and objects in, museums from Port Vila to Paris have played an important role.

I invited Richard Abong to the meeting of Nawita artists that I mentioned above, to give the point of view of ‘traditional’ arts in the ensuing associated with mortuary rituals, in which men achieved titles and entitlements through ceremonial practice and the exchange of tusked pigs (see Deacon 1993a) for some ethnographic information about the Nalawan and other graded societies of the region. Some Lamap villagers have used this text in recent years as a factual record to assist them in the revitalisation of ceremonial practices.
restricted in Vanuatu to exhibition halls, but also impacts upon village dancing grounds. As such, the form of objects themselves — and the very material from which they are constructed — reflects a series of encounters with both indigenous and expatriate agents, as well as the locality and the nation-state.

The importance of international museum interest in providing a crucial context for the presentation of contemporary arts and Pnoab nasara's interactions with museum collections in their revival of ceremonial material culture demonstrates that the collection of objects by museums today has become a powerful force in the dissemination of ideas about authenticity and indigenousness in material form. Here, I have shown some of the slippages between categories of 'traditional' and 'contemporary' as they are applied to material culture. Artists and object producers in Vanuatu draw upon powerful ideas about local uniqueness, whether that be 'other' nasaras, tourists in Port Vila, or foreign museum visitors and collectors. Material culture is a path by which such identities can be both expressed and maintained. At the same time, the formal media out of which objects are produced also plays an important role in maintaining distinctions between kastom and its representations.

Conclusions

In making a collection for the UCMAA I was able to view some effects of museum practices such as collecting and conservation on local cultural productions and representations. The classificatory space of the museum, as the case of Lamap demonstrates, is not materials, the contemporary art object itself is to explicitly transcend a collective past (exemplified by customary material culture), and thus is alienable as individual rather than collective property, negating customary copyright claims. This was made most explicit in the different transactions that emerged in the making of my own collection for the UCMAA.

By contrast, objects produced in the social and ceremonial context of village nasaras, can be viewed as vital constituents of processes, events and of social groups, and as such, are conceptualised as part of these collectives. The fact that contemporary artists live mainly in town, and that 'traditional' artefacts tend to be produced in an island context also awakens us to the contrasting discursive, social, and economic possibilities found in urban and rural Vanuatu that can affect the production of artefacts. Business, aside from small-scale tourism, generally runs through town. Economic and political development initiatives can be understood and even implemented locally by a conceptual return to 'traditional', systems of value, by recourse to pigs as wealth instead of cash, and by concepts of social and political status that are afforded by ritual practice, not only by monetary gain. It is this connection to a sense of local rather than national history and identity, grounded in a paradoxically evolving notion of continuity between the past and the present, which partially gives rise to the classification of 'traditional' with regard to material form. Here, the image, or style of the object cannot be separated from the object itself and the most restricted forms of knowledge are those pertaining to the technological processes of production of ritual artefacts. An image may be known to many as it is publicly viewed, but the particular ways in which it is made are kept secret to the non-initiated. An image is thus more than what is just seen. Its meaning rests in how and where it is made, whom by, and what social relations it therefore contains. However, as the cases of Oifala Andre's masks painted with store-bought paints, or Moses Jobo's appropriation of tapa technology using his own idiosyncratic interpretations of traditional iconography demonstrate, the material distinctions currently being traced by ni-Vanuatu artists and artefact producers are by no means immutable and in fact emphasise the hybrid nature of the classificatory divisions that are expressed in the rhetoric surrounding each artefact. Equally, such phenomena cannot be seen only as 'indigenous' when it is apparent that market buyers and museum professionals subscribe to them as strongly as island villagers. Instead, my observations highlight the ways that museums have participated in the remoulding of customary practice, demonstrating that meanings and values for material culture can be constituted across a wide range of localities (local, national and international).

Most especially, categories such as indigenous arise in these border zones between divergent systems of meaning and value, and within networks of cross-cultural encounter. I have shown here that the local production of museum objects in Vanuatu is best viewed in the context of a spider's web as thick as that of Pnoab nasara's masks. Networks of museum curators, buyers, priests, conference organisers, old men with good memories, and young men and women with enthusiasm for past tradition, all interact in present day Vanuatu with material forms defined as 'indigenous' to mould and create new ones.
References


