Introduction

Art is colonial. Art works can take you outside of yourself, impose their values on you, make you see the world in a different way, get you on side and make you over afresh... Art gives us an opportunity to think again, and again, and again. (Anon. 1992: 13).

This essay aims to dissect some of the tightly meshed connections between art objects and concepts of the indigenous, drawing on fieldwork within the marketplace for the growing contemporary arts movement in Vanuatu. At a time when the term 'indigenous' is increasingly fraught with political contestation in the global arena, a positive connection between art and indigeneity in the Pacific is only growing stronger [1]. Through the rendering of ideas and identities in acrylic, wool, and wood, contemporary artists in Vanuatu are able to synthesize global and local styles, classification and values, providing some alternative resolutions to more analytic quandaries about the cultural authenticity of their economic and political interests. Rather than promoting authenticity as an absolute and external value judgment assessing the legitimacy of identity and economic and political entitlement, the dialogue and exchange engendered by the production and transaction of artworks demonstrates how authenticity is also a strategy used to establish important and efficacious ideas about local identity in cross-cultural context.

In a controversial article, Adam Kuper (2002) mounted a broad critique of the category 'indigenous' (and implicitly of those who use the term, whether they be native, activist or academic) that, if accepted entirely, has serious ramifications for the present utility of the term. Drawing on his readings of the work of various indigenous people’s movements concerned primarily with land restitution in Southern Africa, and North and South America, Kuper outlined and challenged the key notions he identifies as salient to the construction of indigenous identities — a latent primitivism and celebration of ‘nature’ as opposed to culture, a reliance on blood rights, and the elevation of an idealized (pre-colonial) mythic past into the political present. He noted that such forgings of identity are also “popular with extreme right-wing parties in Europe”, citing the attempts of South African Boers to participate at a meeting of the United Nations Forum of Indigenous Peoples in 1996 (2002: 390). Kuper (2002: 395) suggests that these indigenous rights movements generically utilize understandings of race, culture and biology that anthropologists, and others, are intensely uncomfortable with in other circumstances:

the conventional lines of argument currently used to justify “indigenous” land claims rely on obsolete anthropological notions [of primitivism, race, and an opposition between culture and nature] and false ethnographic vision. Fostering essentialist ideologies of culture and identity, they may have dangerous political consequences.

The (ongoing) response to Kuper’s piece has varied from measured to vehement critique (see Kenrick and Lewis 2004). Nearly all commentators have highlighted the importance of acknowledging how ‘dangerous politics’ have long and adversely affected indigenous peoples, and the very real necessity for restitution and empowerment for dispossessed and politically marginalized first peoples. As Suzman comments, “San people are frustrated not because they cannot pursue their “traditional culture” but because they are impoverished, marginalized, and exploited by the dominant population” (2002: 400). It also remains a fact that many groups of people share an understanding of what it means to be ‘native’, ‘first nation’, ‘fourth world’, ‘tribal’ or ‘indigenous’ with many other collectives from very different places around the world (see Smith 1999), sharing a broad experience of cultural and political encounter and co-option. Divisions between colonized/colonizer, native/settler, black-brown-red/white, to name but a few problematic but profound distinctions that feed into the criteria of who may be defined as indigenous, are thus very real. What to make then of Kuper’s challenge to their authenticity?

Anthropologists working in the Pacific, especially those working with art and other kinds of cultural production, are particularly well suited to respond to Kuper’s polemic. Kuper’s critique of primitivism and identification of the political strategy surrounding many indigenous land claims intersects with a well-worn discussion that, whilst by no means unique to Oceanic anthropology, has played a defining role within our discipline: the ‘invention of tradition’ (see...
Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Hanson 1989, Keen and Tonkinson eds. 1981, Jolly and Thomas 1992, Linnekin 1990). In the context of the growing battle for empowerment and self-determination by native peoples living in lands later settled by others and, equally, by post-colonial nations struggling for recognition on a world stage, Kuper exposes indigenous identities to be politically contingent, and infinitely malleable even as they are promoted as timeless, natural kinds. He deconstructs the concept of indigenous much as anthropologists once did that of tradition or kastom, and by extension nationalism. As with much of the early invention of tradition debates, Kuper himself reifies terms such as invention, tradition and identity, assuming that there may be some pristine (authentic) meaning of each which is being corrupted by those with explicit political agendas. In doing so he crucially ignores local determinations and experiences of what it might mean to be native (see Gegeo 2001: 492, Smith 1999, Trask 1991 [2]).

Kuper is right to an extent: indigenous identities, like all identities, are political, contested and fraught with controversy and dissent (both from within and from without) and there are provocative slippages between indigenous and national identities. What is interesting to me is how ideas and discussions about art in the Pacific may be seen to circumvent critiques such as Kuper, and how the anthropology of art has developed a parallel form of communicating about indigeneity and nationhood, one which acknowledges shared territories as well as political inequalities; which shows us that categories like ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ or ‘nature’ and culture are permeable and contingent. Perhaps most importantly, this perspective also incorporates diverse voices, and media, into the analytic framework, exemplified by the participants in this volume. As Ngahiraka Mason, curator Maori at the Auckland Art Gallery has written: Indigenous artists contribute and bring vitality to contemporary art and, inasmuch as they provide sweeping panoramic views of a rapidly changing world, they also offer departure points from which to discuss new directions... (Mason 2000: 24). The “post-postcolonial” imaginaries developed by many artists working in the Pacific offer “a counter-discursive Aboriginal imaginary that is crucial to their contemporary self-production” (Ginsberg and Myers 2006: 29).

Historically, the anthropology of art has been deeply interested in the cross-cultural applicability of categories (such as aesthetics, art and tradition); with the ways in which values (such as that of authenticity) are produced and reproduced in social and historical context; and with the symbolic and/or representational meaning of images in relation to identity politics (see Morphy and Perkins, 2006). Increasingly, artists, and their work, have entered into these academic discussions, not only as illustrations, but also as active participants (see Mithlo 2006). Over the past few years, there has been growing collaborative engagement with practicing artists, exemplified by the symposium from which this very volume emerges (and see Schneider and Wright 2005). Despite growing academic and political dispute over the linkages between concepts of indigenous and land or law (see Brown 1998, 2003), the connections between ‘indigenous’ and ‘art’ have been powerfully reinforced, celebrated and consumed in recent years. The intellectual sophistication and political activism of many native artists, coupled with the very real powers of art to reproduce, not just represent, knowledge about the world increasingly informs our critical analyses. It is this ability to merge diverse opinion and discourse with culturally specific aesthetic forms that makes contemporary art in the Pacific a powerful tool for discussions about cultural, local and national identities.

Working closely in dialogue with artists and their work forces us to consider alternative forms of cultural expression to our own, and to open our analyses to fresh perspectives and ways of understanding, and indeed visualizing or experiencing, identity politics. As Fred Myers comments, referring to Aboriginal Australian acrylic painting, “its real power and lasting value is that it appears to be of ‘tradition’ while violating it. This ambiguity constitutes its unsettlement” (2004: 263) and by extension the potential to unsettle mainstream political debates. The creative synthesis of, and intellectual engagement with, diverse art worlds demonstrates how art practices are extremely fertile ground for the expression, and even resolution, of provocative issues and more discursive divides.

Kuper’s polemic emerges from the problematic of discursively policing the borders of cultural identity with tools that change shape and more often than not slip out of ones hands. In this essay, I want to exploit the fluid tools of the anthropology of art and draw on my own research in Vanuatu to emphasize how ni-Vanuatu artists may empower and connect differing definitions of authenticity and the indigenous, to more constructive and analytic, rather than dangerous political effect. It is here, I suggest, that the anthropology of art might become central, rather than marginal, to some of the fundamental concerns of anthropology (regarding identity, ethnicity, and globalization). Indeed, as in Australia, New Zealand, and other settler-societies, indigenous art is frequently intrinsically linked to land rights and claims making it far from marginal to these issues (see Ginsberg and Myers 2006, Myers 2002, 2004, Morphy 1991, Morphy and Smith Boles 1999).
Art in Vanuatu

The canonization of contemporary art in Vanuatu is a relatively recent phenomenon yet, despite the overt associations of the category with social and political concepts that have arrived from afar, contemporary art objects are used as much in the presentation and development of ideas about indigenous culture and tradition as they are in the development of local participation in an international art world. In this way, categories considered by many commentators to be non-local (such as art) are, in places like Vanuatu, prime grounds for the production and manifestation of local identity.

This essay draws upon research with people interested in art in Vanuatu — makers, dealers and collectors — to discuss how ideas about authenticity and indigenous identity are mediated in this cross-cultural context. The negotiations about value and identity that have emerged in the Vanuatu art world present an alternative view of identity politics to Kuper, where categories and values are conceived as intrinsically opposed to one another rather than as mutually constituted, dynamic and imbued with creativity. As Sero Kuautonga, a leading ni-Vanuatu painter, commented on this synthesis in describing one of his paintings: Since independence, our kastom, church and independence have all come together. Vanuatu as a nation must be referred to in my painting. My painting is my culture. [3]

Authenticity in the Art Market

The Vanuatu art world is therefore a place where complex relations between local, national and international contexts converge in paint, wood and wool. In this, it is primarily an urban phenomenon — the exhibition hall of the French embassy on the main high street in the capital, Port Vila, is one of the few places ni-Vanuatu, resident expatriates and tourists meet and mingle comfortably, providing a space for cross-cultural conversation and more often than not, provocative discussion (Geismar 2004). This kind of art market is a good place to start in examining how ideas about authenticity and identity are both entangled and negotiated. For instance, in most marketplaces concerned with artifacts categorized as art, buyers may think that they are simply buying objects of pure aesthetic value, but in reality they are often purchasing a relationship between the object and its producer (e.g. it is not only the image created by Picasso that a collector buys, but that fact that Picasso himself made it). This perspective exposes that authenticity is relational, and socially and politically constructed rather than inherent to any particular object.

In turn, it is often the case that objects made for sale are valued as somewhat less authentic than those that are perceived to be more embedded in local practice and society. The notion that economic gain has become the guiding motivation for many cultural productions and presentations in the Pacific is salient within much anthropological analysis (Stanley 1998). Ton Otto’s paper entitled Empty tins for lost traditions (1993) exemplifies this attitude. He comments “in the tourism and artifact business expatriate entrepreneurs and local agents share a complicit interest in sustaining dreams of primitivism and exoticism” (1993: 13), and laments the loss of authentic local culture. Chris Tilley on the other hand, interprets the performance of grade-taking ceremonies for tourists on Wala island, North-East Malakula, as a way in which islanders may creatively negotiate between modernity and tradition: “By virtue of the practice of objectifying culture in the show people are beginning to learn that they have to negotiate and transform it.” (1999 [1997]: 259). In this analysis he raises an important critique of entrenched concepts of authenticity that view hybrid interactions between islanders and tourists (or indeed any other foreigner) as somehow spurious.

There is an implicit economic morality that places the market at the opposite end of the spectrum of authenticity to tradition. Dean MacCannell concludes melancholically, that tourism and globalisation are the creators of ‘empty meeting grounds’ (1992), unequally separating the world into consumers (tourists, and perhaps even anthropologists) and commodities (“ex-primitives” selling themselves as cultural productions). In this view, values such as traditional and modern are created by a hierarchical market forces, dominated by a cannibalistic white culture, which is “an enormous totalization” (Ibid: 129, see also Stanley 1998).

In the case of the art market in Port Vila, discourses of collectors and dealers may be seen to converge with those of artists, complicating some of these more pessimistic discussions. Whilst it cannot be denied that making money through the circulation of art is the primary agenda, art production also entails an ongoing public conversation about what it means to be ni-Vanuatu. Unlike mainstream artists in Europe, Australasia or North America, whose work tends to be evaluated primarily in terms of their art education, their originality, or their individual creativity, artists in the Pacific tend to be judged in the art market more by their place in a broader community, their connection to their ancestral and customary heritage, and the formal continuities of their work and practice between past and present. In this context, contemporary art straddles many discursive divides, being both traditional and modern, made for the market, and embodying traditional practices and identities.
Many collectors of Pacific art follow the archetypal collector, Nelson Rockefeller, in linking so-called non-western arts to forces of nature, to spirituality and to some kind of collective unconscious: There are inner forces in one’s life that sometimes seem to be unrelated to conscious thought. This can be true of appreciation as well as creation of art. Much of so-called primitive art was created as direct response to strong feelings. [4]

However, many artists also share this attitude across the Pacific, who do not see this as incompatible with their lives as professional artists. For instance Michael Busai, from Futuna in Vanuatu, works full time for National Bank of Vanuatu as well as being internationally renowned for his pen and ink drawings. He describes the customary basis for his work:

My work is based on traditional art, the art of the island environment that I come from. But it is in a new style, that I have invented.... The thing that really inspires me is the environment of my childhood days. There are many things that really inspired me in early childhood, which are unique to the village environment. [In my art] you can see the birds that I shot as a child when I was in the bush, the fish and seafood... it reflects the natural scenery of the natural environment of the village and also our cultural background, our legends and myths, because the area I am from is one that I really want to research. I think it is very interesting how all the myths and legends are related to our real environment... So in other words, you have a link to the supernatural, through our myths, from the physical world.... This is a secret behind my own painting. My painting has the same foundation that is behind our myths and legends — it has a strong spiritual force that really motivates me. [5]

As well as forging commercial value in the marketplace, art in Vanuatu is an important way to reinforce identities bound up in connections to ancestral power as well as in connection to development projects, churches, and tourist ventures. There is little doubt that the artworks produced in this context inculcate a shared discourse — as convergences, or materializations, of both self-definition and outsider interest, in the context of multiple investments made within a complex field of cross-cultural engagement.

**Dealers and Artists Making Value Together**

The marketplace becomes a place where a variety of different kinds of authenticity are produced, and where local identities are consolidated within broader spheres of exchange. Ni-Vanuatu often enter dealer stores in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, commenting on the pieces on display. Such pieces must therefore be legitimated in front of a local audience as well as for visiting tourists. The market may be seen as a border zone, a public space that foregrounds “the unresolvable oscillations, the restless toing-and-froing, and the cultural, commercial, and political crossings” that develop value (Spyer 1998: 1). Ni-Vanuatu want to make and sell artifacts that represent them properly to others and that are perceived to be locally unique. They also want and need to earn money to survive in the growing urban settlements of Vanuatu. Market sales become grounds of political negotiation and cultural navigation by local people, who use concepts of the indigenous and of authenticity as their tools. Authenticity, which in this context hinges on a series of prescriptions about what it means to be indigenous, is a notion utilized on both sides of a transaction in order to strategically maximize political and economic relations in a variety of different contexts. Here, it is a category made in wood or paint, out of the relations between ni-Vanuatu and others.

In Port Vila, values of authenticity, and the promotion, through artwork, of ni-Vanuatu identities, are therefore made somewhat jointly between art producers and traders. Hanging around the newly opened store of a French dealer, gave me some good examples of this. Madame X came to Vanuatu after many years in Senegal, and has lived in Port Vila since 1988. She is married to a prominent Vietnamese businessman, who has close family ties with a nearby peri-urban village. Her husband was a vital resource in helping her consolidate her trade links with ni-Vanuatu. Madame X’s priority was to sell kastom, which she initially defined as focusing purely on objects, valuing age, ritual use, and island production rather than the urban context of settlements in Port Vila. When she first opened, Madame X often visited the Vanuatu National Museum using the objects on display there as a marker for defining authentic kastom artifacts. On occasion, before she had established her own trade connections, she even bought things from the museum store and resold them downtown at a higher price. Around these objects, she placed photocopied pages from the exhibition catalogue, Arts of Vanuatu, in order to give scholarly validation and authenticity to her selections, and she also gave photocopied pages to local producers and asked them to make the objects illustrated: for example, she had a variety of hair combs from Pentecost island collected in this manner (Bonnemaison et al. 1996: 141)

After she had established her own trade connections, Madame X moved away from this more museological definition of kastom, to one that emerged more out of...
interaction with the people she was working with. One day when I was in the store, a woman from Tonga island who had entered to look at some carved wooden storyboards from her island, commented loudly: “You should have the stories up around the objects, they’ll sell better.” Madame X had realised early on that real kastom was a complex social phenomenon, and that kastom objects needed to be socially embedded to be valuable. She began to request vendors to write down information about the artefacts [fig. 1.1], not just any information but kastom storian (kastom stories).

Story from Falibak: How Man was Formed

Once upon a time, a little child was borne of a liana vine. This vine was in the shape of a serpent, and hung from the branches of a big Banyan tree. After the child was born, he lived in the Banyan tree where he grew up into a big man. He saw a man from Wakon who had a pig. This pig was walking by the ocean carrying its babies on its shoulders, and came up to the roots of the Banyan tree. The man from Wakon was searching for his pig and found him asleep with its babies under the Banyan tree. He looked up into the branches and saw the child sitting in the tree. He asked, “What is your name”. The child replied, “My name is Mel”. Then Mel asked him “Who are you? What are you doing?” The man replied in his own language, meaning that he was walking around trying to find his pig. Mel gave the man a name: Bangbangon.
Bangbangon tried to get his pig to go down to the village, but the pig could not move because Mel had tied him to a root of the tree. The man from Wakon wanted to go to work on his house in the village, but because he couldn't move his pig, he stayed there under the tree with Mel.

They stayed there together and Bangbangon saw that Mel was feeding the pig with his long hair to make the pig big and fat. The pigs grew and grew and gave birth to many more pigs. As he watched, Mel taking out his hair and feeding it to the pig, Bangbangon said: “Now your name is no longer Mel, it is Melfel because now you have a bald head!”

He stayed a long time with the ageing Melfel. He said to Bangbangon, “If I die, you will not bury me. You must put me in the Banyan tree where I can sit and look over everything.” Bangbang did as Melfel told him to do, he put him up in the branches of the Banyan tree, and over time, he became like a stone.

All the people from Falibak used this stone (in the language of Falibak, called Muyuepu) to nourish their pigs, and they say that they make the pigs grow big and reproduce making all men rich in pigs.

And these stones of Bangbangon were used by Rengrengaim after Bangbangon died. When Rengrengaim died then Meleun Batken used them, when he died, they were used by Lokbaro Tungon, when he died they were passed to Bangdomal. Bangdomal used them until 1913, the year of the big volcano eruption at Deep Point. Now the volcano has buried the stones in the village of Falibak in West Ambrym at Deep Point.

So this figure represents this power, and belongs to me, Joseph Tungon from Falibak. I carved the figure again and no one else is allowed to carve him. [6]

The story above was given to Madame X by a carver from Ambrym Island along with a wooden figure to sell in her store. The narrative links the wooden carving to a mythic ancestor figure and explains how the carver knows how to carve this particular image. In presenting the complex genealogies and connections to place that this ancestor embodies, the carver not only represents crucial parts of his heritage to the consumer, but he also consolidates his local knowledge and identity to a more local audience — stating for example that he alone is entitled to carve (and sell) this particular image because of his genealogy.

Such complex criteria of authenticity are balanced around the principles of self-definition as well as external interest, and rather than evaluating their legitimacy we need to accept the political contingency and dynamism of this principle and process. Ultimately in this context, expatriate dealers may suffer because they themselves do not fulfill the particular criteria of authenticity that is most salient to definitions of indigenous identity: that of personhood, made incontrovertible by deep connections to local place. This form of authenticity serves ni-Vanuatu well in the marketplace, drawing upon an oppositional identity politics that privileges indigenous knowledge and market participation, to the detriment of expatriates who will always be ‘outsiders’ in these terms. Even as Madame X was building up her store, other more established dealers stores were closing shop, disaffected with their lack of success in navigating the customary regulations surrounding the production of kastom artifacts and with the complex identity politics which did not legitimate them (Geismar 2005).

Dealer stores in Port Vila are thus spaces within which ni-Vanuatu can subvert some of the inequalities between themselves and generally more affluent expatriates, and, increasingly assert economic and political self-determination. In this way, the production and circulation of artworks is a way in which dynamic local and national politics are worked out in practice, more often as not as a way of articulating shared values and mutual engagements.

Art Making the Indigenous
The negotiations around indigeneity and authenticity in dealer’ stores and the growth of the marketplace has also given rise to the production of new kinds of objects, made specifically for this context. The growing contemporary arts movement in Vanuatu has provided an avenue for debates around the relationship between tradition and modernity to be made more explicit to a wide audience. For ni-Vanuatu engaged as artists, contemporary art (in contrast to kastom material culture) is a way in which social and political concerns may be articulated, a method for capitalising on culture as a resource to profit from the sale of artworks, a way in which they can present and discuss ideas about indigeneity and nationhood to each other and to strangers, and a material marker and maker of these classifications and distinctions. As Ralph Regenvanu, the director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and a practicing artist, has noted:

What is called “art” in Vanuatu today is based on many of the same principles as the traditional creative forms that preceded it. Contemporary art is perhaps distinguishable from its forebears only in terms of the wider range of media used and the sources of inspiration and motivation for creative expression...Although the
tradition of contemporary art in Vanuatu has its origins in the drawing and paintings of the colonial settlers and European visitors to these islands, the contemporary art scene in Vanuatu today features a prominent ni-Vanuatu as well as European presence, with the primary Western form being increasingly transformed by creations inspired by indigenous conceptions. As an expression of the individual and collective experience, contemporary art in Vanuatu is perhaps uniquely placed to provide an ongoing representation of life in a country in which the latest Western technology coexists with a living and vital Melanesian spirituality. (Regenvanu 1997: 5)

Image production has been an important ground for thinking about the specificities of being ni-Vanuatu — a particular kind of indigenous identity defined in relation to national citizenship. In 1990, to commemorate ten years of independence, the Government of Vanuatu published a book celebrating the newly forged national culture of Vanuatu (Vanuatu 1999). In a section entitled National Symbols, the anonymous writer claims that the basis of independent identity is to be found in the natural resources of Vanuatu (of which culture is a constituent part), and goes on to describe a corpus of national symbols, all of which are stylised motifs connecting culture and nature [figs. 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4]. Thus, the national coat of arms, the symbol of _Long God yumi stanap_ [In God we stand] incorporates culture into the natural resources of the country. [7]

The symbol is explained:
The man is a ni-Vanuatu, a Melanesian and a chief. The spear he holds represents his role as defender and protector of his people. His armbands (shell money) denote his role as the dealer in economic exchanges and distributor of services, goods and resources. His headdress and loincloth represent the various modes of attire found throughout the country. The man stands with his feet firmly on the ground, in the soil of his land, Vanuatu. The crossed cycad leaves in the background signify the peace derived from chiefly authority and jurisprudence. The circular pig tusk symbolises unity, wealth, and prosperity, an outgrowth of human interaction, authority and peace. The mat in front of the man recalls the importance of agriculture in

Figure 1.2 Moses Jobo, synthesizes the local and the national in his decorations of a UNELCO electricity shed, Port Vila, Vanuatu, 2001. This scene is about tribal reconciliation in Erromango. Photograph by Haidy Geismar.
our traditional economy. Mats are the product of women’s labour, and women are the producers and managers of our agricultural economy. Our motto, ‘Long god yumi stanap’, reminds us to give back to God our Creator, in sacrifice, all that He has abundantly bestowed upon us. (Ibid: 28-29)

Here is the contemporary nation-state drawn large. The conflation of nature with culture as indigenous resources that can be stylised and circulated as a series of images (consolidating the local and the national) has had great affect on the production of artefacts categorised explicitly as contemporary art.

**Contemporary art mediates kastom**

The production of contemporary art in Vanuatu entails a constant negotiation between continuity and change. Images made from tapestry, paint on canvas, or watercolour on paper, are seen as explicitly contemporary in ways that images created by technologies and materials that have been institutionalised within kastom are not. However, they are made indigenous by virtue of the symbols drawn upon and the identity of the people that produce them.

Newly found national material such as contemporary art not only mediates between the locality and the nation, but between national and international domains. The first organisation of ni-Vanuatu contemporary artists emerged in this context, out of a series of interactions between urban ni-Vanuatu and expatriate artists. In 1987, artists Emmanuel Watt, Sero Kuautonga, Fidel Yoringmal, Juliette Pita and French expatriate Patrice Cujo, met at L’Atelier, the French gallery owned by dealer Suzanne Bastien, in Port Vila to discuss the establishment of an organisation of contemporary art. The meeting was also attended by ni-Vanuatu who had been trained in art at INTV (the technical training college in Port Vila) during the four years that the course was available, including Juliette Pita, John Joseph, Michael Busai, and Sylvester Bulesa. Prior to this, contemporary art in Vanuatu had only been produced by foreigners; exemplified by the work of French artists Nicholai Michoutouchkine and Robert Tatin (Regenvanu 1996, Geismar 2004). Following a suggestion of Pita’s, they decided that the organisation be named Nawita, the Bislama term for octopus. Each tentacle of the octopus represents a different artistic medium or material form of expression, highlighting the diverse talents of the group, united in a single association.

In terms of expatriate relations, the association is still predominantly Francophile — the constitution was initially written in French — affirming a free membership open to expatriates and ni-Vanuatu alike. Despite these connections, Nawita presents itself as an indigenous organisation [8]. Expatriate artists act as teachers and facilitators, but maintain a lower public profile, keeping up the indigenous appearance of the association. Now with nearly a hundred members, Nawita continues to hold yearly exhibitions, in the gallery of the French Embassy, and remains the most prolific and high profile artists association in Vanuatu.
Out of this framework, the primary criteria of the association's membership define the contemporary as explicitly against the concept of kastom. This is primarily a material distinction: artists or artisans using traditional media and traditional principles are excluded (Regenvanu 1996: 312). The use of tradition-as-image, transforms kastom. Whilst contemporary art objects are not regarded to have ritual efficacy, or be emplaced in local tradition, their reliance on customary imagery defines them as indigenous. For example, an expatriate accountant who crafted a miniature replica of the Pentecost Land Dive out of matchsticks and won first prize at an art competition in 1995, was deposed of his prize once his nationality was fully realized by the kastom chiefs acting as judges [9] — he was working with new materials, but was, as a foreigner not allowed to use the land dive as a representational resource. Such criteria of authentic personhood are not yet extended to ni-Vanuatu and it is still legitimate for artists such as Juliette Pita, from Erromango Island, to create versions of the Pentecost land dive out of tapestry.

Navita members conscientiously follow the same rules of indigenous entitlement in place for material classified as kastom: they perceive kastom objects to be the entitlements of authentic persons (determined by natal affiliations with particular islands) expressed using authentic materials, usually those with a basis in the locality, or in nature. Ralph Regenvanu, describes how his work [fig. 1.5] negotiates this relationship:

I always use symbols when I work; I think maybe a lot of artists here do. Basically the symbols are to do with the distinction between kastom and non-kastom. Kastom is taken to mean anything that has aspects of, or any aspect that represents the pre-European past, like the indigenous cultures of Vanuatu. Kastom is obviously made to be a distinct thing from any-thing that is not kastom, which has aspects of the post-European contact history of Vanuatu. For example, money or cash, or even the church, Christianity or things like their clothes and so on are not kastom.

In all the work I do I try to create images of Vanuatu, pictures that I'm interested in. All my work is based around Vanuatu themes. I don't do anything that isn't. Always I want to represent the fact that this conflict exists in everything. Everything that happens in Vanuatu has the kastom and non-kastom side. So you have to find symbols for them and how they interact. That's a lot of my art, and all the other artists' work here in Vanuatu. All the contemporary artists have aspects of both in their drawings and their art.

For me, I use a motif of a face from a drum, a slit-gong and also Black Palm figures that they carve on my island. I'm very conscious about using things that I have a right to use. I don't use symbols from other islands that belong to other groups of people. But you'll find that many of the contemporary artists in Vanuatu today, and most of them have contributed to this exhibition, do use symbols from other islands, which aren't really theirs. But they use them in the terms of a national idea of kastom. When they use it, for example, they use an image of a face from another island where they're not from, to represent kastom in a national context. Artists have got into trouble for doing that, and it's something they have got to be careful about. I totally avoid it at all costs. I just try not to use anything at all, any traditional design that doesn't come from my area. So I stick to a certain range of options that I can use to represent kastom when I do any designs. At the same time there's a different

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Figure 1.4 Andrew Tovovur. Tapestry depicting the arrival of the Pacific Sky cruise ship in Vila harbor. Photograph by Haidy Geismar.
range of options that I can use from the non-kastom side. Obviously a wider range because there aren’t really these issues of copyright that I have to be sensitive about. [10]

New Traditions
Given that the criteria for authentic personal identity is extended into the production of contemporary arts, it soon becomes apparent that the material form of contemporary art pieces are grounds upon which crucial definition and distinctions are formed and synthesised. An example of such synthesis can be drawn out of an exhibition entitled New Traditions: Contemporary Art from Vanuatu, which was held at the VCC in 1999-2000 (VCC 2000) and subsequently toured Australia and New Zealand [11]. In the exhibition, connections were made between contemporary art made by individual artists (all ni-Vanuatu citizens) [12], and contemporary objects (traditional, but newly made) that were associated with general island styles more than specific individuals. The new traditions of the title of the exhibition accentuated the strong relationships between traditional and contemporary arts in the forging of ni-Vanuatu identities.

Ten contemporary artists from the Nawita association were asked to interpret ten periods from the history of Vanuatu [13]. These pieces were then placed alongside examples of recently made traditional artifacts in order to demonstrate “both the similarities and contrasts between modern and traditional art” (Ibid). In his comment above, Regenvanu emphasizes that he views kastom as a parallel way of being to that of the ways of the west (epitomized by clothes, money, and Christianity). In his painting Development After Independence, the ultimate national symbol includes not only the national flag, but is made partly from images of vatu banknotes. Regevanu’s comment that “Everything that happens in Vanuatu has the kastom and non-kastom side” emphasizes the synthetic capability of contemporary arts in Vanuatu to forge some kind of material resolution between the often-problematic opposition of tradition and modernity in a national indigenous identity.

Equally, painter Sero Kuautonga reflected upon his own piece, The Future [fig. 1.6] in the New Traditions exhibition:

My idea behind this picture is our future. To me our future is based on the past, and our past is based on our culture. So based on our cultural heritage and our cultural knowledge, we can enter the future. In this picture I have expressed an aspect of our cultural heritage that is copyright. We cannot create or copy those designs but we can get inspiration from those images and create new ones. I have stylized all the traditional designs. You can see the face of a slit-drum. You can also see a pig’s tusk, a rock design and a footprint. The footprint symbolizes standing in your own culture so that you can enter the future, which is the bright space. The namele leaf is the bridge so that we can speak to each other. It symbolizes staying in the past so that you can enter the future. That is how we can communicate. There is also a show print. The show print steps on the footprint as it steps into the future. So knowing our cultural heritage and our cultural knowledge we can enter the new world, which is the modern world...

Since the New Traditions show, contemporary artists in Vanuatu have increasingly reflected upon what makes their work unique as ni-Vanuatu artists, as they participate in international workshops, art festivals and biennials. The Nawita association has expanded its membership, and other artists associations have been
founded. For instance, a young carver from Tongo Island, Kake Buko, participated in an exhibition of Tongan carvings at the French Embassy in Port Vila in 2001. He described to me how he defined his unique style and subject matter. His training in traditional carving in his island home was supplemented by his work with the US Peace Corps office in Port Vila and by carving workshops in Australia and the Solomon Islands. He draws on the traditional carving techniques of his island, storyboards [figs. 1.7 and 1.8], to depict periods of Vanuatu’s colonial history and his experiences of Pacific multiculturalism:

I want to address in my work some styles of Vanuatu that everyone here knows about. Since I was in Australia, I have been researching the story of the experiences of the workers from Vanuatu who went to Australia one hundred years ago to work on the sugar plantations. I have carved their story onto a traditional

Figure 1.6 Sero Kuautonga, The future, Oil on Canvas. 1998. Photograph by Haidy Geismar.
Tongoan storyboard. My work reflects both my own experiences and wider Pacific art. [14]

Buko also incorporates techniques learned in the Solomon Islands such as pearl-shell inlay to his relief carving. The material consolidation of ni-Vanuatu experience and identity is thus forged in the wider context of the exchange of ideas, styles, and of overlapping histories, and Buko’s work is also part of a growing pan-Pacific visual style, one which highlights shared connections of experience between the indigenous peoples of Oceania.

Looking at the work and comments of contemporary artists in Vanuatu demonstrates that the Port Vila art world is a place where ideas about indigenous authenticity are re-made over the tension lines of tradition/modernity. As in the marketplace, the key to the authentic production of contemporary art objects is the same as for other artifacts: they must be made by indigenous, entitled producers, who in turn set the boundaries and definitions of their own indigeneity. During one conversation I had with Sero Kuautonga and Richard Abong, a chief from Southern Malakula, who is responsible for producing the ritual material culture used by his family in important ceremonial rites of status acquisition, they began to talk about what made objects real, or authentic:

**Richard Abong:** Yes, our art must have its time. The things that we are making now, come from our desire to revive the masks which were used before... we have to go inside our kastom of the past, and make these masks part of our activities today... When we make them we follow the ‘originality’ of the masks that were made before. All of the new masks that we make; we try our best to make them follow the originality of the old masks.

**Sero:** Yes, for example, in making a mask, it isn’t just the creation of art or artefact. It must be made with how you behave around the time of preparation, to collect the right material, then to slowly build up the mask, then at the end there must be a ceremony with a dance, so everything is part of this bigger thing. The object or artefact that you look at, it isn’t just...
The purpose is the mask, the activity that goes with it, kastom dance, or whatever it is. But if you just ‘make it’, and you leave it as it is, the thinking of old tells us that you will be affected by this, it will go against you.[15]

For Sero, a contemporary artist, and Richard, a ritual practitioner, the ancestral past is the ultimate source of authenticity and of indigenous identity. Ancestors are the link between living people, local places and their productions. As such contemporary art practice takes mythic history and kastom and makes it into indigenous national cultural heritage.

Conclusions

Contemporary indigenous art can be used as a window to view how some seemingly opposite ways of being are united materially in everyday life for many ni-Vanuatu. Localized notions of the indigenous and of authenticity are drawn through increasingly international relations: the internationalist environment of the market and the internationally recognized language of contemporary arts. Both categories emerge from a web of connections, which might incorporate foreigners in Vanuatu and in other countries, as well as neighboring islanders from throughout the archipelago, but never forgets to foreground difference as much as relationality. In this way, objects (especially contemporary art objects) become sites upon which oppositional tensions between tradition and modernity, continuity and change can coexist. To make an authentic artwork in Vanuatu, one that is legitimately viable in cultural and economic terms, one must be an authentic (indigenous) person. To be an authentic person means claiming indisputable rights in particular places. Both authentic places and persons are ascribed and described by objects. It is important to realize that there is space for dispute, controversy, and dissent within this process. Making and presenting contemporary art can help us to develop an academic language that can incorporate diversity, fluidity and dynamic change in our understandings of how people talk about their sense of identity and their understandings of authenticity.

This discussion of the machinations of the art market in Vanuatu has highlighted that rather than analytically sweeping the value of authenticity under the carpet, we should recognize it as a powerful mechanism by which the category of the indigenous is made by local agents in tandem with diverse external interest groups. In addition, by focusing on some ways in which the contemporary artists of Vanuatu construct their own concepts of the indigenous that acknowledge both mythic pasts and contemporary historical and political realities, this essay has emphasized how criteria of the indigenous are currently played out in the production of art. Contemporary art objects may be understood as cross-cultural meeting grounds, which may facilitate the reconciliation between sharply contrasting domains of political and cultural experience and the classifications and values that are attendant to them (Thomas 1991).

In summary, looking closely at contemporary indigenous art can show how authenticity and indigeneity are made or materialized out of a long history of cross-cultural political and economic exchange and interaction. Kuper’s discussion, in ignoring local exegesis of these categories, is curiously limited. Focusing on the ways in which dealers, collectors and artists in the Pacific, describe authenticity shows that there is a very real efficacy to the category, as it is negotiated between these different interest groups, and consolidated in the very form of artworks themselves. It is still vital for many native artists to integrate their cultural identity into their work; tourists and collectors still ask whether pieces they buy are truly authentic; dealers discuss authenticity amongst themselves as well as with the people that they buy or sell to (albeit...
in somewhat different terms). Asking what it means for a person or an object to be real or really indigenous is asking a question about authenticity: a judgment that determines the worth of something in terms of the strength of its identity claims. As Regenvanu and Kuautonga both acknowledge in their artist's statements, being indigenous is also a value of entitlement. In this way, the relationship between classifications and values pertaining to authenticity and indigenous identity are extremely powerful and it is for this reason that they continue to be used and to resonate as important categories of thought.