Negotiating Materiality: International and Local Museum Practices at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and National Museum

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the idiosyncratic ways in which the Vanuatu Cultural Centre has incorporated global museum technologies into highly localised systems of object management. The convergence of understandings of subject-object relations, and indeed of materiality, highlights the effects of museum practices of objectification on local practice as well as the effects of local agenda on museum practice. In constructing a holistic analysis of the current work of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, we examine practices of display and exhibition in the context of the archive and storeroom, and grass-roots research; moving away from the emphasis on visuality and exhibition found in many museum studies, to an approach that locates display as but one form of objectification within wider social practice. We challenge some analytic models that view Melanesia and Euro-America as zones that organise subject-object relations dichotomously, highlighting instead the mutual contingency of relationships between persons and things between cultural contexts and the effects of the international exchanges of museum practice on the development of these relations.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of a ‘museum’ most people are familiar with from reading the growing literature of Museum Studies is of an institutional complex that visually deploys material culture within a wider ‘exhibitionary’ paradigm.1 However, this view is all too often not an ‘anthropological’ one: it obscures other museum work less visible to the general public that includes processes of collection, archiving, preservation and conservation: a series of practices that work to define museum artefacts and that can extend the scope and understanding of social relationships between persons and between persons and things. In this paper we examine the convergence of local, national and international interests around material culture in the work of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and National Museum.2 We consider the effects of various aspects of museum practice on the constitution of different types of material culture, and analyse the role of such ‘objects’ in the development and continuation of local social practices.

By way of introduction, we want to briefly overview some general attitudes to material culture taken by mainstream ‘Museum Studies’ before turning to our own study of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. There, performative aspects of local practice such as songs, dances, and rituals have come to be institutionalised as new categories of objects alongside more conventional museum pieces. At the same time, the resistance of some local practices to be objectified is also acknowledged and incorporated into the exhibitionary and research strategies of museum workers.
In brief, studies within the ‘New Museology’ (Vergo 1989, Powell 1991) emphasise that museums encapsulate a culturally defined method of ordering and controlling the world through objects (Hein 2000, Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 2000), representing both people and places via material culture (Pearce 1990; Ames 1992, Bolton 1997). Furthermore, these understandings of artefacts are expected to assist in developing national ‘identity’, historically linked to the development of Western empires as well as to post-colonial nation-states (Anderson 1991, Thomas 1991, Kaplan 1994). At the same time, museums can be a forum for multi-cultural expression and experience (Karp and Lavine 1991; Falk and Dierking 1992; MacCannell 1992; Hooper-Greenhill 1994); contextualised within an increasingly global attitude towards culture as a palatable, visually pleasing set of artefacts and performances (Clifford 1988, Stanley 1998).

These ‘functional’ understandings of the role of objects within museums emanate from what may be termed a ‘Euro-American’ museological tradition. However, such models are increasingly incorporated and contested in other environments. A ‘Melanesian’ museum such as the Vanuatu Cultural Centre is deeply involved with both grass-roots local practice and with international museum operations (see Bolton’s special edition of Oceania, 1999). In looking at the work of the Cultural Centre in more detail, we can reassess some of the museological presumptions often made by analysts working in or alongside Euro-American metropolitan museums.

To assist us, we can use some of the work of anthropologists working in Melanesia. Their ethnography abounds with examples of visually-oriented displays and performances, often exemplifying the anthropologist’s predilection for the spectacular (e.g. Strathern and Strathern 1971; O’Hanlon 1993, Campbell 2002). The history of anthropology can trace the roots of many social analyses and analysts back into ethnological museums (see Henare 2003). Understanding objects in museums using the tools of Melanesian ethnography raises a series of pertinent questions. Can we integrate the analysis of display in museums with anthropological accounts of self-decoration and ritual presentation? Can we make an analogy between museum technologies and social practices, for instance equating archiving with ritual secrecy? How do localised concerns for the management of objects affect 'conventional' (Western) practices of display? How do these diverse local systems of object management relate to the articulation of relations between persons and things in local, national, and increasingly international, contexts? The use of generic museum technologies within ‘indigenous’ museums may be analyzed less as an aesthetic model of spectatorship, or in exhibitionistic terms of ‘resonance’ and ‘wonder’ (Greenblatt 1991), and more in terms of social practice, of the incorporation of new technologies into pre-existent structures of practice (Bourdieu 1977) and understandings of relations between persons and things.

Building on these types of questions, we describe in this paper some ways in which the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (hereafter VCC) exploits international museum technologies in order to manage and materialise ideas about local culture. We analyse the VCC as a mediator between increasingly generic national conventions around the management and interpretation of objects, and a plethora of diverse local concerns around the relations between persons and things, whether they be celebrated, constituted or dissolved. Within our analysis, concepts such as ‘Melanesia’ and ‘Euro-America’ or ‘Western’ are viewed primarily as politicised oppositional narratives of ‘us and them’ — vital to both indigenous and international cultural politics but not, as their entangled histories over many years intimate, necessarily an ‘essential’ dichotomy. This in turn underscores our view that subject-object relations more generally exist within a continuum of social and material processes, rather than as indicators or products of alternative social realities.

In the first part of the paper we discuss the VCC from a visitor’s perspective, i.e. we analyse the museum space that was equally on show to a generic tourist and an indigenous (ni-Vanuatu) public in 1998. We draw our interpretation primarily from what was
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directly ‘presented’ to us in the exhibition hall in the patterns of objects on display. We then contextualise this display by highlighting some of the other ways in which the curators of the VCC idiosyncratically appropriate international museum technologies. Much ongoing work of the VCC is not on display and even in the archives cannot be seen by everyone.

The analysis of the exhibition space is based on notes and video recordings made on an informal visit to the VCC in August 1998 by Tilley. The contextual examination is based on doctoral research undertaken by Geismar (2000–2001, and 2003), working in conjunction with the VCC. It is important to frame our analysis by acknowledging that museums are not static or immutable institutions, but ever-changing according to current cultural and political agendas, often determined through the intentions and idiosyncrasies of individual agents. We hope this discussion will highlight some limitations to focusing purely on museum display as a passive context in discussing the importance of material in museums, and will emphasise the importance of museum workers and processes of materialisation within wider social practice and development in Vanuatu.

THE VANUATU CULTURAL CENTRE

In 1956, the Anglo-French Condominium Government of the New Hebrides decided to mark its fiftieth anniversary by laying a foundation stone for a cultural centre in the capital city, Port Vila (Bolton 2003:32). From the start, the VCC comprised the National Museum, Cultural Centre, National Library and Archive. By 1960, a Condominium Joint Standing Order had established a Board of Management (with French, British, and ni-Vanuatu members). The Political Advisor to the British Residency, Keith Woodward, took voluntary charge of the collections, with a primary objective to implement ‘the exhibition of objects which illustrate the history, literature and natural resources of the New Hebrides.’ (Bolton 2003:33).

At this time, the VCC was geared primarily towards exhibition, primarily displaying expatriate collections — from the birds and shells collected by the German naturalist Heinrich Bregulla to artefacts collected by ORSTOM researcher Jean Guiart. During this early period, many indigenous social practices (and particularly ritual ones) were not yet valued positively, nor deployed politically in the context of the nation-state, but rather maintained the ‘pagan’ connotations formulated by early colonists and missionaries. As a result they were not seen as potential museum artefacts. The VCC seemed to have little relevance to contemporary development and had not yet been indigenously appropriated as a locally meaningful social space, nor had its work expanded outside the walls of the National Museum.

The arrival in the 1970s, prior to independence in 1980, of researchers such as Jean-Michel Charpentier and Darrell Tryon, both linguists, Peter Crowe, an ethnomusicologist, and Kirk Huffman, an anthropologist, meant that the work undertaken through the VCC began to focus less on the museum itself and was more about ‘getting Melanesians interested’ in the regeneration of traditional culture (Bolton 2003:36) in the growing context of political (and thus cultural) self-determination.

The term kastom in Bislama (the national Pidgin English) is translated most basically in Vanuatu as ‘indigenous custom or tradition’ but is a category that has come to have great political resonance, galvanising (often pre-colonially oriented) indigenous identities in the exercise of post-colonial nation and culture building (see Keesing and Tonkinson 1982, Jolly 1992, Otto and Thomas 1997). Within the VCC, the idea of kastom was initially defined in relation to the potential of the centre to assist in the protection and preservation of traditional culture more generally. The reference point was as much the local practice and productions of island villages as it was objects from Vanuatu held in the store rooms of Port Vila and indeed, around the world. In this way, grass-roots local practices

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were linked to a series of museum research initiatives, the first being the Oral Traditions Project (see below). Such fundamentally social projects have been framed by the development of museum technologies of collection, documentation and preservation, with museum artefacts often being used as shorthand for the connection of these processes to wider cultural practices.

The development of grass-roots research projects by the VCC coincided with the growth of the independence movement in Vanuatu. Prior to independence in 1980, the VCC was a rallying ground for indigenous assertions of national culture based around the idea of kastom. Under the direction of the first salaried curator, Anglo-American Kirk Huffman¹ the role of the VCC as a traditional meeting place was developed to encourage political meetings and even to house dissidents wanted by the Condominium police (Kirk Huffman, personal communication). Under Huffman’s leadership, the VCC was a dominant force in developing the First National Arts Festival in 1979, symbol of national unity and cultural independence and in 1980 housed the official independence office (Huffman 1995:92).

THE VANUATU CULTURAL CENTRE TODAY

In 1989, Jack Keitadi, originally Huffman’s deputy, became the first ni-Vanuatu curator of the VCC following Huffman’s resignation. He was succeeded by Clarence Marae, a political appointee (as former Minister of Finance), and in 1995, Ralph Regenvanu, son of former deputy Prime Minister, Sethy Regenvanu, was promoted from curator to director. In this way, the transition from expatriate to ni-Vanuatu management has crucially been linked to the political development of the indigenous nation state. Educated at ANU in anthropology and development studies, R. Regenvanu can successfully manage the disparate strands of the VCC, using his own set of divergent identities. He is from Malakula, from Port Vila, from Australia, a contemporary artist and music maker, a member of a post-independence ni-Vanuatu middle class who are concerned with maintaining local identities in an increasingly urban and cosmopolitan environment. Other members of staff, such as Jacob Sam Kapere, director of the National Film and Sound Unit who has worked with the VCC since 1988, and Ambong Thompson who organises the cultural centre radio programme and has worked for Radio Vanuatu for twenty-three years, have also spanned this formative period of transition from expatriate to indigenous leadership. Today, the VCC has a permanent staff of sixteen (not including the National Library, the Young People’s Project, and other externally funded projects) and is also the base for expatriates working on long-term contracts (funded by development agencies such as AusAID, Pacific People’s Partnership, and the European Union) and for academic researchers, primarily in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics.

In 1995 the VCC moved from the main high street of Port Vila to a new headquarters opposite Parliament House in the suburb of Numbatu, on a site that had been chosen in the 1980s and was already housing the National Council of Chiefs (Malvatumauri). The inauguration day for the new cultural complex, 17 November, was designated National Culture Day. The move was necessitated by environmental threats to the old building, close to the sea-front in the centre of town and the need to build a space that could keep up with international museum standards: a showcase for the new nation-state. The building, the second largest in the country after Parliament, now incorporates the National Museum and a series of projects under the auspices of the Cultural Centre: the Oral Traditions Project, the National Film and Sound Unit, the Women’s Culture Project, the Vanuatu Cultural and Historical Sites Survey, the Juvenile Justice Project, and the Traditional Marine Tenure Project. The National Library and the Young People’s Project remain in the former location. Although initially many locals felt that the move to Numbatu made the VCC less
accessible, the impact of this new building on international and national forums has been significant.

As an institution, the VCC is able to mediate between grass-roots villagers and the nation-state (first colonial, then indigenous). As Bolton comments: ‘The cultural centre is a place where people from throughout the country meet to talk about the knowledge and practice of their own areas. It is national in the most literal sense, encompassing the practice of all places within the nation.’ (1999a:43). Two conventional ‘museological’ approaches may be seen to coexist in the present day, borne out of a combination of Euro-American museum practice and indigenous national and local development. To briefly unravel these interwoven strands: a standard ‘western’ museological view of culture presents the nation to both ni-Vanuatu and the outside world and demonstrates a local awareness of the importance of museums in the establishment of cultural identities on both global and local levels, whilst an alternative ‘indigenous’ view of culture, views museum artefacts as significant means to (re)constructing grass-roots practice. On the one hand, the publicly visible ‘exhibitionary complex’ (Bennett 1988) of the museum space empowers the objectified nation-state of Vanuatu in relation to other nation-states in a global network of museums and artefacts. On the other hand, the less ‘visible’ work of the VCC empowers a sense of local and personified artefacts in a national framework. These two approaches are not exclusive, but unite material and non-material resources into new types of museum property.

In the rest of this paper, we briefly describe four main components of the VCC — the exhibition gallery of the National Museum, the archive, the storeroom, and grass-roots research projects. By analysing each briefly in turn, we draw out some of the different ways in which museum technologies can be used to define relations between objects and persons, and by extension to create artefacts able to make connections between various domains: e.g. public and private, local and national, indigenous and international, rural and urban.

THE EXHIBITION HALL

In the work of the VCC, exhibition and display has been, and remains, a low priority in relation to other activities. Despite, or perhaps because of, this the museum hall is a dynamic, continuously changing area and social space, a fact seemingly belied by the static nature of most of the exhibits that a one-off visitor experiences. Our account here distils some of the themes and artefacts present during our respective periods of fieldwork, although we anticipate that many pieces will have been moved to give way for others by the time of publication. The exhibition space in the new VCC was initially physically erected by VCC fieldworkers (see below), each islander working with material from his or her island (Bolton, personal communication). It still retains this flavour along with the layout of the inaugural display of the Arts of Vanuatu exhibition that travelled from Port Vila to Noumea, Paris, and Basel in 1996–7 (see Huffman 1997). As a space, it is subject to complex local agenda, and is the product of the many voices that are held together by the VCC.

In 2000–1 the exhibition hall was managed by curator and collections manager, Takaronga Kuautonga, curator Marcellin Abong, and the front-of-house and store was managed by Thomas Nangof. Kuautonga and Abong have both been active in the field-worker projects of the VCC on many islands, especially their homes of Futuna and Malakula, and have attended training courses in conservation and archaeology respectively. As such they are alive to the potential local significance of objects that are put into display and continually negotiate this awareness with a desire to mount projects recognised in international contexts.

Alongside the more ‘permanent’ displays of artefacts, the exhibition hall has become
a forum for various interest groups based in the VCC and indeed, throughout Vanuatu. Recent VCC projects have given rise to panels of text and photographs and cases of artefacts. Temporary displays brought in over the past few years by outside agents include: an exhibition by the National Reserve Bank, examining the role of traditional currency in Vanuatu and linking this to the development of national currency; an exhibition of ‘New Traditions’, mounted by a New Zealand curator in conjunction with several ni-Vanuatu contemporary artists; a display of historical domestic artefacts from the collection of a long-standing French resident of Vanuatu, the most notable exhibit being a large wrought iron bed with pillows and quilt that was placed just inside the gallery, flanked by the permanent display of pig tusks and model canoes. There are plans to mount an exhibit of a series of contemporary paintings donated by a French artist. For some time, a large carved bird was at the forefront of the gallery, made by a carver from Tongoa, who hoped to sell it by putting it on display.

In the brief description that follows, we take for granted the changing program of temporary exhibitions and the ways in which various interested parties, both ni-Vanuatu and expatriate, can use the exhibition space to suit their own agenda. We examine here the more fixed space of the exhibition hall, the objects that for the most part change very little, and are as yet unchallenged as more-or-less permanent representations of ‘Vanuatu’.

By way of a brief, general description of the gallery space: walking into the hall of the National Museum, one enters a quiet rectangular room with a gallery at the back. Just past the leaf-thatched information desk and museum store, the visitor walks into a natural history of the islands: cases of shells, coral, geological and archaeological specimens, stuffed birds and reptiles. To the left and right are display cases filled with ceremonial and traditional material culture: for example, artefacts connected with the making of kava, pig killing, traditional currency and music. If we follow the lines of sight created by the vertical rows of display cases we are drawn to the end of the gallery, where underneath and to the left of the balcony stand a series of figurative grade-taking carvings, a display of slit-gong standing drums and a small reconstruction of a Malakulan men’s house complete with effigy inside: a representation of the kinds of display one might expect to find in the nasara (ritual space) of a typical village in North-Central Vanuatu (material comes primarily from the islands of Malakula and Ambrym).

In the centre of the gallery are several outrigger canoes flanked by smaller models and historical photographs of canoes from throughout the archipelago, part of a series of displays that deal with research implemented by the VCC — in this case a project investigating Traditional Marine Tenure. On the walls hang an array of visual material: black and white portraits of ni-Vanuatu taken for National Geographic by photographer Karl Muller, work by the photographer David Becker, and reproductions of ‘historical’ paintings, such as Charles Gordon Fraser’s ‘Cannibal Feast on Tanna’ (see Rothwell 1989).

Adjacent to the display of male ceremonial culture at the back of the gallery, are some cases holding women’s textiles, mats from Ambae and Pentecost and basketry from throughout the archipelago. The significance of these textiles is enhanced by their proximity to the male ceremonial material, but in keeping with conventional gender divides in Vanuatu and representational respect (women should not enter men’s ritual spaces) they are placed separately. This intimates that what is, and can be, displayed in the exhibition hall is fundamentally structured by issues of customary rights and proscriptions. However, such issues of representation are not made explicit to the public. Whilst they are salient for most ni-Vanuatu visitors, a lack of overt exegesis means that tourists can walk away without realising what they are not seeing.

The conventional idea of the museum as a space exhibiting fully ‘public’ material is thus immediately challenged in the exhibition hall in a variety of ways. A visitor survey
Geismar undertook between 2000 and 2001 identified that over fifty per cent of visitors to the VCC were ni-Vanuatu (mainly school children). Out of the foreign visitors: most were tourists from New Caledonia, Australia and New Zealand, followed by smaller numbers from France, Britain, Japan and America. Most tourist respondents criticised the lack of textual explanation in the gallery, whilst ni-Vanuatu asked for people who were connected to the artefacts to be present in the gallery, advocating a system of many curators, one for each island or area. This survey made apparent that, in general, ni-Vanuatu respondents believed the objects in the museum to be intrinsically connected to local people and places. Tourists, following ‘Euro-American’ museum conventions, seemed happy to let the objects (and labels) ‘speak’ for both.

In the gallery there is a marked concentration of artefacts from particular islands, predominantly from the North-Central region of the archipelago: Malakula, Pentecost, Ambae, and Ambrym. Some islands, such as Epi, are conspicuous by a total absence of artefacts. This is due in part to the disproportionate amount of research and museum collection made in North-Central Vanuatu, especially Malakula, and also to the conventions of Western museums, whereby both political and practical concerns (about conservation and preservation for example) render some material culture more suitable than others to be publicly displayed. A brief examination of what is not on display in the VCC exhibition hall may expose some tensions and connections between materiality and immateriality, between museum practice and social practice.

For instance, sand drawings are conspicuously absent. These constitute a long-standing artistic tradition in Vanuatu, north-west of Epi island and into the Solomon Islands (see Deacon 1934, Huffman 1996) and have been the focus of recent VCC efforts to be classified and thus protected by UNESCO under their Intangible Cultural Heritage programme (Zagala 2001, 2002). Such drawings have important ritual components, are conceived as forms of intellectual property, and are fundamentally transient — drawn out in earth or sand only to be blown away. As such, they are not ideal material for museum exhibitions. However, documentation (films, photographs and drawings) of sand-drawings are held in the archive — the part of the VCC where the immaterial may be more easily stored (see below).

Huffman emphasises the presentational context of sand-drawings that inhibits their display in the exhibition hall:

Sand-drawings do not exist in a cultural vacuum: they are done for many reasons at many different times, and can sometimes have different levels of meaning depending on the context in which they are done. Some are just for children’s ‘play’; others, ‘free’ in one context as a message design, can also be sacred and an essential element in the passage of one’s spirit to the world of the dead in another...Some reflect stories of the animal and natural world, others humorous or risqué human affairs...Others depict aspects of the spirit world or historical events. Many are also linked to other activities — string figures, games, songs, messages, flute or drum rhythms, body paint and masked designs, mythical heroes, specific geographical features, spirit travel and the world of ancestral figures, membership of secret societies and so on. (Huffman 1996:250)

Apart from more transient types of material and material whose affective (ritual) power makes it unsuitable for display to a general (uncensored) public, a second category of artefact that is omitted from general display in the gallery is political/historical. There is a lack of material related to missionary work, or cargo cults such as John Frum, still active on Tanna; and little explicitly national material. Whilst archaeological evidence discusses the Lapita period and the burial of a famous chief of Efate, Roi Mata, more recent historical events are not recorded materially: for example documentation of the
Nagriamel independence movement, begun by Jimmy Stephens on Santo, that swept the country pre-Independence. There is no material culture explicitly connected to the period of blackbirding and the sandalwood trade, colonial structures of administration under British and French rule, or struggles for independence, despite the role of the VCC as an educational resource for ni-Vanuatu schoolchildren. The videos played on the gallery television are primarily documentaries focusing on ritual and ceremony rather than current affairs, or history.

Such issues are discussed frequently by locals, in kava bars, on radio and television programs (see Bolton 1999), by researchers working in various localities and are documented to the extent that they can be found in the museum archives. What is highlighted here then, is not only the limitations of the exhibition hall as a representational space, but the preferences of the curators of the VCC to present only certain aspects of ‘culture’ in the gallery: customary ones that are perceived to have been unaffected by the passing of time and that are untainted by ‘westernisation’. In short, kastom is represented as a timeless, ritual, primarily island, rather than urban, phenomenon.

Despite the emphasis on local, customary practice and a lack of explicitly political material, ideas about the nation are still implicitly constructed within the displays. Whilst many individual islands are not represented materially, this is in lieu of a more national perspective. Almost half of the artefacts or images are not placed anywhere by their labels, emphasising generic function rather than locality (e.g. displays of ‘kava making’, ‘musical instruments’ and ‘pig’s tusks’). Individual artefacts are also used to represent the entangled socio-political networks that such objects are involved within, in turn to highlight general trends, linking the local to the national and sometimes even to wider forms of pan-Pacific identity. For example, a label in a display of boomerangs reads:

A traditional throwing stick from Hokua village, the North West of Espiritu Santo, belonging to a male resident of the village named Roma, whose father moved from the interior of Santo to this settlement on the coast during the Second World War. Presented to ORSTOM archaeologist Jean-Christophe Galipaud by the community of Hokua in April 1997, and donated to the museum in early June 1997. The throwing stick was used only in games in which it was thrown. This traditional item of archaeology is indigenous in Vanuatu, as it is in Australia.

This label illuminates the web of presentational contexts for objects in the museum, moving from the local to the national to the international through dialogues between visiting researchers/collectors, VCC staff, and ni-Vanuatu villagers, and brings to the surface some of the relationships that have contributed to the formation of the VCC. At the same time, it draws to our attention that within this national and international context, local agents have been very important in shaping the collection of artefacts. The exhibition hall constructs a particular form of local-nationalism — based on a genericisation of local kastom, a form of indigenous identity constructed in a salient context of cross-cultural encounter.

One of the few contemporary ‘art’ pieces displayed in the gallery, best expresses the synthesis of these generic representations of locality and tradition: a sculpture by Emmanuel Watt (one of Vanuatu’s leading contemporary artists), entitled The Cultural Body of Vanuatu. This artefact was provided with a long textual exposition, written by the artist. We reproduce it here in order to demonstrate the fusion of ideas of modernity and tradition, of locality within the nation that is present in the museum hall using an internationally palatable material language — the combination of object and museum label:
THE CULTURAL BODY OF VANUATU
Sculpture: Emmanuel Watt (Vanuatu)

Made of local wood: “Burao of the seashore”

The natural shapes of the wood, its veins, and its different reflections are main sources of inspiration

Shape: a mask character in movement

The chief’s hand holding his stick, guides him towards the good ways of life. The mask is looking ahead and behind at the same time in order to move on towards the future, the man is turning his head backward and he is looking at his past. His eyes are represented by pig’s tusks which are symbols of wealth in Vanuatu.

Culture is the meeting between the wisdom of tradition and the knowledge of the present. The man’s body is covered by a mat which is always used in traditional ceremonies and it will always accompany him during his life from birth to death.

Inside the human figure are enclosed the most important and legendary totems of Vanuatu:

- The drums symbolise the spokesman of the ancestors
- The small hut (called Nakamal) keeps the custom laws
- The bag contains all the taboos, the sorcery, the good and bad spirits kastom
- Land Dive and the Volcano.

At the bottom part of the sculpture: We can see different historic sites, caves with frescos, fragments of pottery and hatchets made of clamshell.

On the right side: A palm of “Namele” symbolises communication and peace in Vanuatu. The 46 strips of palm represent the 46 French speaking communities gathering together in Paris.

The Rooster symbolises the French language which will be spoken by the artists of this exhibition who came all over the world to mix in the same and common pot belonging to each of them: their culture.
Alongside the synthesising capabilities of objects such as the Cultural Body of Vanuatu, the selective use of maps in the exhibition hall also emphasises the entanglement of nation within locality and vice versa. There are no maps of individual islands. Instead, various networks are traced around the nation: trade networks, chaining of language subgroups, and traditional power systems. Connectivity between places is stressed over individual islands and places. Specific localities that are represented in the gallery highlight the promises of the emergent nation via their distinctiveness; individual islands are foregrounded materially, but foregrounded politically. For example, slit-gong drums from Ambrym are used simultaneously as depictions of the uniqueness of local tradition and as national symbols, referencing their placement on banknotes, stamps, and in many public spaces of Port Vila.

The above set of absences in, and the specific material focus of, the exhibition hall creates a national view of Vanuatu as a series of connected localities, in a space generically accessible to tourist-visitors and ni-Vanuatu alike. The nature of the museum hall and both grass-roots and nationalist agenda determines that only some objects are suitable for display. Other powerful, often immaterial aspects of kastom must by their nature remain outside glass cases. In the following sections, we discuss how some more problematic aspects of material and materialised culture in Vanuatu are addressed by the use of museum technologies alternative to public display: storage, archiving, and documentation and research. Such technologies, despite their original focus upon material culture, may actually enable those working within the VCC to negotiate with ideas about materiality, often moving away from artefacts towards the creation of ‘new’ kinds of museum material.

THE ARCHIVE

What is and can be displayed in the exhibition hall is fundamentally structured by ideas about what kinds of material can represent either the nation or the locality ‘safely’? Underlying this is a series of customary proscriptions that affect the handling of local material in the public domain. Whilst none of these issues is overtly made apparent in the public exhibition itself, the VCC archive can be seen as a solution to the limitations of conventional museum display and some problems of ‘public culture’. The archive of the VCC is an alternative ‘public’ sphere governed by rules formulated in the village as well as the capital city, revolving around the idea that some ‘things’ are made not to be seen by everyone. Here the idea of ‘safety’, and of controlling the affective visual power of objects is crucial.

Pacific ethnography provides rich material testifying to the different technologies by which intellectual property (both materialised and immaterial) is managed as a cultural resource.6 The VCC’s archive is a unique example of the ways in which objects and practices may be managed in museums as the property of persons and places as well as the museum. Here, ‘cultural property’ in a variety of shapes and forms is explicitly materialised by a variety of museum technologies. The VCC archives are filled with ‘objects’ containing forms of local knowledge that are often highly restricted and unequivocally linked to particular persons and practices from local places.

Initially the VCC archive, known as the ‘Tabu Room’, was constructed in order to reassure those permitting sensitive or restricted material to be recorded and collected that the material would not be freely available for viewing by those who were not entitled, and as a safe-house to protect such material from the potential threat of hurricanes, tropical rain and erosion. Since its inception, villagers have been encouraged to use the room as a safe-house or ‘bank’ for kastom, to protect valued artefacts and documentation and to preserve them for future generations, safe in the knowledge that the archives can be restricted along kastom guidelines: for example, by gender and by specific property rights (defined mainly by connections of persons to places, to families, and by traditional status). The collections of the Tabu Room thus constitute a new genre of material culture, drawn out of traditional
practice by the idiosyncratic appropriation of international museum technologies and principles by the VCC: audio-visual recording, archiving, and conservation (see Sam 1996).

Such newly made ‘museum objects’ include documentations of personal testimonies, stories, myths, music, ceremonies, national political and cultural events, ritual paraphernalia and artefacts recorded in a variety of media: written texts, audio tapes, film, slides and photographs. All material is subject to the same restrictions as any other artefact, and a copy of every recording is left with the people with whom it was made, thus assuaging people’s concerns about the removal of local kastom from the islands.9

The VCC is thus an institutionalised network that uses museum technologies of objectification in order to make manifest the complex relationships between places and persons, many islands and single nation, which characterises Vanuatu. If, as Bolton suggests, the idea of kastom is most important ‘in town’ (1999a), then the VCC becomes the place where the outer islander may find their kastom in the newly metropolitan capital, claiming citizenship through the ownership of local kastom made into material that can be housed in the museum.

The transformation of ephemeral events and practices into ‘museum objects’ has, in this context, profoundly expanded the scope of what can be construed as specifically material culture, and has to some extent reformulated wider relations between persons and things, as they are consolidated between locality and nation. The explicit notion of the archive as a ‘bank’ for culture highlights the connection even further, emphasising the political effects that materialisation has on the formation of ideas about objects as property that can be controlled and contained.

In Port Vila, the general public that has access to the exhibition hall is different to the newly ‘elite’ public that has access to the Tabu Room or the fieldworker workshops (see below) — people who are owners of kastom, or who have the entitlements to witness and participate in talk about kastom. Access is not freely available for foreign tourists, researchers, or even ni-Vanuatu. Here kastom, both material and immaterial, is activated in a sphere that negotiates relations between the public and the private, between local and national contexts, and between people of the place and those from other places (including foreigners) using an indigenous language of entitlement in relation to generic museum technologies of object management.

As well as navigating customary proscriptions around the display of artefacts, the Tabu Room also alters the conventional idea that museum artefacts are individual archetypes. Whilst original forms of documentation are held in the archives, copies are also sent back to the islands. In this way, the museum archive becomes a reference point for an entirely separate system of storage — that of the locality — negotiating with the centralised and archetypal view of artefacts that is presented in the exhibition hall. In a continual dialectic between village and museum, recordings in the archive use technologies of replication to reproduce social relations: local people are encouraged to use them to remind themselves of past or lost practices so that can revive them in local practice.

The principle of film photography (using a negative that spawns multiple copies, all of which are authentic images and objects) could be used as an ideal metaphor for the material in the VCC archive. Material culture that is embedded within social relations can be endlessly reproduced as can social practice. In this way, museum artefacts fit into the revival (reproduction) of local practice that is encouraged by the VCC in its grass-roots research projects. Historical photographs and museum artefacts have been used to regenerate traditional barkcloth production on Erromango (Huffman 1996a) and mat-making on Ambae (Bolton 1994, 2001, 2001a, 2003), amongst other projects. Such material is regarded more as an embodiment of practical information, which should be continually reproduced, rather than as a static example of designs or as irreplaceable originals.

The linking of the reproduction of objects to social reproduction forces us to reassess the paradigmatic association of objects with criteria of authenticity (both for individual arte-
facts, and for what they may be seen to represent and/or embody) in museums. In the VCC archive, a boundary between an object and its representation, such as photographs and drawings, is overcome by viewing both media as authentic keys to social practice outside the museum walls. As Jacob Sam Kapere, director of the National Film and Sound Unit comments: ‘Using modern audiovisual techniques and facilities, we work to document and emphasise Vanuatu’s cultural richness and diversity, and to help ensure that our small island nation does not lose its unique cultural identity.’ (Sam 1996:289).

The incorporation of immaterial social practices into the corpus of museum artefacts through the use of technologies such as photography and audio recording reflects not only indigenous interest in global museum technologies, but local attitudes to material culture and reproduction, and increasingly affects the representational strategies of the VCC, changing the potential of future displays in the exhibition halls. In October 2000, a Pacific Islands Museums Association workshop was held in New Caledonia. The workshop intended to train curators from across the Pacific in the management of travelling exhibitions. As part of their brief, they were asked to devise a small exhibition from their home collection that they would set up and take down in the Musée Territorial in Nouméa. All but one of the participants chose to exhibit customary artefacts from their museum storerooms. As the exception, Takaronga Kuautonga, curator and collections manager at the VCC, made a display of several photographs of dances and traditional village activities, focused around one object: a tape recorder mounted on the wall. The points that we have been making about the use of museum technologies as a way of connecting objects to social practice, and tensions between the material and the immaterial that any museum must navigate are made most eloquently in the text that Kuautonga wrote for the display:

HERITAGE IS MAINLY THINGS YOU CANNOT SEE OR TOUCH

Culture is something that derives from a unity of how we think and how we express these thoughts. One of the ways our cultures are expressed is through the production of material objects, and these are what ‘museums’ have traditionally sought to preserve as our ‘cultural heritage’. But most of our heritage — especially in the Pacific Islands where our cultures have no traditions of writing — is ‘stored’ and ‘transmitted’ through talking, singing, dancing and other forms of ‘oral’ or ‘intangible’ expression. How can Pacific museums preserve this heritage?

This tape-recorder has been used as part of the “Oral Traditions Programme” of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. The Cultural Centre in Vanuatu’s capital Port Vila is the tip of a hidden pyramid — most of its activities are in the outer islands of Vanuatu, with living people and cultures. The Cultural Centre’s 60 men and 40 women fieldworkers are each based in their own language and cultural communities in the outer islands, and use tape-recorders — and increasingly still and video cameras — to record (and therefore preserve) aspects of the oral and intangible heritage and history of their own and neighbouring areas. All are volunteers, none receive wages, and their numbers grow each year.

THE STOREROOM

Alongside the archive, which controls tensions arising around the objectification of the immaterial and the public display of cultural property that the exhibition hall cannot handle, the storeroom is a second location where material that cannot be displayed is placed, and where objects are kept out of the public eye. The storeroom holds objects that have a limi-
nal status for a number of reasons. These fall into two broad categories. The first is practical — many ceremonial artefacts such as masks and headdresses lie in the storerooms because they are made out of delicate vegetal material and are too fragile to be put on display; or because there is no room in the gallery for the ever-growing collections. Such objects range from donations from expatriates (e.g., a quilt from a missionary’s wife), botanical specimens preserved in formaldehyde, artefacts of which there are already examples on display, and contemporary art awaiting exhibition.

A second category can be given under the broad heading of ‘problem material’: objects that cannot be put on public display because they are subject to dispute, or because their presentational potential has been challenged. The most notable of these is a five-faced slit-gong commissioned for the United Nations by a famous chief from Ambrym whose rights to it are currently being contested (see Rio 1997). The drum sits in the back of the VCC until the lawsuits surrounding the entitlement to the customary images used in the drum can be resolved. The storeroom is thus a holding zone that can take museum pieces out of sight, occasionally keeping them there permanently.

Keeping things out of sight can also obscure the potential power that museum objects are considered to have outside the VCC. For example: in March 2001, the VCC was approached by the Australian manager of the luxury Hotel Le Lagon for some artefacts from the storeroom to make a small display to decorate their lobby with. The artefacts (several masks and headdresses from Malakula) were chosen by curator Marcellin Abong, himself from Malakula. He was careful to choose objects that he did not consider to be spiritually powerful or ritually ‘active’, ‘museum pieces’ made expressly for the museum and not for ceremonial activity. The next day, the manager brought the pieces back with much embarrassment. The hotel staff had refused to work in the same building as the objects, believing them to be filled with powerful and malevolent spirits. Despite the assurances of the curator that the objects were perfectly ‘safe’ — they were seen by the hotel staff as dangerously alive and threatening without the museum to contain them. This case highlights that the effect of the presentation and delineation of artefacts by the VCC is not restricted by the museum walls. Just as the practices of villagers enter the museum space and constitute new forms of artefact, so can museum artefacts have powerful effects on the wider public and in other public spaces — both indigenous and non-indigenous.

GRASS-ROOTS RESEARCH

Our description of the ‘front-of-house’ and ‘behind-the-scenes’ of the National Museum highlights the ways in which museum technologies can be used to deal with some issues that different types of material culture and processes of objectification can give rise to in Vanuatu. However, as Kuautonga’s label intimates, the National Museum is at the ‘tip of a hidden pyramid’. As an institution, the VCC is more than just the building of the National Museum, but is distributed throughout the archipelago by a network of fieldworkers and research. Additionally, the regular broadcasting of VCC programmes on Radio Vanuatu allows this work to have even greater meaning to the more dispersed population (see Bolton 1999a). The VCC has become a vital institution in creating unity between the diverse islands of the archipelago, based on a sensitive appreciation, initiated by grass-roots research, of the archipelago as both many places and one.

In 1972–3, French anthropologist Jean Guiart initiated discussion about the establishment of an Oral Traditions Project (OTP), which was then implemented by Peter Crowe, and later Kirk Huffman and Darrell Tryon (see Tryon 1999, Bolton 2003). The aim was to encourage ni-Vanuatu to take an active interest in the preservation and regeneration of their own local customs, focusing initially on language, but later expanding to examine other aspects of traditional life, training them in lexicography and the use of documentary technologies in order to record local languages and oral histories. The OTP sent fieldworkers
from around the islands into their villages armed with tape recorders and red notebooks. From 1981 the group has convened annually at the VCC for an Australian Government sponsored workshop to discuss their research, each year based around a different theme. The project has been a great success, creating national connections between Port Vila and the other islands and a new word in the Bislama lexicon: _filwoka_.

In 1990, it was decided, due to pressure from prominent members of the Vanuatu Council of Women such as poet and political activist Grace Molisa, to establish a Women’s Culture Project (hereafter WCP) to redress the balance in the gathering of _kastom_, which hitherto had focused only upon men. Lissant Bolton, then Oceanic Collections Manager at Australian National Museum, was to oversee the project and in return was allowed to undertake doctoral research. Her work heralded a new period of participation of the fieldworker project with external researchers. Her fieldwork site, Ambae, her work with Ambaeen Jean Tarisese (now director of the Women’s Culture Project), her focus on women’s mats, and the pattern of her research (several months in Port Vila and several months touring on Ambae explaining her work in the context of the project) were all decided upon by the managers of the VCC (see Bolton 2003). Anthropological research in this context was a (gendered) collaboration between locality and nation: the museum board of directors, foreign researchers and local fieldworkers.

The collaborative nature of research projects has been maintained to this day, and the network of fieldworkers has continued to grow: by 2000 there were 77 men, and 46 women from different villages throughout the archipelago. All research in Vanuatu is channelled through the VCC, and each foreign researcher must work with a fieldworker and train and help them in the ethnographic documentation of their community or area in keeping with the Cultural Research Policy.10

Today, under the direction of Ralph Regenvanu, the VCC implements museum technologies of collection, documentation, preservation and display within research projects as part of a wider agenda of cultural (and implicitly economic) ‘development’. The working definition of _kastom_ used within these projects is of a grass-roots and indigenous cultural resource based on a version of a pre-colonial (yet tacitly Christian) collective past, defined by the people that practise it. These are the criteria that feed into the construction of _kastom_ as a series of rights to a wide variety of indigenous resources held by emplaced persons, mediated by the subsequent emplacement of these relationships within a wider national context. In turn, the specifically local-national context of the VCC has resulted in an unprecedented level of objectification for many of these rights, and an increasingly material language of entitlement.

The present day work of the VCC is increasingly focused on the role of _kastom_ in development — broadly construed. Kelly notes, in her description of the implementation of WCP research on Tongoa, that the ‘objective of the WCP (and thus the cultural centre as a national institution); in the manner of a public education campaign [was] to persuade people of the importance of kastom as a foundation and stabilising anchor for modern life and _diveleopmen_ (development).’ (2000:177). The rhetoric of developmental ‘resources’ thus encapsulates complex relations between objects and persons. In a radio broadcast intended to explain the work of the VCC to the general population of Vanuatu in 2000, Regenvanu made explicit the role of the VCC in constructing forms of specifically indigenous development as an alternative to ‘Westernisation’, based around the use of _kastom_ as resource that only indigenous peoples have rights in. In this way, the timeless version of past _kastom_ developed within such spaces as the VCC exhibition hall becomes a particular model of development in the present and for the future:

From 1990 to today we have had many changes in Vanuatu. Especially in development, to earn money, to raise revenue for the country — this has been the most important thing. We could say that this has overwhelmed our thoughts to hold
tightly onto our *kastom*... Now, we can say that despite all the talk of development, there is another side to be considered — that the cultural centre tries to promote... For example, you can see that *kastom* already gives us a good system for preserving our environment, and we know it well because it is our *kastom*. So why not use this knowledge if we want to start environmental development? At the moment the western world comes, looks, and tells us how to protect our environment. We have already had ideas about this for a long time. It is not a new thing, in fact there are many good traditional systems that are already in place: systems of chieftainship and tabu... that determine (for example) who can use the sea and reef at what time and in what place. If we build on this, it will make a good basis to preserve our environmental resources. (Ralph Regenvanu, VCC Radio Program, Radio Vanuatu. 8th April 2000. translated from Bislama)

Today, the VCC utilises the various museum technologies we have been examining here as a springboard for the development and active implementation of an indigenous political economy. For instance, in the same radio program mentioned above, an elder from Erromango made a plea for all the ‘risos pipol’ [resource people] to make preparations for a workshop to gather information so that the *nevsem* [Erromangan yam festival] could be revived. Persons and the information that they embody are explicitly conceptualised as part of the corpus of *kastom*, or as resources that the entire community can draw upon. Ofala Simbut explained on the radio that many old men only knew ‘huf-haf storian’ [half of the story] about this customary ceremony and asked that they come together in order to piece together the necessary information to start practising the *nevsem* again. In this sense, museum processes of objectification may be seen to work in both ways: whilst people may be compared to the other museum material we have been examining in that they are given heightened meaning by being collected together as objectifications of *kastom*, as personified ‘resources’ they are a vital part of the reproduction of social practice. Regenvanu concluded the program:

I am making an appeal to all of you listening to the program, to go and listen to your elders, to take from the library in their head. Ask them what is my *kastom*? Where is my land? What is the story of this place, and this place? What is the *kastom* of fishing or making artefacts? All of these answers used to be passed down orally, but today we have the system of the white man and western education, and we learn differently. We learn out of books from overseas rather than from our elders. These books do not tell us about life in Vanuatu. It is our responsibility to find out. If we don’t ask our elders to give us this information, then they will not give it. It rests with us younger people to ask them. If you know that we hold a recording made by one of your elders and you want to hear it, then you can take a copy, we are always ready to give you access to the information that you want. This is your *kastom*, we are merely a bank, and any time you want to take out what your community has put in, it is your right. (Ibid.)

In summary, museum objects in Vanuatu are forms immutably connected to local practice, and as such are negotiated in complex ways between the material and the immaterial. In object form, such resources are capable of moving across boundaries, and of incorporating, expressing, and overcoming political distinctions whilst remaining powerful keys to the simultaneous perpetuation and revival of social practice. However, rather than being perceived as individual pieces of singular material quality, in Vanuatu villages they are seen as a part of a wider social complex that facilitates the reproduction of social practice enabled by processes of materialisation engaged between persons and between persons and things.

Through the consideration of the VCC as a total complex consisting of both exhibition hall and extensive archive we may see how museum technologies are used creatively to contain the power of objects and to create new ones, to control and contextualise local-
national relations. In these ways, the VCC indigenously appropriates global museum technologies to fit in with local norms and agenda, for example exploiting and incorporating technologies of both exhibition and concealment or restriction. The complexity of the VCC’s operations forces us to reassess the conventional tools we use in the analysis of museums, which are all too often based only around discussion of objects (conservatively defined) put on display.

CONCLUSIONS

We have been discussing, quite generally, the effects of various museum technologies (primarily concerned with the making of ‘things’) on local systems of object management in Vanuatu, and vice versa. Strathern has argued in her discussion of property relations in the wider Melanesian region that:

All we need to do is to drop the Euro-American link between visibility and knowledge of the world...Instead I would offer a different Melanesian emphasis...What you see is what there is (presents itself) to be seen; what you do not see is what is not to be seen...This means however, that a Melanesian keeps relations in view. What you see is not a representation of the world; it is evidence of your point of being in it. What you see is there to be seen because the observer is in the appropriate social condition to register the effect...In my model of Melanesia, for which I have imagined a visual theory of sorts, any one perspective elicits another. (Strathern 1999:258–60).

Such a ‘Melanesianist’ sensibility — that you know you may not be seeing everything, and where ‘things’ themselves are explicit manifestations of social relations — seems to be directly at odds with the Western museological or exhibitionistic perspective in which what you see is what you know in the form of free-floating artefacts. Bolton has also argued, specifically in relation to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, that there is a fundamental contrast between the ‘West’ and ‘Melanesia’ in relation to strategies that deal with the presentation of objects, she terms them ‘incompatible’ (1997:19). The contrast drawn here by Strathern and Bolton is not only about museum practice, but is a more general distinction between local conceptualizations of subject-object relations. In a ‘Western Museum’ tradition such relations can be objectified by the presence of a thing detached from the user to represent both various identities, of both place and personhood. In a ‘Melanesian’ mode of understanding and presenting objects there is an intimate connection between place and practice of which the thing forms a part. Or, in other words, things can be presented and indeed conceived of ‘as’ persons and events (see Munn 1970, Strathern 1990, Weiner 1992, c.f. Gell 1998). Our discussion of the place of material culture in the Vanuatu Cultural Centre has somewhat dissolved the category of ‘museum object’. In its place, we have seen how a variety of both artifacts and practices engages with what can be termed, ‘processes of materialisation’ or objectification. As Miller has commented ‘objects may not merely be used to refer to a given social group, but may themselves be constitutive of a certain social relation.’ (1987:122, our emphasis).

At the start of this paper, we highlighted our refusal to see ‘Western’ and ‘Melanesian’ styles of museum management as fundamentally incompatible, and by extension our desire to rethink the cultural dichotomies that the organisation of subject-object relations has encouraged in much analytic thinking. Whilst such contrasts do have considerable analytical import for the manner in which we understand the construction of relationships between persons and things, in the context of political relations between local, national and international contexts, we have shown that the VCC uses both models creatively and in combination, in order to constitute a holistic institution that functions on a wide variety of levels, for vastly differing audiences.
The work of the VCC highlights that kastom can be manipulated as a form of cultural authenticity working materially through both artefacts and their documentation, and immaterially through their connection to local practices. In this way, those working with the VCC may exploit the detail and fluidity of sometimes hidden practice and performance, and the generically visible global metropolitan museum operations of an exhibitionary complex. One is mainly for entitled Vanuatu locals, the other provides a metaphor for the nation-state and is consumed more by outsiders or newly created ni-Vanuatu nationals. Both are subject to crucial political determination by local agents.

The gallery displays in the VCC locate the visitor in the past and the present simultaneously, historical narrative is subsumed by a functional and increasingly universal museum aesthetic. But what at a first glance seems to be a rather incoherently ordered series of objects and images in fact articulates a representation of the ways in which tradition and nationalism can be negotiated locally through both artefacts and images. The material synchronicity constituted through these static displays is then drawn upon in the grass-roots work of the VCC — where visions of a holistic customary past are actively deployed as developmental practices in the present and for the future.

In this manner, we suggest, the VCC indigenously now appropriates worldwide museum technologies to fit ni-Vanuatu, and highly localised expectations around how to manage material culture, explicitly conceptualised not only as objects, but a set of relations between persons and in turn between persons and things. Museum processes of materialisation give rise to a new, increasingly nationalised identity for artefacts, and by extension local persons and places. Sweeping out of exhibition and storage, moving between localities and the nation, processes of materialisation rather than conventional museum objects are the key to the manifestation of local practice in the museum, and of museum practice in the locality.

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NOTES

1. We still feel that despite the growing literature that focuses on the work of ‘cultural centres’, rather than ‘museums’ (e.g. Townsend-Gault 1997, Clifford 1997, Karp, Kreamer and Lavine 1992), an undue focus is made on exhibition practice. There is still a dearth of holistic ethnographies of museums. Whilst Macdonald (2002) begins to address this imbalance, the focus is still primarily upon the constitution of display.

2. Throughout this section we deliberately conflate the term ‘museum’ with that of ‘ethnographic museum’. The critical debates that surround the representation of ethnographic collections in western museums encapsulate the key points involved in the analysis of the ‘exhibitionary complex’ (Bennett 1988); of the exhibition as context; of the subsequent relationships of objects as contextually defined (art, artefact, icon etc); and of the role of the object in a variety of differing social relations, have great pertinence to the display and management of other museum collections. The contemporary ethnographic museum has become a critical reference point for the modelling of many ‘indigenous’ museums and cultural centres. All subsequent mention in this paper of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (or VCC) refers to the National Museum and Cultural Centre, housed today in the same place, overseeing the diverse enterprises that we discuss.

3. As does most of the literature on Oceanic Art: e.g. Mead (1979), Kaeppler et al. (1997), Thomas (1995).

4. Vanuatu, a Melanesian archipelago in the South-West Pacific was jointly administered by the British and French governments from 1906 until independence in 1980. For a more detailed history of the country, consisting of seventy inhabited islands, and over 100 language groups (for a population of just under 200,000) see MacClancy (1981), Bonnemaison (1994), and Bonnemaison et al. (1996). For more detailed account of the early history of the VCC see Bolton (1993, 1994, 1994a 1999 and 2003) and Tryon (1999).

5. Huffman was appointed first salaried curator in 1976, but as he was unable to take up his position straight away, French linguist Jean Michel Charpentier was curator until 1977 when Huffman took up the position, remaining there until 1989 (Bolton 2003:37).

6. Bolton reports that the cases in the new VCC were designed by local fieldworkers, working with material
from their area, and that at the opening of the museum each fieldworker stood beside the displays to explain them to visitors (2001:228). This practice has been discontinued, but the curators still occasionally give personal tours of the gallery, when time permits.

7. For many years, the VCC had its own kastom sorcerer, Avia Koli from Epi, who managed the magical side to the collection, neutralising objects and assuaging people’s fears about the potential power of the objects.


9. See Lindstrom’s (1982) account of the resistance of the Tannese to their kastom dancers leaving the island to perform in the first National Arts Festival 1979.

10. See: http://arts.auu.edu.au/areaworld/kys/conivec.htm. In 1985, the Vanuatu government placed a moratorium on all foreign sociological, scientific and ethnographic research, due in part to dissatisfaction with certain researchers and in keeping with a drive to give ni-Vanuatu the rights to conduct, create, and present their own research. It was lifted in 1995, and a Cultural Policy was drafted making a research agreement compulsory for all researchers. This normally stipulates the contribution that the researcher must make to the host community in return to being given assistance in research and being allowed to write a thesis.

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