The following is an interview that took place during the conference 'Pacific Alternatives: Cultural Heritage and Political Innovation in Oceania' at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, March 2009. The discussion focused on the implementation of the Year of Traditional Economy in Vanuatu and the ways in which it has provided an avenue for rethinking the role of government in villages and for reconceptualizing the basis of economic sovereignty in Vanuatu. The introduction and conclusion contextualize this project both in the context of cultural and economic initiatives in Vanuatu and within the broader theoretical framework of Pacific Alternatives, which have been rearticulated in this volume as 'Made in Oceania'.

Background to the 'Traditional Money Banks Project' and the 'Year of Traditional Economy'

In June 2004 a project emerged that originated with a ni-Vanuatu fieldworker of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, James Teslo. James recognized that there were not enough pigs to do traditional ceremonies, which meant these ceremonies were not being done, which again meant that transmission of kastom, viewed as a form of intangible cultural heritage, was not occurring. The vitality of his culture was therefore being threatened, and he suggested the establishment of a pig 'bank' which could provide the required pigs. With the assistance of Tim Curtis, an anthropologist doing fieldwork in the area at the time and who later went to work for UNESCO, the project documentation was produced. The name of the resulting project, the 'Traditional Money Banks Project', reflected a wider focus on all traditional wealth items needed for use in ceremonies, such as red-dyed pandanus mats, shell money and yams. The project partners...
were the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and the Vanuatu Credit Union League, with funding being provided by the Japanese Government through the 'Japanese Funds-In-Trust for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage' via UNESCO.

The stated objectives of the project were:

1. to survey and understand the production processes and investment and saving/banking mechanisms for traditional wealth items in Vanuatu;
2. to raise awareness of the significance of traditional monies and the need to preserve and continue to transmit the intangible knowledge relating to skills and techniques for the production of these monies;
3. to develop a strategy for promoting the use of traditional wealth items in Vanuatu;
4. to develop strategies to facilitate the use of traditional wealth items to pay for services currently paid for in cash (e.g. school and medical fees), especially in rural areas;
5. to establish laws and policies at provincial and national levels to support the use of traditional wealth items as part of the formal economy of the country;
6. to strengthen the foundations of the traditional economy within culturally appropriate frameworks with a view to stimulating income generation within local populations;
7. to provide infrastructure and resources needed to establish effective and viable 'traditional money banks'; and
8. to establish the viability for extending this concept to other areas of Melanesia.

At the most basic level, the principal objective of the project was to maintain and revitalize living traditional cultural practices while stimulating the generation of cash income. It was envisaged that this would be achieved by:

1. encouraging people involved in the production of various forms of traditional wealth (tusked pigs, mats, shell money etc) to continue producing such wealth;
2. encouraging people who are primarily involved in the cash economy to access the traditional valuables and to use them for ceremonial activities; and
3. facilitating the exchange of cash and traditional wealth items between the informal and formal economic sectors, both to generate income for people involved in the traditional sphere of economic life and to encourage the revival of traditional practices amongst those primarily involved in the cash economy.

The Year of Traditional Economy and its aftermath

HG: So we are going to have a conversation about some of the issues that have come up around culture and economy and development in Vanuatu in the wake of the Year of Traditional Economy and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC) project to investigate the history and continued resonance of traditional economy (known colloquially as the 'Pig Bank Project').

In 2007 the Year of Traditional Economy was legislated by Parliament and came into being. What kinds of policies have already been set into place? What happened between policy and the grassroots? What are the interconnections...
between policy and practice and do the Cultural Centre and the government mediate them in different ways or in similar ways or increasingly converging ways?

RR: The Year of Traditional Economy started on 17 November 2006, which was a national day of culture. There was a march from the middle of town up to the National Museum and the Chiefs’ nakamal, their meeting-house. It was interesting because the Prime Minister and the President showed up in their traditional dress, wearing all the marks of their ranks, with their wives, which may have been the first time ever, in the capital, that this happened. This was widely covered in the media and it was perceived as a very strong commitment by the government to this Year of Traditional Economy. It reflected a very strong commitment by the then Prime Minister (Ham Lini) who is himself a high-ranking leader in North Pentecost.

During the march, every person who marched was supposed to come with some item representing the traditional economy. Some people came with bags of taro, coconuts, there were a couple of pigs, sugar cane, kava ... and [they] marched with these and then they were exchanged between the different provincial groups represented in the march, and between Chiefs, Government, the head’s of Church. They all presented pigs as their contribution. Normally they donate cash or money but the idea was this year they give us what we have in our currency. So that was a very kind of good start to the whole Year of Traditional Economy. There was a high level of commitment and practise of actual exchanges going on in the Chiefs’ nakamal, which was showing what it’s all about.

However, there was also a lot of confusion about what the Year of Traditional Economy means among policy-makers and right down to grassroots. There were questions about how are we going to use pigs and mats to pay for a Hilux: how many mats does it take to buy a double-carry Hilux from Asco Motors? There was also talk about how is the traditional economy going to provide jobs and where are the jobs going to come from. So it was obvious that the main focus of the year was going to be raising awareness.

So, one of the first things we did was put together a policy matrix of all the different policies that were part of the objectives and activities of the Year of Traditional Economy. The matrix allocated responsibilities to the Cultural Centre, the National Council of Chiefs, the fieldworkers, to communities, to the Department of Agriculture, Department of Heath, Minister of Education, Judicial Service Commission, even the USB Chamber of Commerce and various NGOs. One of our first activities was to provide an awareness of what the kastom of Vanuatu is. I pretty much did that with an article I wrote which came out in the newspapers early in the year. I provided a lot of explanations in Bislama that went into brochures, t-shirts, all these kinds of promotional activities. I think probably the main thing that happened in the year of kastom economy was that we sent a group that went all around Vanuatu raising awareness. Not only in the islands at grassroots level but in Vila with policy-makers.

What we found was at the community level, they just almost thought ‘Yeah... well what’s new.’ In some places they expressed the view, ‘All these years the government has been telling us to do other things and now you come after 28 years and tell us, no, you do what you’ve always been doing.’ There was a feeling of frustration there, but basically at the community level, people got into it very quickly. At the policy level, it was a totally different matter. People couldn’t understand. It was very hard for them to understand how this is going to be implemented, this whole concept of, ‘we don’t want to go backwards, but into the future.’ And obviously for them, the future meant a more Westernized future.

So yes, the policy level was the challenge. However, sometimes it was a case of going back to existing policy. For example, the Education Ministry already has a policy allowing school fees to be paid in kind, and this existed before the year of the kastom economy. The ministries of education and health have decreed it acceptable for people to pay for medical consultation fees, for school fees, in kind, in traditional items. The policy is there; it’s just a matter of the school committees and health committees facilitating it somehow.

HG: So did that start to happen?

RR: It was already happening and it started to happen a bit more.

HG: Can you describe how this system of payment in kind works? How is it formulated, those kinds of payments?

RR: The best situation is a boarding school or a hospital. In those cases, it has been happening for quite a while, parents can pay a fee in foodstuffs, which then go to feeding the kids at boarding school, or to feeding the patients.

HG: So that’s a place that you can absolutely avoid money transactions completely?
RR: Yes, and also achieve the other objective of the Year of Traditional Economy, which was eating more traditional food, getting the health benefits of all that. So that's already happening and it happens through the hospitals and boarding schools. They receive food by weight and pay by weight. They have scales.

HG: They know how many days of school are worth how many pounds or kilos of produce?

RR: Yes. The problem is that there is a lot of coordination that needs to go on; for example, in a school, for one meal, if you were going to have a menu with taro on it then you would need enough taro for that meal at that time. So if you were receiving, for example, taro enough for 15 kids, what are you going to do with it? You have a cooking infrastructure there that has to deal with this stuff, so it’s a matter of coordinating the different parents who want to contribute. It's the same with hospitals.

HG: How does this system potentially change people’s traditional practices? Do they suddenly have to intensify their gardening and take time away from cash cropping (and from kastom), for example, to grow enough food to pay for their kid’s school fees? Is the idea to try to develop a completely alternative economic sphere, or is the idea that you’ll borrow or get food from your immediate family and continue to cash crop as well? What are the sorts of knock-on effects of trying to get people to pay with produce rather than money?

RR: Well, the Department of Agriculture in collaboration with the Vanuatu Chamber of Commerce, which are the two organizations working particularly on increasing local production of traditional foods as well as any kind of produce that can make money as well – cash crops – have long had a policy, which was promoted within the year of the kastom economy, of encouraging three gardens. Everyone is to make three gardens: one for your own food consumption and household consumption; one for kastom ceremonies; and one for market, for cash crops, to sell. This policy has been promoted because of the problem people have been facing when they're starting to market food and then do not having enough to feed themselves.

HG: Was it the same with the project to set up ‘banks’ of pigs by giving fieldworkers a fence to set up breeding areas for them. The idea was that these pigs would be divided into three kinds (kastom, commerce and subsistence)?

RR: Yes. So within the issue of giving foodstuffs as hospital fees, hospitals are actually purchasing food items, because the issue is not so much an individual garden being able to supply all of the food, but of coordinating a number of different food producers. This requires a different infrastructure, which is why one of the other policies of the Year of Traditional Economy was that each hospital or boarding school needed to set up a cooperative, a branch of the Department of Cooperatives to deal with this kind of stuff.

HG: Can you talk about working with the Vanuatu Cooperative Society and the Credit Union League, and trying to connect them to ideas about the traditional economy?

RR: Well, one of the fifteen overall objectives of the kastom economy was to assist ni-Vanuatu to save cash money, to assist in setting up savings clubs at village level. The ‘savings club’ is a concept that comes out of credit unions and cooperatives. People get together and start a savings club and decide to commit a certain amount each week or something, to put in the club and so on.

HG: And each person gets to take out the whole kitty at regular intervals?

RR: Well they can take out as much as they’ve put in, but not more – at certain points. There are rules set up by the savings club as to how you can do that.

The idea with the Year of Traditional Economy was that we would encourage people to set up savings clubs at the village level. At the sub-area or ward levels credit unions can take together a number of different savings clubs. One of the ideas the Vanuatu Credit Union was already promoting in savings clubs was that you could use traditional wealth items as collateral for a loan. The system that was already set up with some credit unions was that a person could allocate a pig, for example, as collateral for a loan of a certain amount – whatever the value of the pig was, for example 10,000 vatu. What would happen was that the savings club or credit-union manager and the chief would visit the person who wanted to have the loan, would look at his or her pigs and then identify the pig to be collateral. They’d all look at it and agree: this is how much it’s worth, and then he would get the loan and he would continue looking after the pig. And if he didn’t pay back his loan, then you could take the pig and give it to someone else and the chief would be there to witness everything, and be the authority saying yes, I agree that you did guarantee this. So that was the idea of using traditional wealth items. Actually, I think two years ago, the government passed an act to make it possible to use personal property as collateral, including pigs and traditional wealth items.
HG: Is the idea of personal property based on individual ownership, rather than the kinds of group ownership or relations of reciprocity and debt which is how pigs actually circulate in kastom? Does it allow for that kind of fluid ownership of traditional wealth items?

RR: The legislation itself is strictly for a Western sense of collateral. There’s a person who borrows against collateral, and when he repays, it gets given back to him. So group ownership wasn’t recognized in the legislation, although it is recognized in the savings club. The whole savings club idea is based on a community of people who set rules for each other and help each other to meet their obligations and so on. Another objective that was promoted in the Year of Traditional Economy with regards to the objective of getting ni-Vanuatu to save cash was that savings clubs should be set up using the clan system. So you set up a savings club based on an extended family, given the realization that the extended family is the traditional unit of production. The extended family is the production unit, the resource-owning unit, in Vanuatu. So if you were to set up a savings club across that unity there’d be a real incentive, because it is you building up your own extended family, your own clan. Using it that way promotes the organization of savings along those lines. Also, the idea was to try and have savings clubs or credit unions which include the ‘four legs’ of society, the chiefs, women, churches and youth. A lot of what the year of the kastom economy, and the traditional economy, are about is trying to bring governance down to the community level. They’re not about state governance. They’re about strengthening traditional governance, which would be clan units, chiefly systems and, of course, communities as a whole, which is indeed the current reality in Vanuatu. Which is why we talk about the four legs of community, like a table – chiefs, women, youth, churches – and try to make sure they’re involved in all management, in all governance decisions.

HG: Did you feel, in your observation of what happened as those projects were being introduced into communities, that there were structures in place to implement them, or was one of the issues that you needed to create new bureaucracy to administer and orchestrate these programmes?

RR: Yes, the issue was that there was a lot of mistrust of cooperatives, because of what has happened in the past, where a lot of the time they have been used by political parties, and managed in other ways that didn’t follow traditional lines by individuals, or individual committees made up of individual men who ended up squandering the money. So we were asking people to organize them in a different way as a solution to the issues of being able to look after and manage cash well, which if you go back to the original traditional money bank project, were two of its objectives. One was to revitalize traditional practices and the second was to generate incomes. We have tried to revitalize the belief in cooperatives and, in a lot of cases, to reorganize how they were run and working. Often we had to reintroduce the idea of savings clubs, because the first things to go in the cooperatives were their savings and loans wings, which had been the first to be decimated by bad management.

HG: One thing that I see in the project is an attempt to bridge a divide between the cash economy and ideas about kastom and tradition, and to play on the strengths of what can happen when you bring them together in ways that are informed by kastom but which don’t exclude the possibilities of making profits in cash. This presumably is really what everybody wants – to maintain their traditional base but also be able to have cash. I think a lot of the preconceptions at a higher level, or maybe at an urban level, are that going back to the traditional economy means leaving cash behind in some way. So, that is the way that the project seems to be successful; in bringing the two together. Did you feel that it did that? That you got people to think about cash from a traditional basis rather than just the capitalist basis, and to realize that cash can be valued in different kinds of ways.

RR: Yes, but what happened was that everyone in the rural areas really knew all that. It wasn’t anything new. They live with that reality every day. They live in their traditional economy and they’re trying to make cash to pay for government services and things like that; mainly government services. Government services are the biggest burden, which is why we’re targeting school fees and medical fees, because that’s what people need cash for. It’s like the government is forcing people to get into the cash sector because of the fees it imposes, so it’s not helping at all. So the idea was trying to see how the State, mainly, can be made to not charge people money so that they can manage.

HG: Then more money is actually freed up for medicine and equipment rather than feeding patients and paying for food, for example, in the budgets of the hospital.

RR: That as well. There is the whole argument that some political parties put up in Vanuatu – that these services should be free. But I think that communities are willing to contribute. It’s just that they don’t have the cash or other resources, so that needs to be mobilized.

HG: Can you talk about what happened in town, where this situation is really different in terms of access to traditional resources?
RR: In town what happened was that there was a lot of focus on developing policy to promote easier and cheaper access to traditional foods, and to try and put regulation in place to stop the influx of unhealthy, imported foods. So, for example, we spent a lot of time in the Year of Traditional Economy on trying to assist the Codex Committee, which is part of an international system about food safety in trade. So it is able to look at foods, for example the colorized rice we import huge quantities of to Vanuatu. It takes it and says, look, what’s the nutritional value of this food? What’s the health benefit of this food? Then, according to the international trade regime, typified best by WTO, though we’re not a member, we say on these grounds we don’t want to import this food anymore, and you can’t penalize us because nutritionally it’s a danger to our health. So, we have been trying to strengthen these things that there have been no attention paid to in national policy. There was a draft for food regulation that had been around for years and years, but no one paid any attention to it. In the Year of Traditional Economy, we really took it up and pushed it, and said, who’s doing this? We raised that on the priority agenda, saying this is something that needs to happen. And I’m glad to say it was passed, as a result of this pressure. We looked back at the Vanuatu National Food and Nutrition Policy which had been formulated in 1986 and finally approved in 1998, at this government document and its specific objectives to increase the consumption of local foods to improve food self-sufficiency, to reduce dependency on imported food and beverages, to improve security at a national level, to improve disaster preparedness, to improve the quality and safety of local and imported foods. Unfortunately what was happening was that this stated objective of the department was being sidelined by ‘glamour–projects’ such as the Chinese-funded oil pump foundation at Santo or the Chinese-funded tuna processing plant in Port Vila; these kinds of big export, revenue-earning projects. Down at the department level they were still talking about food security. They were talking about planning a three garden policy. We started to question the priorities that were already in government. It’s the same in education. Policies exist to get a national curriculum that reflects local culture, which reflects local realities. We went back and tried to revitalize it. This was part of the activity matrix of the policy matrix of the year of the kastom economy – to improve education.

HG: Do you see that as dependent on foreign business investment – to set up those businesses – or do you see that as being generated by ni-Vanuatu?

RR: Ideally, it’s generated by ni-Vanuatu. It’s already starting. The biggest local food producer is Lapita Café. They’re doing the most processing of local foods, and that’s owned by a local person. It’s also in government plans in the Department of Agriculture – somewhere in their list of things they want to do, and this is the thing about getting priorities reordered in the list of what the department is going to do – to set up plants on each of the major islands so that people can bring their produce to one place, get it processed and sent to Vila and the urban areas, so that you start having a situation where you can have the same level of convenience with local foods that you have with rice. Because that’s the advantage of it, there’s nothing else really. There is the status stuff that’s added onto it, but I think it’s the convenience that’s the issue.

HG: Changing tack, let’s talk about the role of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in relation to government. It seems to me that this project marks a real shift in the role that the Cultural Centre is playing in really impacting policy and affecting government. Do you see that people, or government, are reopening their eyes to the notion that kastom is now being influenced by the Cultural Centre, or that the position of the Cultural Centre has changed as a results of these kinds of projects in terms of policy making and state governance?

RR: I think so. I believe the Cultural Centre now has very much equal input into other departments when it comes to development issues: which is different from before.

HG: They are coming to the Cultural Centre?
**RR:** Yes, we're being invited to be in all the meetings. Now, for example, the stuff about the *kastom* economy awareness has a budget line in the government's overall budget. It's supporting an office for promoting Year of Traditional Economy. It won't be the Year of Traditional Economy anymore, but there is a Traditional Economy Secretariat. There is funding for staff positions and travelling around the islands. Of course you have to supplement it with the Cultural Centre Budget, but at least it's in there. It's in the budget system.

**HG:** Do you think it has opened an avenue for the chiefs and other customary leaders to feel they have greater participation in governance and other policy-making? You talked about the idea about devolving the State and taking back the level of the administration and implementation of these policies back down into communities and their structures. But on the other side it seems that greater access to the state is also being allowed. It's not about forgetting the state, but about bringing the state so that it's much more present and people feel that they are more connected to the nation.

**RR:** There is still a problem with the state not coming down to the level of the people. There are more avenues being opened for participation of chiefs through legislation. There are more laws now that state that the chiefs have a role. One of the big bottlenecks is that we have to identify chiefs. This is coming to a head, because the more we advocate for traditional leaders and chiefs in state policy-making, the quicker you get to the point where you've got to legislate for *who* are the chiefs? For example, when a law gives power to a minister, there's a process. You know how a minister operates. This is how a minister is put in this position. There is a process that is already in the law. When you give power to a director general of a department, it's all there already, you know what you're talking about. You know it is one person. For a chief it's not like that. So, we're stuck in a dead end where we can keep giving power to chiefs in laws, and yet have this position where the laws are ineffectual because you don't know who the chiefs are and anyone can step up and then they're contested. So to move forward on the issues of chiefs being involved in governance we're going to need to solve that problem.

**HG:** There are some compromises there, because once you legislate you lose the fluidity and the ways in which chiefs are embedded in dynamic systems that are negotiated, that are community based.

**RR:** I think the awareness now in the Cultural Centre and in the National Council of Chiefs is good about the direction we need to move in. And that direction is: you have the state chiefs, who are legislated for, and then you have the traditional leaders, chiefs and so on, who aren't legislated for, but who are separate. And with the state chiefs, the first bit of legislation is coming into being now. The structure is new, but it clearly says there are now fourteen councils of chiefs in Vanuatu. One is the Port Vila Council of chiefs, one is the Luganville Town Council of Chiefs, and then there are twelve island councils of chiefs. Some are big, like the Malakula Council of Chiefs, and then some, the Futuna Council for instance, are small, it depends on the island and how people think about it, but it's fitted to those realities. It's not very contentious. So in some cases, like in Futuna, you just have the island council of chiefs, whereas in Malakula you have the island council of chiefs, and then you have the area council of chiefs and so on. It depends on how big the geographical entity is. For example, the National Council of Chiefs is comprised of the chairpersons of each council of chiefs. There are fourteen members: the chairpersons of them all. That was never the case before. Plus you have the Port Vila Town Council of Chiefs made of chiefs chosen by the island council of chiefs. So Jacob Kapere, who is the chief representative of people from Tanna in Port Vila, was chosen by people of Tanna.

So, in the past there have been all these issues about the Port Vila Town Council of Chiefs being very discredited and disconnected from the islands; and of people walking around saying ‘I'm the chief from Aneityum in Vila’ despite that everyone from Aneityum knows that he's not. No one will be contending that role because of some sort of respect, but there is no authority there. So, one of the things about this legislation and also about the approach that the National Council of Chiefs has taken, is that power has been given to councils of chiefs, not chiefs. The council has the authority, not the chiefs. That's really good. And then there is a registration system for chiefs, which didn’t work in the early eighties because of resistance from chiefs. But the model is very good. The model is that there is a forum. The chief is nominated and the people who have to sign are the leader of the churches, the leader of the women, the leader of the youth, the leader of each clan, and then chiefs of neighbouring villages. If they all sign: this is the chief.

**HG:** So it has to be really consensual.

**RR:** The thing about State Chiefs is that they are going to be given power by legislation and so on; they are basically community leaders.

**HG:** What will they be called?

**RR:** They'll be called State Chiefs.
HG: So you won't be able to tell, just by somebody's title, what kind of a chief they are, you'll have to know by the context in which they've been created chief.

RR: Yes, but they're community leaders. Then you have the other chiefs, who are the heads of clans. Although chief is not an indigenous concept, the closest you get to a chief in Vanuatu is the leader of a clan, and that role existed prior to colonization – the person chosen by the clan to be their spokesperson. So that's still there. And then you have all the graded systems as well.

HG: And then you have MPs, elected officials to represent areas...

RR: But I suppose they're not chiefs, right?

HG: Right, but doesn't that then divorce community and state leadership even more?

RR: Yes, and that's why one of the big pushes here, in the Year of Traditional Economy, was to implement Article 30, Sub-article 2 of the constitution, which says the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs should be given the power to endorse any legislation to do with land, kastom or language. The most recent case is the family protection bill, which gives chiefs power to intervene in a household between a man and his wife – if the man is beating his wife up. The chief has the legal right to come and kick the guy out of his own house. This power is given not only to chiefs but also to teachers, to women's leaders and to church leaders. But chiefs are one of them.

HG: And who oversees the chief? What if the chief is beating up his wife?

RR: Yes, see now, that's the thing. Now you have one of these other leaders step in.

HG: So there's a kind of parallel between different domains of power?

RR: There is equal power, but these people have to be recognized by the state. The state has to decide: these are the main people in the community empowered by this law. So it's going to have to name the chief in the community. Which might conflict with the chief as recognized by some other party. Essentially there has to be some mechanism – if the chiefs are going to be involved in governance at the state level – to have laws formalized in a way that is recognized by written law and state law.

HG: Moving from the Cultural Centre into government, how do you perceive the contrasts between the people – some are seemingly participating in capitalist markets and government and legislation for their own purposes, others are struggling to really create indigenous models and to base policies on ideas about kastom. Do you see a split between all these other organizing power structures and government, or do you see that they're coming together now? After all, all this legislation is then going to affect the way in which government is then negotiating with the World Trade Organization.

RR: Potentially, but these things haven't happened; there are no official structures or ways to do that yet.

HG: Is there interest in government for people to want to create those alliances?

RR: Yes. Definitely.

HG: Is it that people are frustrated with the framework that's been imposed, or the structure of government that's been adopted in the country, which you are trying to adapt and trying to change?

RR: Yes. There is much frustration, but there is also a lack of models; a lack of conceptualizations of how it's going to work.

HG: Are there other countries in Melanesia or other places in the Pacific that you look to for guidance?

RR: There are lots of models, the problem is we don't know about most of them. We know about some, but it would be good to learn about more.

HG: So what kind of models would you say you drew on, in formulations of the traditional economy, apart from the project of understanding community interests and community frameworks, which has been going on for a long time through the Cultural Centre fieldworker programme?

RR: I think it's more a question of models of alternative development from the development field; alternative ways of empowering communities towards development goals. That's where the models have come from. Our culture is the alternative for communities because that is what they're doing any way. That is their knowledge base. So that's the way the alternatives are going to be articulated. Because that is what the experience is. And that is what's working...
and has proven to work more than anything else. Because it has been doing this, providing these sustainable outcomes, livelihood outcomes, and the spiritual outcomes, as well as economic ones.

HG: Do you feel that those lifestyles are sustainable in town, in Port Vila, given the projections for growth and development there? If we shift the focus back to reliance and traditional products – is there sustainability to the reconnection of people to their traditional base? Furthermore, could you talk a bit about what you mentioned as honouring the traditional landowners in Vila and the region? Obviously land is going to become the huge issue in town if you want to commit to this system...

RR: There are the policies of the Year of Traditional Economy, which were the kind of policies I espoused in my campaign to get into Parliament … which people want. I mean, they voted for them.

For instance, different island communities in Vila or Luganville, the two main towns at this stage, should have their own nakamal or meeting house. Everyone must have a nakamal. Everyone needs a place where it can be their place to meet, their place to sort out problems. If they want to teach kastom, that’s their place. Everyone should have land and a building, and communities should be given land to grow gardens, in town. These island communities, they’ll be identified in different ways. For example, in Malakula their meeting house won’t be a Malakula nakamal, they’ll be Wala, they’ll be Rano, they’ll be Urapiv; while Futuna might just have Futuna. So it might follow the areas, according to the Malvatumauri, because I think the Malvatumauri structure is the best kind of structure we have for governance in the country. It starts at the village level and goes to the national level. There is a clear line. So one of the big things we proposed in the year of the kastom economy was that the provincial structures and the national structures have to align, so we have one structure. And I think that the chief structure is the best one, so far. So, we should perhaps have the island communities in Port Vila following that corresponding structure. They have their land, they have the nakamal, they have their garden areas. For example, when the Tanna/Ambrym conflict occurred in March 2007, the Ambrym community had to reorganize to form an entity that could speak on behalf of that entire community because the existing structure that they had wasn’t representative. This shows that there is a need to reconstitute the way the island identities are organized in Vila, so that they can represent a particular area in a sustained way.

So, as an MP, I’m spending a lot of time helping communities that are trying to get these structures. One way to do it is to try and get them to set up bank accounts, so that I can feed state resources to these communities; this also helps them to try and organize themselves, to have a bank account. I also tell them I want a woman to look after this account, no-one else. Or it can be the youth account, or someone else’s. But there are key people you have to have, and the chief has to assent to it for the community. These funds, when they come, who are the people who are going to approve what they’re used for? So, I am helping them to get these types of organizations. Then the next step, of course, is getting the land, and for that you have to be in government, basically. But there is a whole lot of privately owned land that is vacant. And my policy in the campaign was, in essence, we’re going to take all of this land and make it into gardens. The government has the power to repossess land and give compensation. We really need to do this in Vila now. There is all this land that is vacant and that we can’t build on. We have to start making provisions for gardens. That is the way this traditional economy is going to incorporate the urban areas.

Concluding comments

It is clear that the Year of Traditional Economy and other projects to reformulate and revivify a national and state recognition of the viability of subsistence and community – as models for economic engagement – is embedded within a critique and commentary on broader structures of power and governance in Vanuatu. In reference to the argument of this book about politics, ‘Made in Oceania’ (see Introduction, this volume), there is a powerful contribution to the notion of a ‘Pacific’ alternative – in that the Pig Bank Project uses the infrastructure of government, but to quite different ends. In doing so, it builds an alternative into the mainstream, with a powerful potential for reconfiguring national agendas. The contribution that the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and the Vanuatu state may make to international models of political innovation is in exploring the ways that alterity may be mapped into the heart of governance. Just as the category of kastom itself is both an index of indigeneity and a nationalist (and regionalist) movement, so projects like the Year of Traditional Economy reposition alternative visions with the explicit intent of nation-building.

In making Vanuatu Cultural Centre fieldworkers the key agents of the Pig Bank Project, in promoting regional credit union activities alongside cultural centres, biodiversity projects and traditional resource management projects, and in linking traditional wealth items to UNESCO funded projects around intangible cultural heritage, the Pig Bank Project and the Year of Traditional Economy have explicitly re-imagined the national economy in Vanuatu. As Regenvanu notes in our conversation, in the absence of models, the customary economy itself becomes a good platform for envisioning political transformation. If intangible cultural heritage may be criticized by some as a
peculiar form of cultural reification, a globalizing concept that homogenizes the idea of culture as performance, whilst at the same time drawing boundary lines between naturalized ‘Western’ nation-state cultures and indigenous, minority and ‘non-Western’ cultures, then it is also a remarkably efficacious alternative model for the economy and economic development that allows grassroots definitions to infiltrate internationalist theory and institutional frameworks (see also Piglischio, this volume). It opens up avenues for international participation and allows ni-Vanuatu to travel and have their voices heard in key international forums. As a global category, intangible cultural heritage may solve some of the perennial problems of property qua commodity taken for granted within much economic theorizing, namely providing a space for understanding resources as total social facts, even as it raises problematic issues around the boundaries between the material and the immaterial, especially in terms of the rights and entitlements that such materialities usually entail.

In another talk, Ralph Regenvanu has called the Pig Bank Project a ‘Trojan horse’ for kastom (Regenvanu 2006). The Traditional Money Banks Project was, and is, therefore strategically subversive. It intends, by sneaking kastom into a domain that usually excludes it, to provide a set of practical solutions to the persistent questions that underlie contemporary life for many ni-Vanuatu and indeed many other Melanesians. Some of these questions are: why is our access to money and the fruits of international investment and development still so limited? Why has our government failed to deliver on its promises of self-reliance and development? How can we reconcile the international interests of finance with local desires to develop a strong ‘cultural’ base? And, how can we make more money without selling out (which is often abbreviated to how can we make more money)? In short, ni-Vanuatu, like many contemporary anthropologists, are interested in exploring the seemingly divisive relationship between the ‘economy’ and ‘culture’ and in developing new ways of thinking about their entanglement.

The imaginary synergies between, for instance, pigs and money, which have led to a productive model of economic development, have not only emerged from within Vanuatu or in UNESCO led initiatives. In 2006, the Happy Planet Index, devised by the London-based New Economics Foundation (whose tag line reads ‘economics as if people and the planet mattered’), announced that Vanuatu was ‘the happiest place on earth.’ Their pronouncement was based on a quantitative algorithm that incorporates the indices of life expectancy, the subjectivity of ‘life satisfaction’ and a measurement of ‘ecological footprint,’ linking the sense of ‘happiness’ to environmental policy and ecological well-being as much as to national income based on GDP. ‘In doing so’ NEF writes, the report ‘strips our view of the economy back to its absolute basics: what goes in (natural resources) and what comes out (human lives of differing length and happiness); factoring out political instability, war and other such blips in human experience.

Within the index, islands perform well (with all of the G8 countries scoring particularly lowly on the chart). Vanuatu, along with the neighbouring Solomon Islands, ranks so highly because of the relatively high numbers of people living off the land (70% according to the 1999 census), the relative under-population of the country, and the lack of integration into global consumption of natural resources. These two economic imaginaries, global and local, bring into being a series of straw men that interlock and are encompassed by one another. Firstly the spectre of ‘the economy’, which analyses well-being in association with access to and consumption of resources, viewed in terms of Gross Domestic Product and a monetary standard, is encompassed by a view of the economy that uses the language of heritage and resource management with its emphasis on the ‘right to culture’ (Eriksen 2001:127–48) as a model for a new form of economic regimentation. The New Economics Foundation connects itself to the growing movement within economics that theorizes happiness. This concept of happiness is increasingly used to justify economic policy-making with emphasis on, say, environmental protection rather than corporate profit in terms of resource management.

Like many grassroots projects that intend to resist and reformulate global economic practices, a ‘social’ theory of economics is built into the implementation of the practical solutions proposed through the Year of Traditional Economy. At this early stage of the project more has been modelled than enacted. However, it is apparent that a utopian movement is emergent in Vanuatu in which the basic structures of governance are being provocatively re-imagined. The challenge is to see whether these imagined economies can be made into concrete national models or if they work best at a grassroots level, within smaller rather than larger spheres of exchange.

Notes

1. This section has been taken from Ralph Regenvanu (n.d.) ‘Making policy to support living cultures: a case study in “mainstreaming culture” from Vanuatu,’ paper presented at the ‘Islands as crossroads: Cultural diversities in Small Island Developing States’ expert meeting, Seychelles, 11–13 April 2007.

2. In the second iteration of the index, published in 2009, Vanuatu was not included due to inadequate data. So we need to take the conclusion that Vanuatu is the happiest place on earth with a pinch of salt. What is important is the creation of an alternative index, which positions countries like Vanuatu in surprising relationships to countries like Australia and the USA.
Like previous indices, it is multi-dimensional, composed of distinct variables, each reflecting different aspects of the human condition. However unlike, previous indices it … makes no explicit use of income or income-adjusted measures … utilizes both objective and subjective data … combines fundamental inputs and ultimate ends… The HPI reflects the average years of happy life produced by a given society, nation or group of nations, per unit of planetary resources consumed. Put another way, it represents the efficiency with which countries convert the earth’s finite resources into well-being experienced by their citizens.’ (http://www.happyplanetindex.org/calculated.htm, last accessed September 18, 2006). Even Vanuatu, with a HPI of 68.2 failed to reach the target index set by NEF of 83.5. Another interesting point is that the remoteness from international markets in Vanuatu is cited as a possible cause of increased happiness in it population!

Bibliography


CHAPTER 2

Re-placing the state in the Western Solomon Islands

The political rise of the Christian Fellowship Church

Edvard Hviding

Rural resilience in a ‘failed state’

During 1998–2003, Solomon Islands experienced civil unrest, armed skirmishes on the island of Guadalcanal between militia groups (the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force), corruption and extortion at gunpoint of government ministries, a spiralling decline of government services, and a collapse of the national economy (see Dinnen 2002; Fraenkel 2004; Moore 2004; Dinnen and Firth 2008). Following armed conflict in rural Guadalcanal, a coup in June 2000 unseated the government of Prime Minister Ulufa’alu, and violence escalated in and around the capital Honiara and in parts of rural Guadalcanal, which saw large-scale displacement of Malaitan settlers. Although a peace agreement was reached later in 2000, a number of militia leaders from both sides refocused on extortion and small-scale strongman tactics both in Honiara and in Guadalcanal’s rural hinterlands. Rarely has a Pacific Islands nation been regarded with such aversion by regional observers, particularly in Australia, where the ‘failed state’ of Solomon Islands was at one point regarded as a ‘petri dish in which transnational and non-state security threats can develop and breed’ (ASPI 2003:13).

This conflict-ridden recent past, and images and stereotypes of the Solomon Islands situation conveyed by international media and political commentators (particularly in Australia), gave a widespread impression that the Australian-led RAMSI intervention in 2003 – which by any standards was quite successful and relatively peaceful in its opening stage of disarming militants and establishing ’law and order’ (see Kabutaulaka 2005; Moore 2005) – was one of reinstalling peace in a country in which every corner was war-torn and any economic activity was on its knees. In international media