
THE MATERIALITY OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN VANUATU

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Abstract

Close examination of material forms and the social relations within which they are embedded soon reveals that things have the capability to affect the way people think. Here, I focus on the recent development of the category of contemporary art in Vanuatu, a nation comprising over 70 inhabited islands in the south-western Pacific ocean. Contemporary art in Vanuatu is a local classification that draws on both traditional objects and iconographies to create new objects in new media, thus making fundamental material distinctions between image and object, traditionalism and contemporaneity. Appropriating Gell's invocation to practise 'methodological philistinism', I came to realize during fieldwork, that artworks as well as artists were able to effect material negotiations between often competing rhetorical distinctions. In this way, the material distinctions made on the sites of objects categorized as 'art' reflect a series of cross-cultural encounters and exchanges. Here, understanding the materiality of art objects themselves, and the material concerns of their producers allows the anthropologist to disentangle complex sets of cultural classifications and values.

Key Words ◆ contemporary art ◆ indigenous ◆ kastom ◆ materiality ◆ Vanuatu

MATERIALITY AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Alfred Gell, in his famous essay, 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology' (1999[1992]), began to outline a revised and reconstructed anthropology of art that was to inform much of his

later work, culminating in his posthumously published *Art and Agency* (1998). From the outset, Gell memorably advocated that students of art undertook a form of 'methodological philistinism',¹ rejecting critical reifications of western aesthetic criteria in favour of a truly anthropological study – understanding art objects as part of social relations rather than as merely reflective or representative of them. For Gell, art objects could be interpreted as efficacious artefacts that participate in society by *virtue* of their very materiality.

In this way, the study of the material world gives rise to a vantage point from which to undertake a more general form of analysis of social relations. Within such relations, objects are not merely privileged sites of analysis but intrinsic to the development of a social world, borne out of the importance of 'difference' in creating social and political categories. As Gell succinctly puts it: "The immediate "other" in a social relationship does not have to be another "human being". Social agency can be exercised relative to "things" and social agency can be exercised by "things" . . . Whatever happens, human agency is exercised within the material world." (1998: 17–20; see also Pels, 1998).

This 'relational' perspective is particularly pertinent to the discipline and practice of anthropologists, situated as they are on the cusp between places, categories, languages, values and most importantly within the complicated methodological paradigm of 'participant observation'. The current challenge to any new researcher working with objects, and especially those classified explicitly as 'art' in any locality, is thus, as Gell identified at the start, methodological: To practice a form of 'philistinism' with regards to our own constructed categories and to examine how persons and things together may articulate a broader perspective on 'difference' within social relationships.

Taking the effective capabilities of objects as a given, instead of following Gell's injunction to withdraw from the problem of defining the category of art ('The art object is whatever is inserted into the 'slot' provided for art objects in the system of terms and relations envisaged . . . Nothing is decidable in advance about the nature of this object . . . It has no intrinsic nature . . .' 1998: 7). I was interested in finding out exactly what kinds of objects *were* called art during my fieldwork in the contemporary Melanesian archipelago of Vanuatu.² What form did they take, and what substance were they made out of? What kinds of 'difference' could they embody and maintain?

The canonization of contemporary art in Vanuatu is a relatively recent phenomenon and, despite the overt associations of the category with social and political concepts that have arrived from 'afar', such objects are used as much in the presentation and development of ideas about indigenous culture and tradition as they are in the development of local participation in an international 'art world'. In this way,

categories considered by many commentators to be non-indigenous (such as 'art') are, in Vanuatu, prime grounds for the production and manifestation of indigenesness. In other words: difference works both ways. I hope to demonstrate here that the material world and local concepts of materiality play a vital role in the constitution of such related differences. During my research, artworks as well as artists proved to be vital informants, teaching me about the past in the present, understandings and ideas about tradition and modernity, and constructions of the indigenous. Taking very seriously Gell's invocation towards understanding the role of materiality in social and political relationships led me to understand that the images-as-objects I was examining were not only representations or reproductions of social values and consciousness, but rather an intrinsic part of the production of these in the first place. Both the form and the substance of such artefacts were able to consolidate complex ideas hard to express using language alone. In Gell's words, they were 'mediating objects' (1998: 163), substantively and powerfully connecting diverse interest groups and categories.

In this article, I highlight how becoming a philistine, or a student of material culture, is an invaluable methodology for the study of contemporary art. I am going to give a snapshot view of how working with both contemporary art objects and artists in Vanuatu provided me with the means to resolve some of the broader issues that I was struggling with during my research. In doing this I am extending Gell's methodology back to the study of artefacts that are classified explicitly as art, and attempting to realize the contingency of formal and social analyses.

THE PLACE OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN VANUATU

Drinking coffee in a Port Vila café, ni-Vanuatu sculptor Emmanuel Watt told me: 'Before we used to live in *kastom*, now we make it.' We had been talking about the growth of the main contemporary arts movement in Vanuatu, *Nawita*, which used the idea of *kastom* – the Bislama (national pidgin English) term most basically translated as 'autochthonous indigenous tradition' – to emphasize everything contemporary art was not.³ Watt's comment articulated the vital importance of 'making things' to the production of ideas in Vanuatu – especially the self-conscious discursive pairing of concepts of 'tradition' and 'modernity'. At first glance, early on in my fieldwork, the contemporary arts of Vanuatu seemed to me to be exactly what their makers overtly claimed they were: antithetical to customary material culture with seemingly little 'local' significance, made primarily for sale and exhibition to expatriates and tourists, and exploiting often conservative 'traditional' imagery in often conservative 'non-traditional' form for display in arts festivals and museums interested in 'indigenous' art.

However, the intellectual expectations that surround 'contemporary art' more generally, and no less in Vanuatu, meant that I was working with a self-conscious and highly articulate community of producers, who used material categorized as 'contemporary art' to explicitly interrogate their relationship to local development in both 'traditional' and 'modern' terms, as well as to represent these relations to indigenous *and* expatriate constituencies. During the course of my fieldwork, I began to see how contemporary art objects could both consolidate and separate vital social and temporal distinctions, materially mediating all sorts of highly politicized contrasts that when articulated merely in language seemed irreconcilable. The contemporary arts scene in Vanuatu is a place where complex relations between local, national and international contexts converge in paint, wood and wool. In this, it is primarily an urban phenomenon – the exhibition hall of the French embassy on the main high street in the capital, Port Vila, is one of the few places ni-Vanuatu, resident expatriates and tourists meet and mingle comfortably, providing a space for cross-cultural conversation and more often than not, provocative discussion.

CONTEMPORARY ART AND *KASTOM*

The category of contemporary art in Vanuatu, as elsewhere around the world, is generically defined in opposition to the material culture and visual production of the past. Throughout the region of Melanesia, heightened ideas about the past in the present are best expressed by the concept of *kastom*. In Vanuatu, *kastom* can be manifested in a variety of practices. In terms of material culture, *kastom* is constituted by the replication of forms and images that are either considered to have been handed down through generations by ancestors, or are more prosaic artefacts, still intrinsic to the perpetuation of customary practices, from ritual, to fishing, clothing, and food preparation.

The Vanuatu Cultural Centre and National Museum (VCC), based in Port Vila, has encouraged the use of older artefacts from Vanuatu, collected by missionaries, anthropologists and traders over the past 150 years and now mainly held in museums around the world, as triggers for the reproduction of many different customary practices. The recreation of artefacts of *kastom* is seen as a vital key to social reproduction. In cases where customary practices have been long disrupted, or even halted, due to a century of colonial and missionary influence, the use of objects in the regeneration of practice is explicitly termed in such projects as 'revival'. Projects to renew the production of barkcloth on the island of Erromango (see Huffman, 1996), and to reinvigorate the making of red mats on the island of Ambae have triggered both discussion about the viability of customary lifestyles in the present and facilitated their development (see Bolton, 2003: 152–4, 164–9). Such work underscores

a vital materiality to the category of *kastom*, not only as a model of the past, but as a developmental model of indigenous national self-determination through the exploitation of various local resources, in contrast to the ways 'of the white man' or 'of the West'.

Contemporary art objects are intricately connected to artefacts of *kastom* in that they are conceived locally as their opposite. However, it is widely acknowledged in Vanuatu that contemporary artists capitalize on, whilst breaking from, indigenous tradition. The enforced discursive separation between '*kastom*' and 'contemporary' in terms of material culture that any researcher first encounters is thus immediately complicated. In a discussion I had with ni-Vanuatu artist Sero Kuautonga, he expressed ambivalence at the disjuncture between 'contemporary' and 'traditional' that is applied to most material culture of the Pacific, especially that conventionally gathered under the rubric of art:

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

Richard Abong, a chief from the island of Malakula, interjected into the conversation at this point: 'With the ideas that we get from all the traditional objects and thoughts behind us' (both talking in Port Vila, 11 July 2001).

As Kuautonga identifies, a combination of continuity and creativity is at the heart of the category of *kastom* and as such is also vital to the production of contemporary art objects. These discursive contradictions are hard to formulate, even in the most relaxed of conversations. However, if we turn our attention to contemporary art objects themselves, we can get a sense of how objects might be able to provide some material resolution to such tensions.

NAWITA

Contemporary artists in Vanuatu define themselves primarily through their rejection of the materiality of *kastom* in favour of non-indigenous artistic media such as watercolour, acrylic paint, and tapestry. This is most obviously seen in the work of artists from the *Nawita* association, the first and largest contemporary arts movement in Vanuatu, founded in 1989, currently with about 40 ni-Vanuatu members (see Regenvanu, 1996). The *Nawita* association is marked by the urbane diversity of its members, its reactions against local *kastom* to create new national forms, its involvement with expatriates, and the enthusiasm of its members for

developing an intellectual discourse around their work primarily in the context of international museum exhibitions and arts festivals. For *Nawita* artists, tradition or *kastom* has become a subject matter to be represented rather than a set of localized practices. This is a material transformation of the local directed towards the national, facilitated by 'international' art media.

The very name of the association highlights this preoccupation with materiality: *Nawita* means 'octopus' in Bislama, and was chosen to represent the material diversity of the association's members – each tentacle standing for a different, non-indigenous artistic medium (see Figure 1). The formal manifesto of *Nawita* explicitly makes contemporaneity into a material distinction – affirming a free open membership to both ni-Vanuatu and expatriates but excluding artists or artisans using 'traditional media' and 'traditional principles' (Regenvanu, 1996: 312). Here, contemporary art consolidates the category 'indigenous' by both creating and merging a series of contrasts – native/foreign, traditional/contemporary – through the combination of local imagery and non-local material.

An example of this can be seen in an untitled work by Sero Kuautonga, specially commissioned for the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. He describes his eclectic use of customary imagery within the painting (Figure 2):



FIGURE 1 *Nawita* by Patrick Cujo.
L'Atelier, Port Vila

Since independence, our *kastom*, church and independence have all come together. Vanuatu as a nation must be referred to in my painting. My painting is my culture. The man covered by a mat represents how man lives his life here: birth, marriage, death: mat have an important role. He holds tight to his culture like a mat. The procession of men, walk to meet at a *nabangga* [banyan tree], then walk until they arrive at a cross, another place of meeting, after that they go to a place where they have the national flag, another place



FIGURE 2 'Untitled' by Sero Kuautonga. Canvas, acrylic paint. Specially commissioned for the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Accession number 2002.55.

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of meeting, a place of unity for the people. But the walkabout isn't finished yet, they carry on walking. We carry on and on. The movement of a community never ends.

I also use some weaving designs to represent all women as well . . . We express here that birth, life, comes from women and men together - the generation of life. I am trying to express the birth, not only of a family but also of a nation. Today, since independence, we have many new developments alongside our old ways. We have TVs, nearly every family has a TV inside their house. Here [in the painting] there is a projection, channel 1, 2, 3, 4, and so on. In the future, Vanuatu will have many television channels.

In this painting I have tried to unite everything . . . Every motif has a different background to it, but I can put it all in the same place to give unity. The shape is like an island, as Vanuatu is made up of many islands, and the red colour comes from: plenty of people that come to Vanuatu, tell you that it is a warm place, and that the people are happy. In England I hear that it rains all the time, so I am trying to send something a little bright. (Sero Kuautonga, Port Vila, 15 July 2001)

Kuautonga's comment 'painting is my culture' underscores how the media of contemporary art plays a vital role in the construction of indigenous, newly nationalized, identities in Vanuatu. Nicholas Thomas has commented, 'what has emerged repeatedly from studies of the indigenous art traditions of Oceania is the sense in which affinities are *formal* rather than *contextual*' (1999: 13, my emphasis). I take this to mean that the recognition of material forms (images and objects) can actively create relationships, mediating between and across contexts. The meaning of categories such as 'art' are constructed through this process of material recognition, bouncing off forms seen to emanate from many different places. It is by creating material distinctions *and* affinities that ni-Vanuatu artists use the media of contemporary arts to conduct a series of negotiations with tradition in the present, with the past, and to make themselves specifically 'ni-Vanuatu contemporary artists'. In this way, Kuautonga's painting traces formal connections between banyan trees and national flags, television sets and rock art motifs, and identifies through these placements in paint how he is situated within this material landscape.

I have briefly detailed how a *Nawita* artist translates the images and icons of *kastom* into the media of the contemporary arts, in the process creating an internationally recognized, indigenous national identity. I want to balance this with a brief description of some of the work of another contemporary arts association in Vanuatu, one that also formally appropriates traditional images into the media of contemporary arts, but engages with a very different version of *kastom*, embodied by the 'artistic' representations of early colonial missionaries. Like *Nawita* artists, the family-oriented members of the *Nainao* association also use the media of the contemporary arts to make vital distinctions about the relationship of the past to the present and they, like Gell, also explicitly develop the idea that contemporary art pieces can be politically and socially efficacious.

NAINO

The *Nainao* association consists of a large extended family from the southern island of Erromango. As in the case of *Nawita*, the association's name highlights the material efficacy of contemporary arts in wider social context: the term *Nainao* is taken from the local language, meaning 'a beam or ray of light that shines through a hole, like a shaft through a bamboo woven wall of a house', used by the association to represent the 'Erromangan Artistic Beam'. Following on from this material trajectory, *Nainao's* formal manifesto is: 'to revive, preserve and promote the traditional arts of Erromango, and to fight against SPR'⁴ (*Nainao* manifesto). The association currently has 12 members. Unusually, and unlike most *Nawita* artists, all the members of *Nainao* earn their living from the production of art and artefacts, and often travel between town and island.

In July 2001, *Nainao* held a large exhibition at the French Embassy gallery as their official launch, entitled '*Taem bifo, Taem tudei*' (past times, present times). Some pieces on display at the *Nainao* opening seemed to me at first glance to be entirely dissimilar to the work of *Nawita* – instead of the 'creative' appropriation of *kastom* in a new series of styles, many *Nainao* artists seemed to have simply copied images from the corpus of colonial and missionary artists of the 19th century. However, closer scrutiny of these pieces and discussion with the artists lead me to realize again the benefit of understanding the pieces on display as a series of material negotiations with ideas about tradition and the past.

The centrepiece of the *Nainao* display was a series of paintings described in the exhibition blurb as 'dealing with the history of Erromango: wood traders, cannibalism, and traditional arts.' These works consisted of a series of paintings depicting the martyrdom of several Presbyterian missionaries in the mid-19th century by Erromango islanders, events that gave rise to the notorious epithet 'Martyrs Isle' (see Robertson, 1902). When I asked about the sources of the graphic images in these paintings, Moses Jobo told me that they had been copied from a book originally published by the London Missionary Society entitled *Won By Blood* (Langridge, 1978[1922], illustrations by A. Pearse), still available in facsimile through an Australian press. In the exhibition, colourful renditions of the black and white illustrations from *Won by Blood* were accompanied by written texts – both extracts from the book and commentaries by the artists – describing the violence of early encounters between the missionaries and Erromangans.

Initially this seemed to be a curious appropriation. In describing the martyrdom of George Gordon, the narrative in the book tells us:

Had Gordon known that an Erromangan almost always strikes from *behind*, he might have divined the evil purpose in the savage's heart. But he strode on . . . Presently they neared the fatal gully, and instantly Lovo the Bunkil Chief rushed upon the missionary to strike . . . A half-fallen tree lay across the track. A savage was standing upon it, and struck, again from behind, sinking his tomahawk into Gordon's back. Stunned and bleeding he dashed on over the boulders on the track, until a second savage struck him a fearful gash in the palm as he raised his right arm to ward off the blow. (Langridge, 1978[1922]: 69–72)

Whilst this text is not repeated in the exhibition, the image that illustrates it is, painted twice by different artists (Figure 3). At first glance, these images seem to be literal representations of the vehement missionary illustration (Figure 4).

However, this particular image has also been drawn into the wider narrative of the exhibition – an indigenous effort to represent and manage the troubled history of Erromango. In Moses Jobo's version of



FIGURE 3 *The Death of Rev. George N. Gordon* by Moses Jobo 2001. Acrylic and barkcloth on board.

the painting, he adds a bolt of divine light reaching from the sky to touch the outstretched palm of the missionary, re-emphasizing the hagiography of missionary representations. At the same time, he literally frames his painting with Erromangan tradition – painted barkcloth. The exact appropriation of the image of the troublesome murders is used as a material method by which to overcome a series of divides: between the past and the present, between Christians and non-Christians, and between Erromangans and missionaries.

In the surrounding series of paintings by Jobo and the Tovovur brothers, the pagan murderers of Gordon are condemned by the artists, providing a critical context for the images in Langridge's book. Andrew Tovovur depicts events surrounding the death of the missionaries from an indigenous perspective. Here, Nerimpau, 'warrior of darkness', after murdering James Gordon and a young Erromangan woman working for the mission, is drawn into conflict with an angry relative, who disapproves of his actions – the two mortally wounding each other on the



FIGURE 4 *The Martyrdom of George Gordon* by A. Pearse.

Reproduced in Langridge (1978[1922]: 71)

reef. When found by local villagers, Nerimpau is buried like a criminal with a wooden stake through his throat (Figure 5) and Novohyalpat is given a hero's burial.

We are more familiar with the mobilization of traditional art in colonial and post-colonial political situation (e.g. Morphy, 1991; MacClancy, 1997, and Moses Jobo's barkcloth frame in Figure 3) rather than the galvanization of colonial art in the mobilization of traditional identity, but here the medium (acrylic paint) of 'traditional western' representation is appropriated to construct an *indigenous* political



FIGURE 5 *Nerimpau's burial* by Andrew Tovovur, 2001. Colour acrylic.

narrative. The images in the exhibition use a similarly realistic style to Pearse's illustrations in *Won by Blood*, to perpetuate the hagiography of missionary representations whilst pictorially 'writing' the other side of Erromangan experience, asserting indigenous choice and agency in the troubled situation of violent colonial encounter, even including some Erromangans as those among the martyred. Here, the appropriation of missionary imagery and literature is part of a larger cultural effort to engage with, and reimagine, the kinds of social and political relationships that missionary art represented (see Thomas, 1999: 13). As Joan Kerr comments with reference to the practice of colonial quotation in Australia: 'This art of reconstruction obliterates a shameful past by *remaking* rather than *re-reading* the colonial image' (1999: 243, my emphasis).

In total, the series of paintings make up a powerful visual narrative in colour (rather than the black and white of textual reproduction) that provides redemption not only for the martyred missionaries but also for Christian Erromangans, visually distancing themselves from the now shameful acts of some (but not all) of their forefathers. Fundamentally, this remaking is achieved materially by *Nainao* artists through both the

appropriation and the representation of missionary imagery using the media of paint on canvas.

Young has written about the ubiquitous dramatic re-enactment throughout the Pacific of missionary encounters, documenting a 'curious structural, thematic and imagery-invested convergence' of missionary and local accounts of encounter and conversion (1997: 102 see also Errington and Gewertz, 1991: Ch 4). In general such public performances depict the arrival of the missionary, the initial encounter with heathen savages, and their conversion from paganism to Christianity, from 'darkness' to 'light'. However, despite this comment, little attention has been paid to the material efficacy of these representations, in the case of *Nainao*, the insertion of paint into local experiences and understandings of history: an actual 'art' history.

In the case of the *Nainao* artists the medium and the very images of missionary artists are appropriated in the presentation of an indigenous political narrative that does not deny complex entanglements with the outside world in either the past or the present. The copying of both style and media can thus be used to negotiate between what at first may seem to be entirely opposing political and religious systems, creating new and provocative meanings for such stories.

The strategy of copying images both locates Erromangan artists within continuities of indigenous traditional 'art' production (that hinges, as elsewhere in the Pacific, on the continual reproduction of ancestral images) and simultaneously establishes an externally directed engagement with western art traditions, of which missionary illustrations are but one component. Here, ideas about both contemporaneity *and* about the traditional past are combined and made coeval through the materials and technology of 'contemporary art'.

Thomas, writing an anthropological art history of indigenous/settler colonial and artistic relations in New Zealand and Australia comments that looking aslant at art objects can be a way of writing 'cross-cultural histories' (1999). I have briefly shown the benefits of interpreting and understanding contemporary art as a particularly material form of visual culture, highlighting the ways in which art media have the capability to combine complex and often opposed ideas. Some of the most fundamental distinctions around tradition arising in the minds of ni-Vanuatu artists are not so much temporal, but material – in the case of 'art' contemporaneity (a concept that I have developed here, much like the 'indigenous', as a form of cross-cultural encounter) is captured primarily by the use of particular media.

Contemporary artists in Vanuatu merge together traditional identities and modern materials in the construction of a particular form of indigenosity that functions in the salient context of cross-cultural encounter from the arrival of missionaries 100 years ago, to that of

tourists and museum curators in the present day. Contemporary art pieces expose, perhaps more than any other artefact, the complex mixture of ideas and viewpoints that engender oppositional narratives, highlighting all the while the efficacy of material culture in their construction.

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Notes

1. 'Methodological philistinism consists of taking an attitude of resolute indifference towards the aesthetic value of works of art – the aesthetic value that they have, either indigenous, or from the standpoint of a universal aestheticism.' (Gell, 1999[1992]: 161).
2. Formerly known as the New Hebrides, the archipelago was governed from 1906–1980 by Anglo-French Condominium, which shared out the administration of the country between two languages, police forces, Governors, religions and was more colloquially known as 'Pandemonium'. The country remained a 'region of joint influence' rather than a colony. Indigenous of Vanuatu, the name taken upon independence in 1980, are now called ni-Vanuatu (see MacClancy, 2001[1981]; Bonnemaïson, 1994).
3. The term *kastom*, and its variants, has been galvanized throughout Melanesia as an indigenous possession, conceived in direct opposition to the practices and artefacts of 'the west' or of 'white men', and reflects a complex self-consciousness about history and development, for both indigenous persons and foreigners. Throughout this article, I use the term to broadly refer to the body of artefacts, practices, knowledge and representations that are used to construct 'indigenous' culture in Vanuatu, generally by building on a view of a collective past in the present, seemingly bypassing the colonial period, and working to establish the legitimacy of an indigenous political economy and nation-state. For deeper discussion both in relation to Vanuatu, and the region of Melanesia, see Keesing (1982), Jolly (1992), Norton (1993), Otto and Thomas (1997, especially Jolly's chapter – Jolly, 1997) and Rio (2002: Ch. 4). For some examples of discussions about the more material aspects of *kastom* in Vanuatu see Bonnemaïson et al. (1996) and Bolton (2003).
4. *Sperem Pablik Rod* – a disparaging term literally meaning to hit the high road, used to describe predominantly young urban layouts and urban drifters.

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