

Curating Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Case of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre

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Negotiations of ICH in museum-work



Key findings

1. ICH as Participatory Museology



2. Bridging the tangible/ intangible divide



3. The museum as a performative space





VCC conflates agendas of mainstream/ modernist museology with local calls for heritage (*kastom*) preservation and community development.

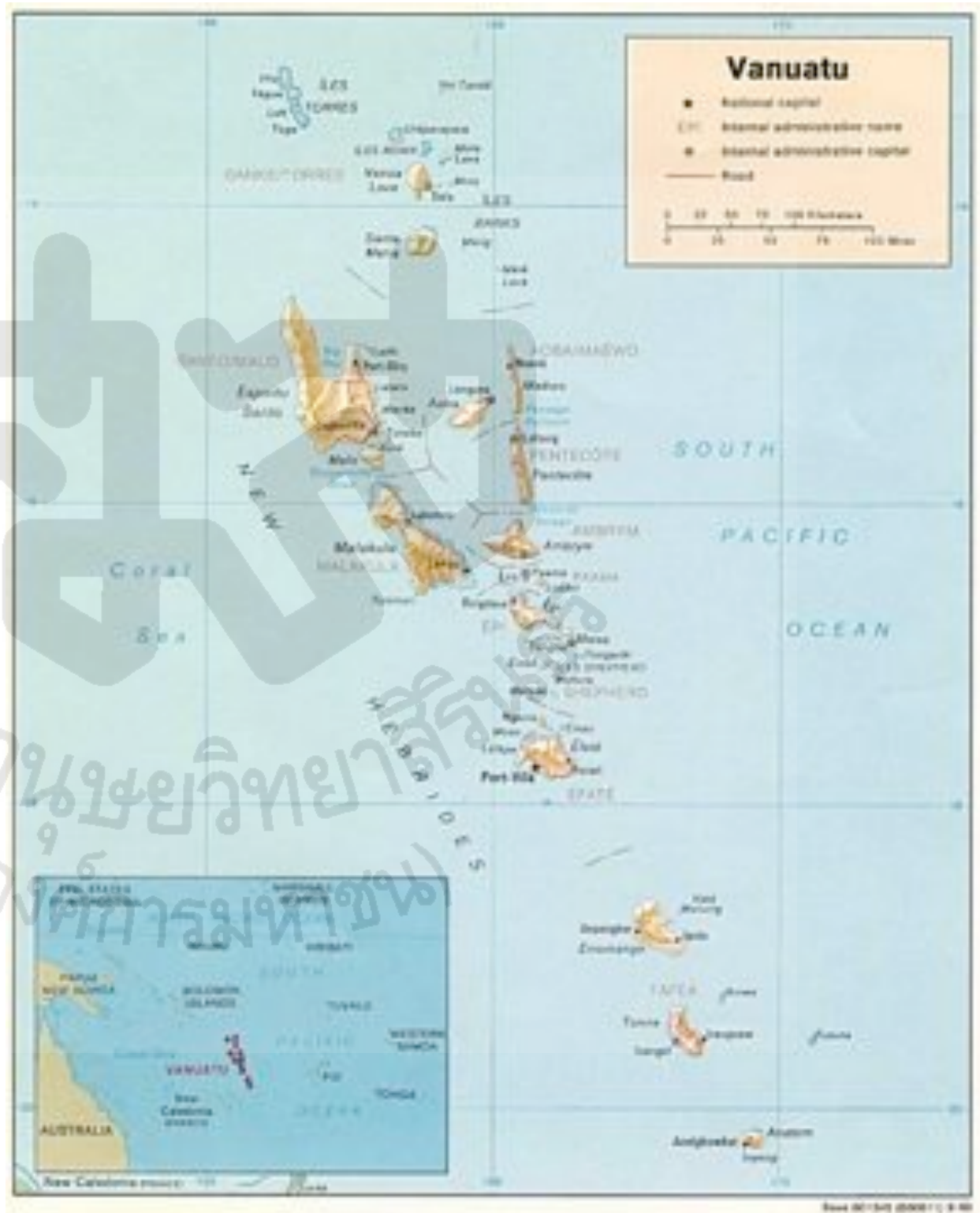
Therefore, it is not an 'indigenous museum', but rather an institution that has indigenised Western museological techniques and research methods to serve the needs of local communities.

Vanuatu in Melanesia



Vanuatu

- 1907: Jointly governed by British-French Condominium & known as New Hebrides.
- Independent nation as of July 1980.
- About 200,000 inhabitants, 50% under 18.
- More than 100 languages spoken - island/ national identity.



Presentation Outline

- What does the VCC do?
- VCC: Historical Overview
- The Museum today
- Oral Traditions Project: Safeguarding ICH
- The VCC and local communities: Community development projects

Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC)

Umbrella organisation comprised of:

- National Museum
 - National Library
 - Oral Traditions Project
 - Film and Sound Unit
 - Women's Cultural Project
 - Young Peoples Project
 - Historical Sites Survey
- Main cultural heritage body of the archipelago

VCC: Historical Overview

- 1956: Condominium Government lays the foundation stone for a cultural centre in Port Vila.
- 1959: Completion of the building which was initially used for condominium purposes (balls, meetings).
- 1961: Library installed in building.
- The museum was taken care of by British Residency staff member.
- 1960s-70s: 'The museum was a Western institution in its scope and preoccupations.' (Bolton 2003: 33)

Objectives

The provision of facilities for 'the exhibition of objects which illustrate the history, literature and natural resources of the New Hebrides; and scientific, artistic and literary activities of general interest' (Joint Standing Order 1960)

VCC Board → British, French and ni-Vanuatu members and dealt with issues of ethnology and history.

Collections

First objects collected by colonial diplomats and anthropologists, archaeologists and other researchers doing fieldwork in the archipelago.

Natural history specimens (birds, shells) were also part of the initial collections by foreign researchers.

→ Local people did not visit the museum



The new VCC

1980: Independence of Vanuatu from French and British Condominium.

→ Search for contemporary identities in the pre-colonial past and the traditions inherited by ancestors (*Kastom*: revival of traditional practices).

→ Moratorium on research by foreigners.

1995: New building of VCC in the style of traditional Melanesian longhouses and next to the *Malvatumauri* (Council of Chiefs).



Kastom Preservation/ Revival

The Oral Traditions Project – Safeguarding ICH

1970s: French/ British anthropologists initiated an oral traditions recording programme ‘to get the Melanesians interested in the documentation and revival of their traditional cultures’ (Huffman in Bolton 2003: 36)

This was very much in line with similar UNESCO sponsored projects in the Pacific on the documentation of local traditions and languages.

The Oral Traditions Project

Expatriate researchers trained local people (fieldworkers) in oral tradition recording techniques (written and audiovisual):

- Genealogies
- Dictionary Making

Project rooted in a Western ethos of preservation that underlies **modernist museology** → recordings are new items to be catalogued and documented.

It **ALSO** increased local interest in cultural revival and preservation.

Selection of trainees

- Speakers of Bislama (ni-Vanuatu lingua franca) and not necessarily French/ English → focus on rural people rather than urban elite.
- Men with deep knowledge and understanding of cultural traditions and local practices, rather than young trainees.
- Community leaders suggested men with necessary skills and knowledge to participate in the project.

Evolution of Project

At first, the OTP was mostly about recording and documenting stories, traditions, practices.

Gradually, it was aimed at raising the profile of traditional culture within the practitioners and after Independence became entwined in national identity formation projects.

It soon developed beyond the preservationist framework to a concern with maintenance and revival of cultural practices → cultural festivals throughout the archipelago.



Fieldworkers

Skills:

- Knowledge of cultural backgrounds and traditions of their communities.
- Ethnographic training (oral traditions recordings, taking notes, using audiovisual technologies).

Duties:

- Each year conduct research on a particular theme (fishing, dance ceremonies, grading systems, marriage customs).
- Convene once a year in the VCC to discuss findings.
- Unpaid work – privileges.

Fieldworkers



CI women standing along National Temple



CI women standing along National Temple

Recordings

- Notes on fieldwork diaries.
- Audiovisual recordings: tapes, videos.

Recordings are kept in the Tabu Room.

Some can be accessed by everyone and are disseminated over the radio, tv, or in publications, but others are owned by specific communities/ families and can only be accessed by them (restricted access).

Post-Independence VCC

1980s: Vanuatu Cultural Council imposes a Moratorium on anthropological research in Vanuatu → alienates expatriate researchers (esp. anthropologists) from cultural affairs of archipelago.

In parallel, it makes the work of the VCC more concerned with the preoccupations and benefit of local communities and brings into play agendas of DEVELOPMENT.

‘It remains a fact that the great majority of ni-Vanuatu will never read publications produced by professional researchers. The body of knowledge currently being generated will augment the academic discourse about Vanuatu which has always been conducted and constructed outside, in the metropolitan countries... It is the objective of VPRC (new research policy) to ensure that, at other levels more directly relevant to their own lives, ni-Vanuatu can perceive research as an exercise over which they can meaningfully participate, and from which they can benefit.’

(Regenvanu 1999)

Community Development

New directions in VCC heritage-work:

NOT ONLY cultural revival, BUT ALSO community development through *kastom* preservation.

- Education Reform.
- *Kastom* Economy.
- *Kastom* Transportation.
- Heritage and Sustainable Development (Tourism/ Ecotourism).

VCC = *Kastom* School





Kastom Economy

‘... the introduction of Western lifestyles can eventually be very harmful to ni-Vanuatu. For example, if the international economy falls and prices rise, we won’t be able to import rice. This is why we encourage people to live according to our *kastom* economy, cultivate the land and use canoe to travel.’

(Kapere 05/07)





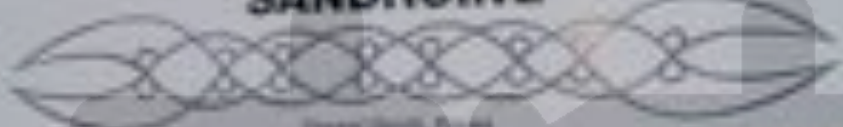
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Sandroing: A UNESCO Masterpiece



Action Plan

Funded by UNESCO & Japan Funds in Trust for ICH.

- Revitalisation, transmission, promotion (*Sandroing* festivals for men & women).
- Integration into school curriculum (publication of books, annual competition for students).
- National & international awareness raising (festivals, radio programmes, permanent interactive display in museum, information packages, short films & internet site).

Action Plan

Legal protection, income generation & inventorying:

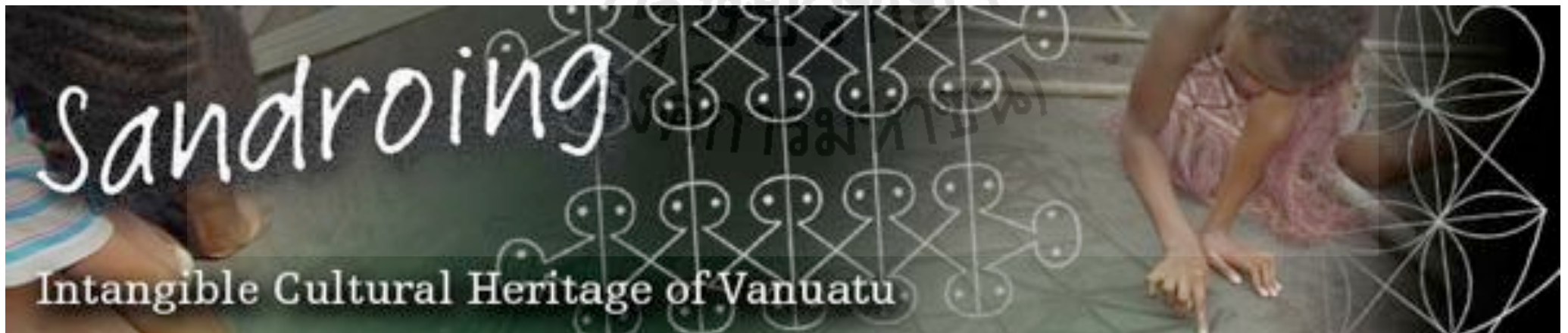
legal safeguarding


financial safeguarding: selective commercialisation controlled by tradition bearers (selection of images that can be publicly distributed, establishment of trust-fund for supporting practitioners).

database: collate resources on *Sandroing*.

Tradition and Modernity

Intangible heritage → new tool for engaging with traditions and participating in international heritage and development arena.





ศูนย์มานุษยวิทยาสิรินธร
(องค์การมหาชน)





Cultural Tourism

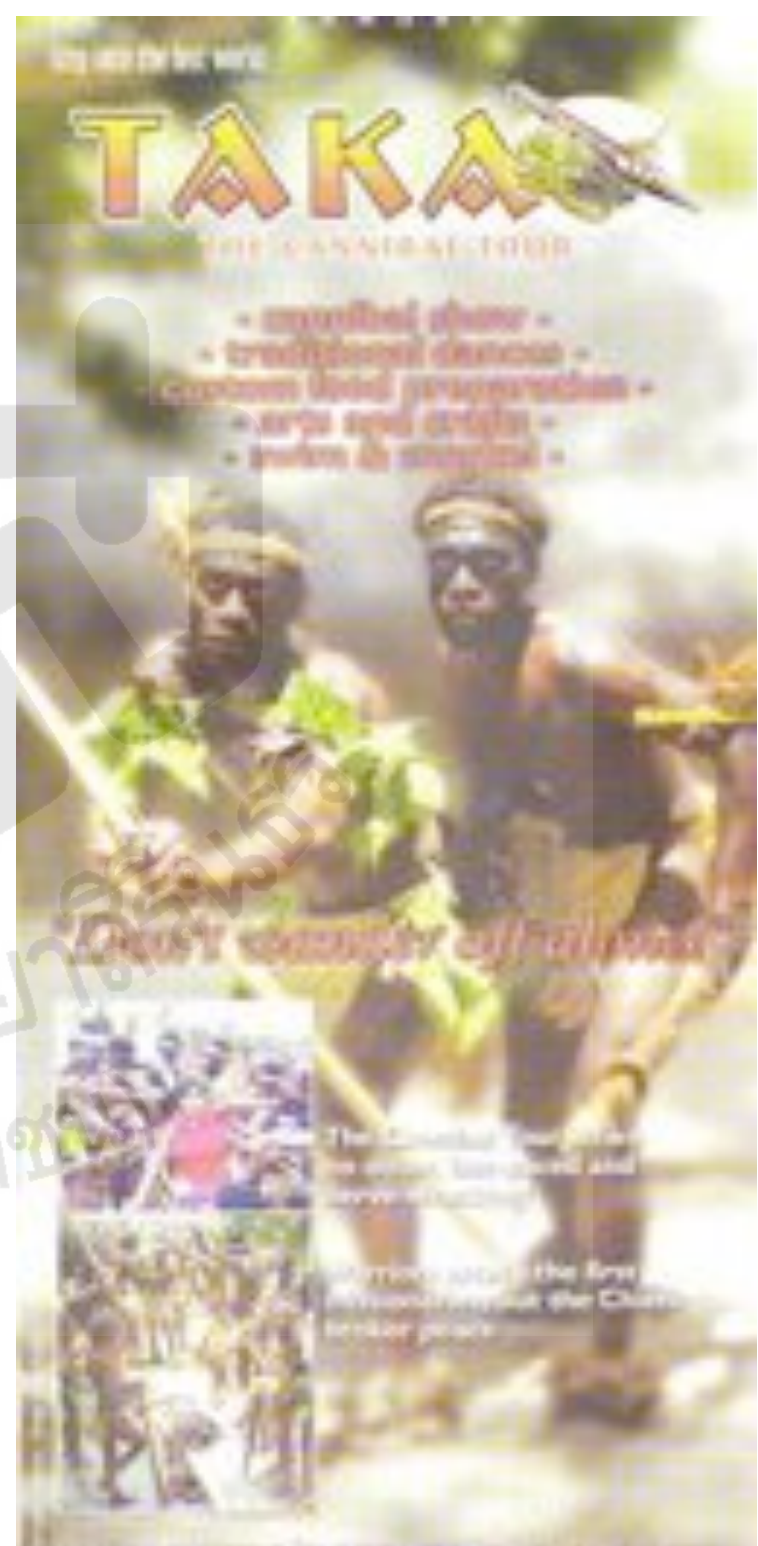
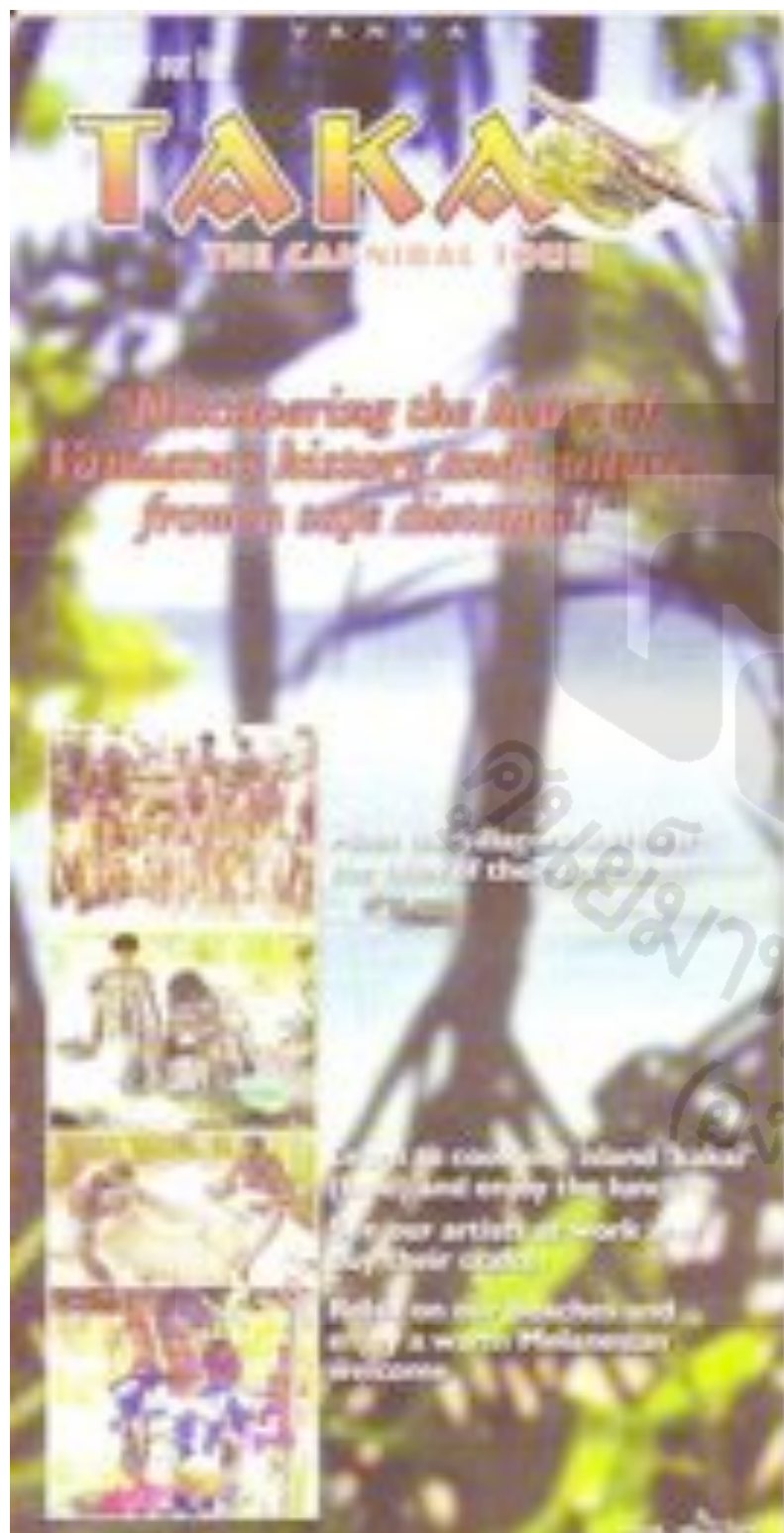




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วิทยาลัยบูรพคดีศึกษา
(องค์การมหาชน)





Rethinking Authenticity

‘... tourism can distort cultural expressions. The question, however, is if the community who is the bearer and practitioner of the tradition decides to alter the tradition for the purpose of making money, is that a distortion? Or maybe is the intervention of UNESCO, museums and anthropologists saying that they can’t do that the real distortion? (Regenvanu 05/07).