

Gender, Creativity, and Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of the Vanuatu Women's Water Music

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In the South Pacific island nation of Vanuatu (see Figure 1.) there are over 100 different languages spoken. With its population of approximately 250,000, this means Vanuatu has the highest rate of per capita linguistic diversity on the planet. In the remote north of Vanuatu, in the province of TORBA, are the Banks Islands. The location of these islands in the remote north of Vanuatu, and the combination of a small population on a group of islands with a small land mass, means that the TORBA provincial government struggles to deliver services to the same degree as the other provinces. Notwithstanding the lack of services (perhaps because of it) a recent report on ni-Vanuatu indicators of wellbeing concluded that “people of TORBA Province are, on average, the happiest people in Vanuatu” ([Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2012, p. 13](#)).

For as long as anyone can remember the women of the Banks Islands have made sounds from the river and the ocean. Women from other islands in the TORBA, and as far away as the Solomon Islands have also been known to engage in this practice of making sounds in the water by splashing, scooping, and slapping the water (see Figure 3.). Hugo Zemp (1978) recorded this practise in the Solomon Islands, where the Sa'a people of Small Malaita, refer to it as *kiro* while the neighbouring 'Are'are people of Malaita use the terms *kiroha*, or *kiro ni karusi*, meaning “kiro of the water” ([1978, pp. 39-40](#)). Despite identifying that the 'Are'are have a discrete “musical category” for the *kiro*, Zemp classified the water percussion as a “game”, perhaps because the “repertoire is very limited” ([Zemp, 1978, p. 59](#)).

Another reason why Zemp, and the Melanesian communities themselves, have considered the water music as a “game” or pastime may be because, almost exclusively, it is women who practise it. Occasionally boys join in if they are young enough to be bathing with their mothers or sisters, but water music is simply perceived to be “a woman's thing”. The water music is also not associated with any formal ritual or ceremony, and is therefore not considered a sacred or taboo practise. It is possible that if water music was considered “a man's thing” then it could have developed a stronger association with men's customary rituals. Perhaps the women deliberately prevented the water music from entering any ritual, or any musical canon, preferring that it was perceived to be a “game” so as to protect it from being ritualised by men (from inside or outside the community). The fact that it is not associated with any ritual or taboo makes it more accessible than many other cultural expressions in Vanuatu.

More recently, a team made up of an ethnomusicologist and a linguist, recorded the water music on two tiny islands in the south east of the Banks Islands: Gaua and Merelava (see François and Stern 2013). One of the ethno-linguistic groups who live on these two islands are the Mwerlap people. This case study concerns the Mwerlap diaspora and the way that they have

structured elements of their cultural heritage in creative ways to generate opportunities for women and men of all ages to participate in a range of entrepreneurial activities.

The Leweton Cultural Group

In 2008, a Mwerlap man named Sandy Sur was living on the fringe of Luganville, Espiritu Santo, the second biggest town in Vanuatu with a population of almost 15,000. Sandy brought together the Mwerlap community living in and around Luganville and facilitated the establishment of a conscious community – a peri-urban “cultural village” – for the dual purpose of maintaining cultural heritage and presenting their cultural heritage to tourists. They named their village “Leweton” being an acronym of six of the villages they came from on Gaua and Merelava. With support from the New Zealand High Commission the Leweton group constructed a purpose-built “pool” for performing the water music and then constructed a “cultural village” around it.

Viewed through the lens of Southern Theory (R. Connell, 2007) and the decolonising project (Smith, 1999), the conscious expression of agency by the Mwerlap-speaking diaspora to reclaim and represent themselves as the Leweton Cultural Village can be interpreted as a transcendental act where the actions of the individuals and groups transform rather than maintain the existing societal structures. As Homi Bhabha writes, the spaces in between the rural and the urban “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha, 2012). By reclaiming their own physical and conceptual space, the Leweton community transform the structures of the society in which it is an agent.

As the incidence of tourist visitations increased, the Leweton group built on the unique and spectacular performance of the water music and bundled other elements of their cultural heritage into the overall “show”. It now includes *na-matto* a syncretised format of the Melanesian stringband with elements of traditional musical instruments and rhythms and chants, *ma-mag*, the young men’s traditional dance accompanied by traditional rhythms played on slit gong drums made of bamboo and wood accompanied by chants and songs; and *ne-leang* the women’s version of the traditional dancing and singing. As the village becomes more established and more popular (and more profitable) they have incorporated demonstrations of other cultural activities including preparation and cooking of food, traditional games and magic tricks, preparation and consumption of kava, and weaving of toys, baskets, mats, and costumes. Many of these artefacts are on displayed for sale to visitors.

Water Music

This practice of water music, originally called *vus lamlam* in the Mwerlap language, has been handed down from grandmother to mother to daughter for generations. According to one of the leaders of the Leweton Cultural Group, Warren Wevat Wessergo from Gaua, in 1974 two women and their daughters,

came together to discuss the development of the *vus lamlam* into a form of 'water music'. These women were Elizabeth Womal Marego and her sister Zalet Hilda. The women used a range of techniques, to create different layers of tone colour, structured into different rhythmic arrangements resulting in a series of unique compositions out of the various beats, rhythms, and textures previously applied in a more random fashion.

It is likely that many other people have similar narratives about the heritage of water music and how it has developed in their communities. Indeed, [François and Stern \(2013\)](#) relate that another woman on West Gaua (but originally from Merelava), Matauli Rowon, "(re)invented" the practise of water music in 1983, while she was doing the laundry in the river. Indeed, Banks Island societies are traditionally quite open – with lots of trade, exchange, and intermarriage between islands and communities. And throughout the colonial period labour recruiters and plantation owners would recruit Banks Islanders from different communities to come and work together. This continuous exchange between communities in the Banks Islands makes it very difficult to know precisely where the water music originated. What we do know, is that the water music is seeing something of a resurgence – and it generating an interest in other forms of cultural renewal.

In 2014 there are three more identifiable groups of women performing the water music – each with village activities and infrastructure and activities that are presented as a part of the performance. On Gaua there are two groups: Limoros and Salap. And on Santo, on a neighbouring property to Leweton is the Turgor group.

One of the key people at the centre of this cultural renewal is a woman from Gaua named Delly Roy. Delly is the leader of a grassroots indigenous-led movement of that was established specifically to promote and preserve the diverse cultural practices of the northern part of Vanuatu and to engage young people in their cultural heritage. The Traditional Entertainment and Kastom Support (TEKS) Program in Santo, focuses its work in the field of traditional knowledge and wisdom transfer, and cultural development.

Modelling Effective Cultural Heritage Maintenance

TEKS is working alongside the Lukaotem Gud Santo Festival (LGSF) in Luganville, Santo, the second largest music and cultural festival in Vanuatu. Together TEKS and LGSF act as a creative hub for cultural promotion and development. TEKS was set up after the 2011 edition of LGSF due to the need to provide more support to traditional performance groups. Delly oversees the work of TEKS ensuring that the program uses alternative locally-based approaches to cultural resource management through the promotion and preservation of important traditional wisdom practices including dances, music, songs, and stories, and connecting these with contemporary music and dance; and traditional artistic creations such as carving, weaving, painting, drawing and fabric art.

Last year, Delly and the TEKS program were awarded the "8th UNESCO

Youth Forum Label” as a recognition of the quality and excellence of the projects, in line with UNESCO’s priorities.

The idea that underpins the work of the TEKS project is the unity that underpins the diversity of ni-Vanuatu cultural expression. The work that TEKS has done with Leweton has modeled an effective process for other groups to follow. TEKS selected the water music as one of its first test cases because:

- it features women prominently in the group
- it is not associated with a sacred ceremony
- and it is practiced throughout the Banks Islands – not just in one place – which means that any women from the Banks Islands can perform.

Delly explained the significance of the water music as model for engaging young women in cultural expression in safe and respectful situations:

“We know that there is a warrior element to our heritage. But sometimes we forget that the fundamental elements of our *kastom* are based on peace and respect. Maybe this is because men have dominated the process of telling our stories in recent times? Now that women are standing up and singing and dancing and telling their own stories, we can connect with the part of our heritage that has been hidden from the men: our women’s stories. And with these stories comes a woman’s way of telling the stories, singing the songs, and dancing the dances.”

The global economy, is just a way of operating that reflects the *kastom* of people from Europe or America. Here in Vanuatu communities have developed their own ways of regulating exchange and trade between communities. But the integration of the cash economy makes it difficult to honour the traditional systems. The TEKS program is modeling ways of using the strengths of ni-Vanuatu cultural heritage to support economic development for women. This has implications for the Vanuatu government officials as the tourism industry in Vanuatu relies heavily on the cultural heritage of the indigenous communities. While *kastom* and traditional wisdom – songs, dances and stories – are a big part of the tourism industry, it must be understood that the people who perform these songs and dances are also musicians and dancers. They are working in the arts/cultural industry, or creative industries, as well as the tourism industry.

Delly explains the tension that exists at this level for the ni-Vanuatu custodians of cultural heritage:

“Sometimes it seems that the tourism operators are not working in the best interests of the performers. And the government officials do not get involved at that level. Of course we understand that everyone has the right to make money and profit from their endeavours. But there are ways of operating that respect the value of cultural heritage and still allow you to make a profit. Artists and performers also need to make a living.” Delly Roy, Leader, Traditional Entertainment and Kastom Support Program

These tensions that exist in the corporate world of the tourism industry and the arts industry, they are still being played out in the daily lives of people who have fairly minimal interaction with the cash economy. The cultural heritage of these communities is far more relevant to them than the regulation of the economy. There are no arts unions in Vanuatu, and there is practically no market for arts products outside of the tourism industry. Not only is the cultural heritage the context for daily life, but it is also – through the songs, dances and stories – the foundation of the economic activity and the source of supply of cultural products. This importance of this is demonstrated by the Alternative Indicators of Wellbeing report that presents quantitative data suggesting that traditional wisdom, in the form of stories and songs, is more resilient in the TORBA than other provinces ([Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2012, p. 13](#)).

As Delly explained, “The TEKS project recognizes that there is enormous potential within Vanuatu for capitalizing on the inherent strengths of the various cultural expressions. The leaders of the Leweton, Turgor, Limoros, and Salap groups have all displayed outstanding entrepreneurial vision to achieve the success that they have achieved so far. It is our hope that the TEKS project can facilitate the development of these groups and the expansion of their market internationally.”

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