

INNOVATIVE NETWORKS IN VANUATU

Tourism and Cultural Industries

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Abstract

This paper examines Fest'Napuan, Vanuatu's annual culture and music festival, to understand the festival's contribution to the cultural development of Vanuatu. Since 1996 Fest'Napuan has provided a forum that supports the performance of contemporary and traditional music and dance. The festival and its organising association have spearheaded projects and innovative partnerships that have led to the advantageous export of ni-Vanuatu music and cultural performance.

Tourism firms operating in the region are developing innovative relationships with Fest'Napuan, with both the organisers, and with the individual performers directly. These networks are clusters of intense cultural negotiation as external forces interact with traditional norms thus fomenting tensions around authenticity, sensitivity, Indigeneity, and artistic value. In this paper we argue that musical production in Vanuatu should be viewed as a 'natural competitive advantage' for both the cultural performers and tourism operators. However, in order to exploit this natural advantage, diverse and selected actors need to deploy particular combinations of relational and social resources to achieve collective gain. Innovative, strategic collaborations are contended to increase awareness of these regions and promote their cultural diversity at the same time as developing a tourism brand.

Keywords

Festivals, culture, networks, policy, tourism, Melanesia

Introduction

Fest'Napuan is an annual, five-day, cultural festival featuring music and dance from Vanuatu and the Pacific. The Festival, and its organising body, the Fest'Napuan Association play a significant role in the creative development and identity of Vanuatu, and Melanesia as a whole. The Fest'Napuan association is involved in a range of projects and community and cultural development activities throughout the year.

There is a body of work exploring the contribution of festivals to the broader community which found that festivals contribute to both the social advancement and economic prosperity of regions (Hill, 2007). Gibson and Connell (2005) trace the importance of festivals as a growing feature of music/cultural tourism. They note that:

a shift has occurred in the perception of music festivals, and in their cultural and economic roles, from community orientation to commercial motives (Gibson and Connell, 2005: 211).

Research conducted in Pacific islands supports the notion that music tourism can significantly affect, and threaten, cultural authenticity (Gibson and Connell, 2005; Hayward, 2001, 2011).

Babadzan (1988) has written about the complex relationship between culture, politics, and national identity in Pacific Islands, especially with regard to the tensions around contemporary perspectives on traditional practices. These tensions are part of an ongoing dialogue around what Jolly (1992) calls the "specters of inauthenticity". Kaepler (1987) maintains that festivals are important communicative vehicles to affirm ethnic identity and the impacts of tourism on Pacific. More recently, and specifically in Australia, there have been several studies investigating the impact of festivals, especially rural festivals (Gibson and Stewart, 2009), Indigenous Community Festivals (see Heydon, 2007) and Indigenous Cultural Festivals (see Phipps and Slater, 2010). These authors all note 'community building' as a factor stemming from regionally placed festivals. Further, Phipps and Slater (2010: 9) suggest "festivals are important to Indigenous communities for their contribution to community wellbeing, resilience and capacity". In recent years, and outside of an Australia context, Fest'Napuan is providing significant stimulus for research (see Hayward, 2009, 2011; Dick and Meltherorong, 2011). Fest'Napuan is an example of a festival that showcases performers from local cultural groups and contemporary Indigenous musical styles and thus draws on concepts of cultural identity to market Vanuatu's unique cultural heritage.

There is a growing interest in research exploring Melanesian contemporary culture. Hinch and Delamere (1993: 3) ask whether or not traditional cultural practices should reflect a "living" or a "frozen" culture. This is to some extent connected with the development of the 'world music' genre and a European desire for the exotic (O'Brien, 2006). This has raised questions around the politics of ownership of Indigenous music and musical ethics: What is authentic Vanuatu music? There is the well-documented case in which a traditional melody from Vanuatu's Melanesian-neighbour, Solomon Islands, was used in the Deep Forest/Pygmy Lullaby tracks and it was wrongly attributed to an African village (Feld, 2000). Kupiainen (2011) provides an analysis of the first Melanesian Arts Festival, held in the Solomon Islands. Specifically in Vanuatu, there is a gap in the research in relation to the significance of large, free-to-the-public, community events for social and economic development, cultural identity, tradition and contemporary culture (see Hayward, 2009, 2011; Dick and Meltherorong, 2011; Jolly, 1992). This research starts to outline and examine the contribution of festivals in Vanuatu. The investigation of the contribution of cultural festivals is critical as small island nations and Indigenous cultures generally are losing cultural heritage and festivals may provide a way to capture and sustain local knowledge. Further, social capital may accrue to local festivals as well as cultural capital as the networks of actors that come together to produce and perform at Fest'Napuan create new kinds of resources (Keast, Brown and Gunsekara, 2009). Finally, the extension of these networks to international locales may support Burt's (1992) structural hole theory that entrepreneurial action or social innovation may occur in the gaps between dense interactions of networks as tightly bound relations may stifle new thinking and restrict action. While Walker, Kogut and Shan (1997) found that structural hole theory may apply more to business networks relying on market transactions than social networks relying on norms and social capital however, it is not clear whether structural hole theory accounts for the operation of complex cultural networks that encompass a mix of community, institutional and business network actors. The research question is 'What is the role Fest'Napuan plays in the cultural development of Vanuatu'?

This paper includes in its scope, the variety of festival activities that come under the banner of Fest'Napuan and/or the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and the relationship of these activities to the social and cultural diversity of Vanuatu. Both of these organisations have played a pivotal and catalysing role in community and cultural development (amongst other things) in Vanuatu. Fest'Napuan, outside of its core program of music and performance, actively coordinates training and development opportunities for young

people (mostly in the creative industries activities) and develops other cultural project. In addition to this, Fest'Napuan has an important function in shaping policy through channeling development funding, negotiating relationships with international festivals and promoters, and influencing the national tourism strategies.

A case study research method was employed. Qualitative data in the form of media material, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders around the festival, and observations were collected and analysed. Through this the authors account for the influence of Fest'Napuan on the tourism and cultural development of Vanuatu.

Background

Fest'Napuan was first held as a one day show in 1996 to mark the opening of the new National Museum building. It was organised by a group of musicians to provide an opportunity for local musicians to perform contemporary music. In the words of Ralph Regenvanu, President of the Fest'Napuan Association and (at the time) Director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre,

with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre we're celebrating things from the past and so we wanted to celebrate our contemporary culture, to show that our culture is always evolving. It's really contributed to the development of life in Vanuatu – the cultural life of a nation (Regenvanu, 2009).

In 2000, by which time the event had become a two-day festival, the organising committee incorporated Fest'Napuan as a charitable association. Over the next decade, Fest'Napuan evolved into a five-day event incorporating three discrete festivals, each with its own programming committee. The first day is billed as 'Fest'Nalenga' and features Melanesian stringband music. The next three days are Fest'Napuan proper. The final day is 'Zion Fest' featuring religious music. The entire event is organised and produced by volunteers, with funding coming largely from corporate sponsorship, donations, and the licensing of food stalls at the event.

The VCC is an umbrella organisation which includes the National Museum of Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Cultural and Historical Site Survey, the National Library and the National Film and Sound Unit. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC) is widely regarded as an important cultural institution in the Pacific through its engagement with local community and promotion of collaborative research designed to maximise the relevance and benefit to the people of Vanuatu. This was fostered by the development of the (men's) fieldworker system from 1980 by Kirk Huffman (2000) and the women's fieldworker program in 1994, by Jean Tarisese and Lissant Bolton. This work was furthered by Ralph Regenvanu, who in the 1990's developed guiding ethical principles which have been used as a model both by UNESCO and WIPO. The VCC provides a platform for villagers to engage with the nation-state (first colonial, from its establishment in the 1960s to Independence in 1980). It has proactively influenced policy and public debate in terms of cultural policy by giving a voice to people otherwise marginalised from the political arena, thus enriching the nation-state.

Foreign aid – Policy and development

Fest'Napuan has successfully partnered with the VCC, and other organisations to secure funding for a range of projects aimed at developing the cultural and creative industries in Vanuatu. Ralph Regenvanu's dual role as President of the Fest'Napuan Association and Director of the VCC (until 1996) has been critical in this process. The table demonstrates the breadth of formal network partnerships that Fest'Napuan has developed since its

incorporation in 2000. It also demonstrates the diverse conceptual nature of the projects and the broad geographic scope of the projects in which Fest'Napuan is involved. The table also demonstrates the broad base of donors providing financial support to Fest'Napuan's initiatives.

Project	Partner(s)	Year/Period	Funding Donor(s)
Alternative Indicators of Well-Being for Melanesia project	VCC, Statistics Office	2010-2011	The Christensen Fund, Secretariat of the Pacific Community
Digital Media Workshops	FN, Further Arts, Wan Smolbag, Village de Santo	2010-2011	Self-funded
<i>Storian</i> /Women in Music Project	FN, Southern Cross University, Further Arts, Brisbane Multicultural Arts Centre	2010	Centre for Tourism Leisure and Work, AusAID, Village de Santo, Griffith University
Africa-Caribbean-Pacific Festivals Network	FN and Zone Franche	2009-2011	European Union
Youth Creative and Cultural Opportunities Project	FN and Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific	2008-2011	European Union
Traditional Money Banks Project	VCC	2004-2006	UNESCO and Japanese Funds-in-Trust
Island Studios Project	FN, VCC and Further Arts	2005-2010	Private
Bie Studio Project	FN, VCC and Further Arts	2002	AusAID
Oral Arts Project	VCC and Further Arts	2001-2004	European Union
Naio Australian Tour	Further Arts and FN	2002	Private

Table 1. Important cultural development projects in Vanuatu

As demonstrated in this table, foreign aid supplied by Australia and the European Union is important for the country's cultural and economic development initiatives. Over the last decade, European Union funding has been employed as a mechanism to fund (specifically) cultural development activities within Vanuatu to stimulate economic growth and address social issues, such as 'urban drift', and 'youth bulge' – the term given to the burgeoning youth population under the age of 14 and youth unemployment problems (Johnston, 2008). In Vanuatu the 2009 census revealed that the median age of the population was 20 years old, and 39% of the population was under the age of 15 years old (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009). The foreign aid has played an important part in forming the network partnerships, for example European Union funding helped establish the Island Rehearsal Studios at the Youth Centre on Espiritu Santo from 2002.

The rehearsal studio located in Espiritu Santo is in close proximity to the Village de Santo Resort, in the main town of Luganville on the northern island of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu's biggest island. Luganville is 280km north of the Vanuatu capital of Port Vila. Impacts from external forces are increasing in Santo, through tourism, and penetration

of the cash economy. Young people are particularly affected and at risk from rapid social changes and lack of information and support to navigate these changes. Many are caught between two worlds having had some modern education but no economic opportunity, and yet having disconnected to some degree from their traditional cultures. Influences such as marijuana, violent films, and alcohol are fuelling discontent and creating complex social problems such as violence, depression, sexual transmitted disease and teenage pregnancy. In Table 1, the Youth Creative and Cultural Opportunities Project was designed to specifically address these issues. Its project proposal claims that "the positive mental health and creation of alternative opportunities for young people is critical for the future of the country". This project facilitated creative activities such as music, dance and story-telling (developed through mediums such as recording, radio and film) and created opportunities for positive outlets and occupation of young people and dissemination of critical educational and awareness information.

During the renovation of the rehearsal studio in 2009 (an activity funded through the Youth Creative and Cultural Opportunities Project), various members of the Fest'Napuan network worked together with the owners of Village de Santo Resort on a variety of mutually beneficial projects. Village de Santo, through its engagement with the Youth Centre and rehearsal studio, also gained access to the network of people and organisations attached to the Fest'Napuan Association.

The development of this relationship suggests that foreign aid policies that promote this kind of network development can lead to spillovers in other industries such as tourism. Such conclusions are supported by both established network theory and cultural and creative industries literature (Dunphy, 2009; UNESCO, 2005).

WOMEX – A network case study

One partner to the Fest'Napuan organisation is the International World Music Expo (WOMEX), which is held each year in different locations in Europe. For the years 2009 through to 2011 WOMEX was held in Copenhagen, Denmark. The relationship between Fest'Napuan and WOMEX was facilitated through a 2009 European Union (EU) funded project. The project successfully established a global network of festivals in Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific countries (these three regions being the focus for the EU international aid program). Fest'Napuan is the only representative in this network from the Pacific. This project was called the ACP Festivals Network (henceforth ACP).

The ACP provides funds for delegates from Fest'Napuan to attend WOMEX annually for the duration of the project. So in 2009, 2010, and 2011, Fest'Napuan had delegates attending WOMEX. The members of the Fest'Napuan network perceived WOMEX as a major element of the Western hemisphere of opportunity for the people and organisations involved in the cultural industries in Vanuatu. WOMEX is attended by many of the major international promoters of world music. Thus it represents a chance for Fest'Napuan delegates to promote Vanuatu musicians to a broad and diverse section of the agents who represent international festivals with a view to organising international tours and performances. However, not only is the cost of travel to Europe prohibitive in the sense that international promoters are disinclined to outlay such a large amount of money to transport the artists from Vanuatu to Europe, but the European audience, as represented by producers and promoters at WOMEX, has failed to recognise the traditional and customary music of Melanesia as an art-form. For example, in 2010, the Fest'Napuan delegates to WOMEX reported that discussions with the organisers of WOMEX yielded the comment that traditional music performed in the islands of Vanuatu, in its local setting, does not fit into the rubric of 'world music' and perhaps was better

suited to presentation at a tourism trade fair (Tjiobang, pers. comm., 2 December, 2010).

While the organisers of WOMEX clearly recognise the intersection between music and tourism and further, the role that Fest'Napuan was playing in mediating this interaction, it is important to note that this does not necessarily reflect the views of the ni-Vanuatu performers. Prior to independence, traditional music was constructed as an opposition to colonialism (see Bolton, 1998). With the capital becoming more cosmopolitan and the widespread adoption of Bislama (a Creole born of English, French and vernacular languages) as the lingua franca, contemporary Vanuatu underwent a transformation of traditional community practices into commercial activities in the capital (Hayward, 2011). In his analysis of the tourism and music industries in Vanuatu, Hayward (2011: 58) writes that:

the power of the tourist dollar in the low-employment economy around Port Vila has provided a continuing motive for ni-Vanuatu to perform various types of traditional material for tourists, at hotel venues, at special events or at 'traditional villages' set up specifically to provide employment for island youth through re-presenting aspects of their cultural heritage.

This situation was regarded with some concern by ni-Vanuatu commentators, for example in 1974, Gordon Ligo noted that: "Tourism is ruining the spirit of our ceremonies" (cited in Hayward, 2011: 6). And while the tourism industry has provided a channel for overseas distribution of local music, there is limited potential and even less capacity for achieving significant sales to international audiences for the music.

From the unpublished project proposal documentation for the Youth Creative and Cultural Opportunities Project in Table 1, the following statement provides some insight to the issues that confront the local cultural industries:

Notwithstanding the vibrancy of the contemporary, domestic music industry, it is severely limited in its capacity for growth. Economically, Vanuatu will always find it difficult to compete in the contemporary global music industry on account of: its geographic isolation from the major markets of Europe, North America, and Asia; and the lack of awareness in those markets of Vanuatu and its rich musical diversity. Furthermore, the lack of formal music education and broadcast-quality audio mastering equipment limit the aspirations of musicians to the selling of a couple of hundred copies of an album to customers in, mainly, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji (Johnston, 2008: np).

Many of the actors in the Fest'Napuan network have identified that the Vanuatu music 'brand' is something that galvanises the local artists, as Vanuatu musician Marcel Meltherorong states:

I see my music as a tool – a way of teaching my children and future generations about holding on to Vanuatu culture, our customs and our traditions at a time when western influence is changing our way of life. I remember an old bloke told me that if we can marry western knowledge with our traditional knowledge that would make our children 'twice wise' (Dick and Meltherorong, 2011: 110)

One Fest'Napuan organiser has written:

In the field of promotion and distribution of its music Vanuatu is in fact competing with the rest of the world ... A niche has been pinpointed and this is where Vanuatu and its

musicians must concentrate their efforts – the merging of traditional custom music with modern music ... there needs to be a more conscious effort to integrate more of our culture into our music (Nalo, 2004: 4-5).

The competitive advantage, defined as the competencies or resources which are distinctive from or superior to those of one's competitors (Petaraf, 1993), that exists for Vanuatu musicians is that they have a strong connection to their traditional cultural practices and their original geographic context – such as the Leweton Women's Water Music Group, a troupe of women from the northern islands of Gaua (and with some intermarriage with the island of Mere Lava) who stand waist deep in the ocean and create unique tonal and rhythmic percussion by slapping, splashing, and paddling the water.

Despite the challenges of classification and presentation, WOMEX provided the opportunity for the Fest'Napuan delegates to meet with the organisers of the Rainforest World Music Festival in Malaysia. The Fest'Napuan delegates, acting as an informal and uncontracted agent for the Vanuatu music industry at large (and arguably the entire Pacific), were able to negotiate for the Leweton Women's Water Music Group, residents of the island of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, to perform at the Rainforest World Music Festival. The negotiations started in October 2009, at WOMEX, where Fest'Napuan delegates presented several different videos of various Vanuatu musicians to Rainforest World Music Festival Director, Randy Raine-Reutsch. But it was not until the following year, again at WOMEX, that a proposal was made for the Leweton group to perform in the 2011 Rainforest World Music Festival. At this point, negotiations would not have been able to progress further without the assistance of the Village de Santo Resort. Representatives of this firm provided the contact point and communication channel to the local Leweton group, facilitating the process of acquiring passports, and making visa applications. In return, the Fest'Napuan delegates were able to negotiate for representatives from the Village de Santo Resort to have access to a stall in the festival grounds whereby they could provide promotional material to the attendees and, at the same time, act as tour manager for the Leweton Women's Water Music Group. This collaborative and innovative approach demonstrates the importance of the partnership with the tourism industry while also demonstrating the mutual benefits that can accrue to network partners.

Conclusion

The Fest'Napuan delegates experience with WOMEX demonstrate how the Vanuatu music brand can converge with the tourism brand to provide export opportunities, in particular through the Leweton Women's Water Music Group's experience. This case study highlights the value of the strong social fabric that exists between members of networks in Vanuatu, whereby a high level of trust between actors means that actors can speak on behalf of each other such as in the case of the Fest'Napuan delegates to WOMEX acting as agents for the musicians of Vanuatu. At the same time this exemplifies structural hole theory (Burt, 1992) as the delegates reported that even though they had been advised that traditional cultural practice was not 'world music', they could not only see the opportunity that exists for cultural performers from Vanuatu, they could act on it.

The projects that have been funded by the various donors reflect the interest in developing cultural and creative industries in developing economies. The projects administered through the Fest'Napuan Association and its networks in Santo have created a space for dialogue away from the urban capital of Port Vila. This was significant in providing a channel for participation in the democratic process by enabling

access for rural peoples and musicians to contribute to the national conversation in their own community and at the annual Fest'Napuan event.

Public policy, both domestically and internationally, for governments and communities, has a major impact on the interaction between agents in developing countries. The positive spillover effects of regional policies supporting networks and clusters in the cultural and creative industries and how they benefit industries such as tourism, is an area where future research could help streamline development policy and programs.

Musical production in the Melanesian region is so deeply rooted in its geographic context and yet so rich and diverse that it can be viewed as a natural competitive advantage: for both the cultural performers and the tourism and hospitality operators. Innovative, strategic collaborations can increase awareness of these regions and promote their cultural diversity at the same time as developing a tourism brand. Both the regional tourism industry and the local festivals can realise exponential growth from greater cooperation and collaboration.

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