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On being a contemporary *Taasila*: navigating *kastom* and *ol ting blong waet man*¹

Abstract

Pacific journalists are faced with many issues, some of which would be familiar to Western journalists, while others are unique to the South Pacific and can be confusing to journalists exclusively educated or trained in the West. The core argument of this paper is that an approach attentive to the cultural context and particularities of South Pacific societies like Vanuatu can enhance our understanding of the challenges faced by contemporary Pacific journalists and allows us gaining a better understanding of these journalists' activities. 'On being a contemporary *taasila* navigating *kastom* and *ol ting blong waet men*' explores the impact of *kastom* (ni-Vanuatu's customs) on news translation in the archipelago, providing specific examples of how *kastom* interferes, impacts (perhaps positively or negatively) and influences the processes of news gathering, writing, editing and news delivery, in an attempt to refresh the thin available literature on media and journalism in Vanuatu, by giving serious consideration to cultural socio-cultural factors. The impact of re-emerging oceanic epistemologies will be investigated in an attempt to describe how culture in a complex socio-cultural context impacts on ni-Vanuatu journalists' work on a daily basis.

Dr Marie M'Balla-Ndi, James Cook University

Introduction

The manner in which the 'norms' of journalism are expressed can vary widely in both time and space, and the manner in which local customs, agendas, and laws influence the practice of journalism is widely discussed in the Western academic literature on journalism. To succinctly canvas this material: In the newsroom ethnographies of Tuchman (1978), in the New Left critiques of Gitlin (1980), in the move away from fact-based accounts to personalised storytelling characterised by the 'New Journalism' (Wolfe & Johnson, 1990) and civic boosterism in newspapers in Philadelphia (Kaniss, 1997), as well as community journalism – all coming from the land of the free and home of the First Amendment – or even in what is called 'local journalism' in the United Kingdom (Herbert, 2001), the decade-long debate over the emergence of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) (Carlsson, 2003), and the debate about Asian values in the reporting of events in Southeast Asia (Richstad, 2000). All of these studies recognise that the notion of the 'Fourth Estate' is never a fully realised ideal but rather a set of aspirations always mediated by local context. This is also the case in the South Pacific where, it is argued

in this paper, the dis-embedment and re-embedment of traditional patterns and socio-cultural structures has led to the hybridisation of norms and practices of journalism that could be referred to as “acts of cultural translation” (Conway, 2011).

This article interrogates how, more than three decades after independence, ni-Vanuatu journalists navigate liquid modernity, as well as the challenges it poses for their practice of journalism in post-colonial Vanuatu. Some aspects of Vanuatu’s socio-cultural environment will be described in this paper to contextualise this study and its core argument; the ontology of journalism practices in the specific context of Vanuatu will be examined; and the major points discussed in this article, as well as their implications, will be summarised in the conclusion. This research is not an anthropological study, but a newsroom ethnography addressing the lack of research into the role and impact of *culture* on journalism practice in Vanuatu.

Vanuatu: An brief overview

The Republic of Vanuatu is an archipelago of 83 islands located in the South West Pacific with a predominantly Melanesian² population. Vanuatu’s population is estimated at 243,023 in the 2009 National Census.³ Before independence in 1980, the islands were ruled under an arcane and complex Anglo-French condominium established in 1906.

Vanuatu is a vivid illustration of tensions between modern and traditional ways, also referred to in this paper by *kastom*. In fact, the concept of *kastom* in Vanuatu encapsulates notions of traditional values, beliefs and ways of doing, which are often seen by the respondents interviewed for this study as a system parallel to *ol ting blong waet men*, which used to define ‘modernity’ in Bislama (the lingua franca in Vanuatu) literally meaning ‘all things that belong to white men’. Ni-Vanuatu historian Anna Naupa (2005) argues:

As cultural change blurs the boundaries between the traditional and the modern, indigenous reference to *kastom* in contemporary Vanuatu is rather vague. Ni-Vanuatu remain aware of *kastom* ideals but can manipulate interpretations to suit their needs. [...] The ambiguous nature of *kastom* therefore allows communities to address the changing social (and natural) environments, while always rooted in cultural values.

The complex relationship between modern and traditional ways can be observed in the everyday life of ni-Vanuatu, the physical environment of the capital city, socio-cultural structures and institutions, as well as in local journalism practice. This will be discussed later in this paper, but as but one example, it is fascinating to observe how language is representative of the combination of elements of tradition and modernity in Vanuatu. Vanuatu was a jointly administered territory of France and Britain – a condominium – until its independence in 1980. French and English share official language status with Bislama, derived from the two colonial languages. Governmental institutions, schools and other public institutions use Bislama and an additional language, whether English or French. Crowley (1989) argues that in other Melanesian postcolonial societies “it is English alone which fulfils many of the functions which are also shared by Bislama in Vanuatu” (p. 45). The status of French and English in Vanuatu is a direct influence of colonial times, or ‘modernity’. Upon independence, ni-Vanuatu could have chosen to establish Bislama – a ‘compromised language’ (Crowley, 1989) derived from the two colonial languages – as the official language. Instead, ni-Vanuatu positioned French and English along with Bislama as the official languages, which could suggest that ni-Vanuatu consider these languages an integral part of their post-colonial identity. More detailed examination of what impact these phenomena have on journalistic practice is discussed later. The next section will describe the data collection and theoretical approach used for this study.

Data Sample

For the purpose of the study discussed in this paper, only journalists from mainstream print media in Vanuatu were selected. There is only one daily newspaper (*Vanuatu Daily Post*) and two weekly newspapers (*The Vanuatu Times* and *The Independent*) in Vanuatu. *The Daily Post* is the most-widely read and publishes content in English and Bislama. Both weekly newspapers publish in English, Bislama and French. The data used in this paper was collected over two periods of participant observation: one with 10 ni-Vanuatu journalists in a Vanuatu daily newspaper in 2009, and one in 2011. During these two periods of fieldwork, 10 in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with ni-Vanuatu journalists. Some data was also collected through four email interviews with ni-Vanuatu journalists, and through the examination of archival

documents. The data was analysed through thematic analysis. The participants, who are all ni-Vanuatu journalists working for different media organisations, are referred to in this chapter as Participant 0, 1, 2, 3... or P0, P1, P2, P3... The respondents reflect a mix of men and women, as well as chiefly status holders and commoners.

Theoretical approach: An overview

This study uses a theoretical strategy that combines Bauman's concept of liquid modernity with resurgent oceanic epistemologies and will also briefly borrow from cultural translation studies.⁴ In other words, the theoretical strategy used in this study combines an emerging field of academic studies and a North Western European concept capable of integrating oceanic epistemologies. Being a Western concept articulated in 2000 by Zygmunt Bauman, a British-based Polish sociologist also known for his extensive work on modernity and post-modernity, liquid modernity might of course only be partially applicable to South Pacific societies such as the Vanuatu; this paper does not suggest that Bauman's concept does not need amendments when applied to examine journalistic practice in a Pacific context. However, this study does suggest that conventional notions of modernity, and even post-modernity, seem more inadequate or unsuitable than liquid modernity for theorising the socio-cultural context of contemporary Pacific societies such as Vanuatu. The reason for this, it is argued in this paper, is that theories such modernity and postmodernity tend to disregard co-existing cultural values that affect people living in Pacific societies⁵. These values are influenced by many currents including centuries-old local traditions and tribal rules, the introduction of Christianity by European missionaries during colonisation, the introduction of Westminster political systems and so one. All these influences have had an impact in what have become the 'norms' on which ni-Vanuatu journalists base ethical and professional behaviour. This said, this paper also acknowledges that, quite obviously, Pacific journalism also bears many characteristics in common with developed world journalism, not the least because much Pacific journalism is derivative of developed world practices, aspired to standards, and business models. In fact, journalism practice in these countries could be, and indeed has largely been, analysed by deploying Western theories and methods (see, for example, Robie, 2004, 2008; Layton, 1992). While this study recognises the

impact of this body of research, it argues that there is still a need to examine journalism practice in the South Pacific – and more specifically for this study, in Vanuatu – from a perspective that addresses what will be described here, though the words of Kyle Conway (2011), as “acts of cultural translation” (p. 584), which involves the need for ni-Vanuatu journalists to constantly negotiate shifting socio-cultural norms in order to be able to practice journalism in a safe, accurate and ethical way.

Thus, the aim of this paper is not to interrogate the complex area of modernity, or to revisit the various theories and notions of modernity and post-modernity. Yet, the most common scholarly views on modernity are briefly discussed here to clarify why liquid modernity is suggested, in this study, as a more adequate approach to conceptualising South Pacific socio-cultural contexts and journalism practice.

Modernity: Brief overview of its limitations for application in the Pacific

The dynamics and features of modernity (including Western media) are well defined in politics, sociology, culture, science, philosophy, theology and the arts. The concept of modernity is also often central to Western worldviews of space and time; as Lyon (1999) argues, “Modernity is marked by its unprecedented dynamism, its dismissal or marginalising of tradition, and by its global consequences” (p. 25). Even in the South Pacific, colonial and post-colonial associations between Western countries and Pacific societies are often described in terms that identify modernity with Westernisation. European colonisers and Christian missions are also a major source of the importation of Western or modern values and ideals into the Pacific.

Mouzelis’ (2009) view that modernity replaces tradition, entailing “the destruction of traditional localisms [...]” (p.154) and substitutes centuries-old indigenous knowledge and practices with rational knowledge can be problematic when examining South Pacific societies. For example, Coleman (1990)⁶ proposes that modernity is a “purposively constructed environment” that replaces a “natural/primordial” environment. Coleman (ibid) argues that in modern times, “purposively constructed corporate actors” predominate over “primordial ties and the

old corporate actors based on them (family, clan, ethnic groups, and community)” (p. 552). In other words, according to Coleman, in modern times, this “purposively constructed” environment has replaced a natural “primordial” environment (tradition). The persistence of traditional social hierarchies and governance systems (such as the *wantok* systems⁷ in Vanuatu, *fa’a matai*⁸ in Samoa, and *les grands chefs*⁹ in New Caledonia) and the importance of kinship in the South Pacific strongly challenge such a view of modernity.

The concept of modernity also generally defines any period distinct from a previous – or a past – one, and marked by profound ruptures. Connell (2006) argues, “Modernity is both the creation of the new and the dissolution of the old” (p. 243). For various reasons, such broad views on modernity are problematic when examining non-Western post-colonial societies, such as Vanuatu. Bauman (2000) points to this issue in *Liquid Modernity*, arguing “The society which enters the twenty-first century is no less ‘modern’ than the society which entered the twentieth; the most one can say is that it is modern in a different way” (p. 28); many Pacific and post-colonial societies would be more accurately described as liquid modern.

Liquid modernity and cultural translation in Pacific Societies

Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity does not suggest the drastic dichotomy – often made by conventional theories of modernity – between the traditional and the modern. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) uses a metaphor of liquidity to depict contemporary times, which he sees as “fluid and light” as opposed to “solid and heavy”; he argues that contemporary times are “novel and different” from the project of modernity, which he also refers to as a “modern illusion”, and that modernity has gradually collapsed, including:

[...] The belief that there is an end to the road along which we proceed, an attainable *telos* of historical change, a state of perfection to be reached tomorrow, next year or next millennium, some sort of good society, just society and conflict-free society in all or some of its many postulated aspects: of steady equilibrium [...] of perfect order in which everything is allocated to its right place, nothing out of place persists and no place is in doubt; of human affairs becoming totally transparent thanks to knowing everything needing to be known; of complete mastery over the future – so complete that it puts paid all contingency, contention, ambivalence and unanticipated consequences of human undertakings (p. 29).

The concept of ‘cultural translation’ is also a metaphor increasingly borrowed in academic fields such as anthropology, translation and cultural studies. Conway (2011) admits, “What cultural translation is and what form it takes remain somewhat obscure” (p. 583). Akdoğan Özdemir (2013) also argues, “In a theoretical framework where translation is regarded as a linguistic and cultural process and the object of translation is not only a text but the whole language and culture, the term ‘cultural translation’ sounds tautological” (p. 8). However, in this study, informed by the work of scholars such as Conway or Asad, who have extensively researched the field of translation studies, ‘acts of cultural translation’¹⁰ will refer to the diverse strategies used by ni-Vanuatu journalists to navigate, sometimes perhaps less successfully than others, between traditional and modern values, rules and principles that have an impact on their journalism practice. In other words, cultural translation is seen here as a complex phenomenon encouraging mediated experiences that are affected by the understanding and application of different practices and principles as a result of the encounter between local customs and other imported values.

Due to the metaphorical nature of the concepts of liquid modernity and cultural translation, the application of these notions in postcolonial contexts and ethnographic research can appear controversial in the theoretical discussions of these fields. However, it is the author’s contention in this paper that these notions represent a promising approach for examining contemporary journalistic practices in South Pacific islands, because they have the potential to address the difficulty of drawing a clear line between the old and the new knowledge in these countries. For example, liquid modernity denies a clear rupture between the present condition of the world and the end of what we commonly refer to as ‘modern times’. It posits instead, that contemporary times are not a new ‘post-modern’ state of society intrinsically distinct from these ‘modern times’, but a chaotic continuation of modern times also witnessing the renewal, or revitalisation, of some ‘old’ values. In addition, liquid modernity does not reproduce imperialist or colonialist views of the Pacific region because it subverts the common association between tradition and a “negative connotation of backwardness and unthinking conservatism” (Lawson, 1996, p. 14; also see Hau’ofa, 1993, p. 129).

In liquid modern times, society is in a state of ‘permanent revolution’ (Bauman, 2002, p. 17); change is constant and things are continuously being swept away and reshaped. In liquid modern times, Bauman (2004) argues:

Following the precedent is not good advice anymore. Accumulating knowledge and relying on knowledge accumulated a long time ago, is not a good proposition today. Relying on unchanged routine, which you can actually imbibe and follow blindly, is also not a good recipe. The same is true for acting according to habits and customs. All this is no longer one dominant authority but a competition of authorities, very often at cross purposes, very often mutually contradictory (p.5).

This claim has interesting parallels with observations made by some Pacific scholars, such as Hereniko (1999) who argues:

Torn between being traditional (which usually means behaving and holding the same values as their rural counterparts) and being realistic (adopting certain European or American manners, certain kinds of dress and values), they [Islanders] are often unable to reconcile these seemingly conflicting notions [...] (p. 150).

Thus, while deep-rooted traditional values undeniably remain in these countries, they have also engaged, since colonial times, with modern and Western-style socio-political systems and practices, and are, as a result, now strongly infused with *liquid modernity*.

Liquid modernity in contemporary Vanuatu: Traditional Society, and the Media

The main guideline on which ni-Vanuatu journalists rely – the Media Association Vanuatu (MAV) Code of Ethics – suggests (admittedly ambiguously) the need for journalists to find some sort of mediation or compromise between different values and principles. For example, article 14 of the MAV Code of Ethics states:

While free to report and to comment in the public interest on Vanuatu chiefly institution, traditions, affairs and other cultural matters, media should take particular care to deal with these subjects with sensitivity and appropriate respect.¹¹

This can be seen as an early indication that journalism practice in Vanuatu is affected by liquid modernity. Liquid modernity can also be observed in the encounter between traditional beliefs, norms of customary law, and state criminal laws in Vanuatu. For

example, on January 28, 2011, the *Vanuatu Daily Post* (VDP) published the article ‘Sorcery is public’s biggest fear, says Chief’.¹² The article questions:

Does sorcery exist? Whether one is a simple gardener in their village or a highly educated individual with their Masters in a white collar job each ni-Vanuatu cannot deny it is very much part of their cultural heritage, a means of social control with the dimensions of good and bad sorcery.

In its conclusion the article also states “generally cases of allegations of sorcery, which do reach the Court put the daunting onus on the Public Prosecutor to provide evidence to prove beyond reasonable doubt in a state court that physical visible evidence on the act of this supernatural practice/belief exists”.

A year later, on February 28, 2012, the article¹³ ‘Man pleads guilty to witchcraft charges’ was published by the VDP. This article explained that this was “the first ever case” in which the Court handed down a guilty sentence for these charges and that “similar cases in the past were thrown out by the Court because there was not enough evidence”. These stories have many layers relevant to this study. First, they juxtapose traditional worldviews and beliefs (sorcery and witchcraft) with modernity (state criminal law and systems that outlaw these practices)¹⁴ and with liquid modernity, since the story is presented through contemporary media, using articles and pictures not only in print but also online.

It can then be argued that ni-Vanuatu manage to maintain a traditional way of life tolerating, or appropriating (sometimes conveniently), a certain degree of modernity. On the one hand, ni-Vanuatu’s lifestyle is considerably influenced by deep-rooted traditions, but on the other hand, the influences of modernity and Western practices, principles and values can also be observed. The mix of different values, principles and influences on which the socio-cultural context of Vanuatu is founded can also be observed in the Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu itself:

We the people of Vanuatu, proud of our struggle for freedom, determined to safeguard the achievements of this struggle, cherishing our ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, mindful at the same time of our common destiny, hereby proclaim the establishment of the united and free Republic of Vanuatu *founded on traditional Melanesian values, faith in god, and Christian principles*, and for this purpose give ourselves this constitution.¹⁵

The following section demonstrates that *kastom* establishes several values and principles, which affect the work of contemporary ni-Vanuatu journalists in different ways.

On being a contemporary Taasila

During an interview about the main differences between the journalistic practices of ni-Vanuatu and Western journalists, P5 stated:

I had a constructive argument with a peer in New Zealand some years ago about the fact that, in the South Pacific, we have our ways of reporting. My peer, who is also my friend, argued that there was one and only one way of reporting in journalism. I told him that it was not true and that I would give him an example.

I told him: if you and I had to report a story about the corruption of a minister, you would write a story that strips the minister naked. I would write the story too, but the difference is that I would keep the minister's clothes on. And this is the difference that I call cultural sensitivity, that some foreign [to Vanuatu or the Pacific region] journalists often lack.

The cultural sensitivity P5 refers to is highly influenced by *kastom* and ni-Vanuatu journalists have to respect it. Tonkinson (1981) was among the first anthropologists to use the term *kastom*, which he defined as “traditional cultural elements” (p. 237). In this paper, *kastom* refers to the traditional social structure, values, practices, and institutions that the ni-Vanuatu respondents identified as having a significant impact on their journalistic practice.

In some instances, *kastom* rules, although they result from the contact of tradition and modernity, can contradict aspects of Western-influenced, or modern, standards and values. This can be problematic for contemporary journalists in Vanuatu because, although their journalism practice shows some dissimilarity to Western practice, it does have roots in Western journalism. Some of these rules and their impact on local journalism practice are discussed in the following sections.

The issues described below are linked to three major themes that resulted from the thematic analysis conducted on the data collected for this study: (1) uses and abuses of chiefly status and honorifics, and the unconditional respect ni-Vanuatu journalists must show to these statuses, which I will discuss in an attempt to identify the challenges and opportunities they create for journalism practice in Vanuatu, (2) complications of kinship and how this affects journalists' ability to perform their job, and (3) *kastom* fundamentals that directly influence journalism practice in Vanuatu.¹⁶

The manifestation of adjusted journalistic practices affected by these major themes described in this paper will include the challenges faced by ni-Vanuatu journalists when interviewing, or writing stories about chiefs and their families; when reporting stories that involve their numerous kin members all connected by a complex and broad social net, stories that involve people with higher social status (big men). Ultimately, this paper also describes how beliefs, values and ways of doings specific to *kastom* in Vanuatu shape the respondents' perspective of what should or should not be acceptable in terms of journalistic practice. This includes the discussion in the media of specific topics and/or taboos as well as the emphasis given to such topics in media.

The uses and abuses of chiefly status and honorifics

Many *kastom* societies consider it a clear sign of disrespect to a chief, his family, or his people when a journalist runs a story without acknowledging *kastom* rules, which are usually framed in an indigenous system. Showing disrespect to a chief is itself against *kastom*:

On many occasions, when a journalist chooses to disregard this rule, it will then affect his/her future ability to get information from tribes and chiefs, or chiefs' people (P2, senior ni-Vanuatu journalist who holds a chiefly status).

Kastom also establishes that "not only someone without a chiefly status but also someone who is not from a chiefly family" (P2) generally has no authority when expressing their views on an issue that may place a chief in the spotlight. This would be seen as an absolute lack of respect:

In such circumstances of disrespect, the chief's people and the chief would also lose their respect for the journalist and would by-pass, or sideline the journalist from getting information that would be needed to further a story (P2).

Ni-Vanuatu journalists must also be knowledgeable of the complex hierarchy system in *kastom* societies in order to appropriately refer to the people involved in their story:

I remember an incident that happened throughout the whole term of Head of State Kalkot Mataskelekele. The media have, during his term, referred to his wife, the First Lady, as Mrs Hanson Mataskelekele. In protocol, according to the custom of Tongoa of which the President hails from, his wife cannot carry the name Mataskelekele as it is a chiefly title inherited by the Head of State from his father. Such *kastom* acknowledgement in Vanuatu is crucial and must be observed to avoid any kind of turmoil (P2).

In addition, journalists participating in this study acknowledge commonly inserting Bislama words into articles they write in English. For example, the Bislama term *nakamal* is often used without being translated. *Nakamal* means ‘Meeting House’ and can also refer to the *kava* bars or the ‘Men’s House’. Traditionally, women were not allowed in the *nakamals*, which were often used by chiefs (or big men) to discuss their villages’ social and political matters.

Similarly, when writing stories about a politician or a traditional chief, journalists use their honorific titles to designate them:

There is a line drawn on what can in the media be referred to as a way of preserving our way, our *kastom*. This is why we use traditional words within the context of an article being written in English (P2).

Such words are inserted in stories to respect traditional conventions and to preserve the core values and principles of *kastom*, such as demonstrating an unconditional respect to chiefs or political leaders. These values are usually “the major contributors in maintaining peace and harmony in our Pacific societies” (P2).

One of the journalists under observation, P2, stood out as having easier access to information from various tribes and chiefs. This journalist is from an influential chiefly family in Vanuatu. P2’s father had the highest chiefly rank in the *kastom* system, and P2 is also known in the indigenous system and society under a chiefly title. P2 is very involved in *kastom* and was, at the time of observation, only one step away from entering into the highest chiefly rank. Thus, P2’s status and rank in *kastom* society seemed to have a significant impact on this journalist’s access to information, somehow affording P2 ‘more’ authority than the other journalists to work on stories that put chiefs and their peoples in the spotlight. This could be considered strongly problematic, if seen from the perspective that other journalists, who do not have such a rank or status, do not benefit from an equal access to information or an equivalent authority to deal with stories involving chiefs or chiefs’ people. However, from another perspective, P2 could often guide fellow journalists and send them to the right people, as well as reliable sources and documents, when they were writing a story involving *kastom* chiefs and influential people. P2 explained that the publisher of the newspaper, who is not a ni-Vanuatu, once asked a very reliable source for documents, but the source denied him the right to access them. However, after P2 approached this

source, they handed over the documents freely (although they requested anonymity). In terms of Western journalistic practice, because of, or rather thanks to P2, the publisher got a 'high quality leak' and acquired all the documentation needed to run a fully informed story.

This study also reveals that the 'big man syndrome'¹⁷ is and will certainly continue to be a major challenge to the practice of journalism in Vanuatu. *Kastom* requires people to respect their big men, and, when translated into the modern ways of doing journalism, this can often lead to the curtailing or total suppression of vital information:

Journalists in Vanuatu generally have respect for leaders, especially politicians, and they tend to accept whatever they are told, even if someone is trying to misrepresent someone or something (P1).

Allied to this is the issue of gifts and gratuities offered to journalists in Vanuatu. It is difficult to draw a line between good practices and bribery, as gift giving is a very important aspect of Melanesian culture.¹⁸ However, P1 observes:

Journalists in Vanuatu who have been groomed initially by the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation, which receives funding assistance in the form of grants from the government and serves generally as a government mouthpiece would have a different view, albeit similar to the one politicians like to hide behind—that gift-giving is part of the Melanesian society and therefore cannot be considered as bribery per se. But it is not all that true. As journalists, one should be able to tell if a politician was blatantly bribing or not.

Thus, ni-Vanuatu journalists need to be able to distinguish if a politician is truly offering assistance or a gift according to local protocols, or if he/she is offering a bribe. Bribery is an issue also faced by Western journalists. However, because it is a legitimate practice according to – and also an inherent aspect of – *kastom*, gift giving is a more delicate issue for ni-Vanuatu journalists.

The complications of kinship

Vanuatu, like most of the Pacific Islands, is a small close-knit society, and journalists often find themselves having to write about somebody they know, which might be considered a real challenge, and sometimes even a 'taboo' (the same thing happens in small towns or community journalism in the West). All the ni-Vanuatu journalists, whether titled or 'commoners', who participated in this research face this issue:

Vanuatu is a small society and we do not have anonymity. Everyone knows everyone, and in a way we are all related. [...] Intermarriages make it even more complex, as your mother might be coming from one *kastom* society and your father from another, which increases the number of people you are related to, the people that belong to your *kastom* society (P3).

Kinship issues also surround the notion of the *wantok* system in Vanuatu. The literal meaning of *wantok* (one talk) – ‘wan’ (one) and ‘tok’ (talk) – would be ‘someone who speaks the same language’ (see Rose, 1980). MacDonald (1984) describes the *wantok* as a “bond of people with a basic, kinship community, speaking the same tongue, living in the same place, and sharing values” (p. 4). Participant 3 states:

In Vanuatu, there is a sense of belonging not only to your nuclear family but also to the whole community. For example, we do not just call people by their first name here. This man is not just ‘Peter’, he is ‘Uncle’ Peter, and this lady living on the lot of land nearby is Auntie Janie, not just Janie. This is one of our ways to embrace *kastom*, which is a safety net here in Vanuatu.

The *wantok* system is also a traditional style of social organisation, a hierarchical governing system “which is a uniquely organized system of democratic leadership by a Chief of Council” (Prideaux, 2007, p. 4). Brigg (2009) describes *wantokism* as “an influential kinship-derived system of obligation and support” (p. 148). The *wantok* system is quite common in other Melanesian societies such as the Solomon Islands or Papua New Guinea. Under the *wantok* system rules, a big man is expected to provide for his *wantoks*, his kinsmen. As Prideaux (2006) points out, “*wantok* is often responsible for abuse of patronage in organisations and government, misallocation of resources, and for allegiances formed during disputes” (p. 4). Therefore, for obvious reasons, respect towards the hierarchy and rules of the *wantok* system can be problematic for ni-Vanuatu journalists who report stories involving their big men.

For example, P3 recalls an incident that happened a few years back when he wrote a story about the Vanuatu Commodities Marketing Board (VCMB), whose minister at the time was also the President of the National United Party:

The minister was from the Pentecost, like my father. And this is a strong link. Coming from the same *kastom* society makes you siblings according to our customs. So my father and the minister are like brothers. And that puts the minister in a spot where I need to respect him as I respect my own father.

I was fearful of this relationship, but still wrote the story involving the National United Party in corrupt practices. After we ran the story the National United Party was removed from government. And you can imagine the tension arising from this with the members of my *kastom* society. It created a lot of

problems, and I am now on very bad terms with my brothers, my uncles and cousins.

Now, I chose to run the story, because I think that the interest of the mass should prevail over anything else. But many ni-Vanuatu journalists would not put themselves in this situation, as you do not want to mess with your *kastom* society. Just because *kastom* is a safety net here in Vanuatu and you do not want to lose this safety net.

Along the same lines, *kastom* can also sometimes prohibit journalists from questioning someone from whom they may need information:

It is prohibited in *kastom* to speak directly to either your brother-in-law or sister-in-law. In some *kastom* societies it is also prohibited to ask for information from your father-in-law or cousins of your father-in-law. If we do go ahead and ask them, they would consider us to be disrespectful to the *kastom* way and will not respect us in return (P2).¹⁹

Beyond the challenges caused by the notion of kinship, ni-Vanuatu journalists must also face protocols that are not always imposed by *kastom* but rather inherent to their culture; traits that P1 describes as “characteristic to Melanesian societies”.

Kastom fundamentals and their implications for ni-Vanuatu journalists

Shyness or *self-effacement* is particular feature of the Melanesian culture in general, and represents a further challenge to the practice of journalism in Vanuatu. P1 mentions that, culturally, most Melanesians are shy and seldom ask questions:

I have been to press conferences and interviews where not a single reporter has asked a question [...] Some politicians take advantage of this situation and often do not give out the full story while some use such opportunities to preach their political propagandas.

For obvious reasons, such behaviour can be problematic for journalists, whose job is to interview people, ask questions, or challenge what they and/or the public are being told.

Kastom also implies many ‘taboos’ or ‘sensitivities’ that are not always documented in scholarly research, but seem to be commonly acknowledged and accepted among ni-Vanuatu:

I am taking the example of the reporting the VDP made of the recent death of an expatriate who committed suicide in North Efate. The piece was a good piece and very informative, but clearly not written by a ni-Vanuatu as we would not give so many details about the state of the decomposition of the

body. Just because of this cultural sensitivity we observe. The man is dead and our readers do not need to know the terrible shape his body was found in. There is no need to go into these details. It is not well received by our communities (P5).

Along the same lines, P8 states:

The concept of ‘news values’ as taught and understood in the West is a major problem for us journalists in Vanuatu. For example, the value put in the dramatisation of news is problematic in a context like Vanuatu where there are things that *kastom* (and the cultural values it stands for) does not allow discussing.

P1 also adds:

Kastom stands for the truth to be told but where real conflicts arise is how those issues are presented. In journalism we are taught to tell a story as it is, to bring out all the facts so that people are fully informed while *kastom* tends to generalise issues and often leads to compromises.

Thus, journalism news values, as conceptualised in the West, differ in these countries where traditional and cultural norms describe notions of shock, sensationalism, or drama (among others) as indecent curiosity or improper topics to discuss in the media. Ni-Vanuatu journalists seem to navigate between traditional and modern values, influences and principles, which involves - in terms of journalism practice - some degree of artifice or ‘acts of cultural translation’ such as carefully selecting their words, or silencing some details they might judge unnecessary or offensive to *kastom*. Ni-Vanuatu journalists often do this for the sake of keeping their relationships with their relatives, as well as the harmony in their *kastom* societies, intact:

We apply some sort of self-censorship. We choose our words very carefully, sometimes more neutral or positive words, which will not inflame, ignite or start any conflict. It is true that at the end of the day a story might have lost a bit of its implications by doing so, but sometimes this is less dramatic than the consequences that could have erupted if we were not as cautious with what we say (P4).

This observation demonstrates the constantly shifting and negotiated dissonances and parallels between the role and duties of contemporary ni-Vanuatu journalists and those of their ancient forebears, traditional messengers or storytellers. As P1 points out:

Journalism might have its roots in Western society especially when it comes to recording and reporting facts by use of a pen and paper and actually getting it printed but there are many aspects of journalism that are also as old as the Vanuatu society and many others.

Vanuatu, like many other Pacific societies, still has hereditarily assigned or negotiated roles for traditional messengers, orators and heralds, although these have been influenced in many ways by globalisation and modern ways:

In some parts of Vanuatu we have this system that we call *kastom rod*, and which is a system of communication that was used long before the arrival of Western journalism in our country. *Kastom rod*, whether performed during traditional ceremonies or in general communication between chiefs or villages, treated information as gospel. This gospel was articulated by chosen messengers, *men blong karem messages*²⁰ and the message or piece of information they were carrying was coming straight from chiefs, and was for this reason, incontestable.

In a way, we [contemporary ni-Vanuatu journalists] identify with these messengers as when we write our stories not only do we choose our gospel cautiously, but also because of the way our readers and the wider community treat information. People treat it as if it was gospel; once a piece of information has been published it is true because *The Daily Post*, *The Vanuatu Times*, or *The Independent* said so.

And we are conscious of this fact, which is why we do choose our gospel carefully, screening our stories and ensuring that what comes out is carefully written (P3).

Participant 5 also states:

We still have a chiefly system in place in Vanuatu, and as it was done before the arrival of modern journalism in Vanuatu, chiefs may send a spokesman or a messenger to another chief or a village. This system differs from what it used to be years ago and it can vary from one *kastom* society to another but it is still in place today. In Efate, where Port Vila is located, the chief's messenger – his mouthpiece – is called the *taasila*.

As a ni-Vanuatu citizen, a journalist and a chairman of the Island Council of Chiefs, I very much identify with the *taasila*. I am a link between people and chiefs, a messenger.

Just like traditional messengers would come and meet another messenger in a remote village, chiefs' spokesmen come to meet me in my office and convey a message they have been given the responsibility to carry. These messengers or their chiefs could just call me or email me to give me their message, but they still decide to come and meet me face-to-face, respecting a protocol and also because sending a messenger in Vanuatu is still seen as one of the highest manifestations of respect regardless of the message that needs to be delivered. Then, the setting in which the message is communicated is a bit different, but it is still done the traditional way, from a *taasila* to *taasila*.²¹

The main difference some ni-Vanuatu journalists (for example P0) identify between their contemporary role and this ancient messenger is that a *taasila* could not talk

back to the chiefs or say anything negative about them, and the villagers had to treat information conveyed by this messenger as gospel. In fact, whereas P3 mentions that most ni-Vanuatu treat news stories as gospel, P0 argues that ni-Vanuatu journalists today not only convey messages between the authorities and the rest of the community, but also offer everyone the chance to ‘speak back’ with concept such as ‘rights to reply’, and letters to the editor, which is “a step forward for messengers but also for any person, whether a politician or a villager in Vanuatu” (P0).

Conclusion

Ni-Vanuatu often find themselves obliged to navigate between the duty of promoting the traditional Western media agendas of accountability and transparency, and the role of a traditional messenger, by preserving – or at least not profoundly disturbing – *kastom*. Phenomena similar to those described in this paper can be observed in many other Pacific islands, but also in some places in the West, with variants that have been identified and are well-travelled in academia with, for example, the plethora of research analysing local journalism and others phenomena discussed in the introduction of this paper. However, few studies and/or scholars focus on examining culture in its contemporary context in order to understand journalism practice in South Pacific countries. Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity, combined with *kastom* (or oceanic epistemologies in a broader way), provides a valuable alternative to other theoretical perspectives and approaches (which tend to draw drastic boundaries between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’) in order to properly conceptualise post-colonial South Pacific socio-cultural contexts such as Vanuatu. The deployment of further concepts such as cultural translation is also useful here. Concepts associated with cultural translation such as cultural hybridity, transposition and cross-cultural identity and borders can also complement and greatly assist such theoretical approach. Cultural translation has a strong focus on studying communication practices in fragmented societies and complex and/or hierarchical contexts. This is useful when examining journalism practice in a society such as Vanuatu, where the *wantok* system and *big man syndrome* play a critical role on the journalists’ ability to report stories.

In the light of the data provided in this paper, drawing a radical dichotomy between the traditional and the modern results in failing to appropriately theorise the context in

which ni-Vanuatu journalists evolve; a context that appears caught up in many dynamics – whether temporal, spatial, social, political, or cultural. Journalism practice in Vanuatu reflects a transitional state, or rather a state of liquid modernity and ni-Vanuatu journalists show an interesting capacity to navigate back and forth between tradition, modernity and resurgent oceanic epistemologies (*kastom* as it evolved in contact with imported Western values).

Thus, this study shows that it should not be assumed that journalism practice in the South Pacific countries such as Vanuatu is a mere reflection of journalism as we define and understand it in the West. The participants' perceptions of journalism and of what defines and affects journalism practice in their countries deeply differ from common Western views of journalistic practices. Local and traditional values, beliefs and protocols affect these journalists' work on a daily basis, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. Ni-Vanuatu journalists mediate the tensions between modern and traditional ways on a daily basis and seem to have 'accommodated' to liquid modernity. This conclusion is also based on data collected for a larger project this study is part of, which finds that in other South Pacific contexts, liquid modernity is still being negotiated (e.g. Samoa) or even contested (e.g. New Caledonia).

¹ The *taasila* is the traditional messenger in Vanuatu who, before the arrival of the Europeans, was responsible for carrying messages and information between villages, chiefs, and the rest of the community.

² The author admits the difficulties of this typification (see Spriggs, 2008).

³ Statistics available at: <http://www.vns.gov.vu/index.php/surveys/census-2009>. Accessed May 19, 2013.

⁴ Oceanic epistemologies refer to Pacific customs, traditions and worldviews.

⁵ Timote Viaoleti (2006) argues, research based solely on Western traditions is "unlikely to have values and lived realities that allow the understanding of issues pertaining to knowledge and ways of being that originated from *nga wairua* (spirits) [...] of Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Tuvalu, or the other Pacific Islands" (p. 22).

⁶ See also Connell, 2007.

⁷ *Wantok* system is discussed and explained later in this paper.

⁸ *Fa'a matai* refers to the Samoan 'way of the chiefs'.

⁹ *Les grands chefs* are the Kanak high chiefs of New Caledonia.

¹⁰ This study does not intend to define cultural transition, but instead attempts to include some observations made during fieldwork under the umbrella of 'acts of cultural translation'.

¹¹ Available at <http://www.mav.org.vu/welkam/media-code-of-ethics-and-practice>, accessed 22 February 2012.

¹² Article available at: <http://www.dailypost.vu/content/sorcery-public's-biggest-fear-says-chief>. Accessed 13 May 2013.

¹³ Article available at: <http://www.dailypost.vu/content/man-pleads-guilty-witchcraft-charge>. Accessed 13 May 2013.

¹⁴ Section 151 of the Vanuatu Penal Code states that ‘No person shall practise witchcraft or sorcery with intent to cause harm or detriment to any other person’. Vanuatu’s Penal Code available at: http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=198053. Accessed 19 May 2012.

¹⁵ Preamble of the Constitution of The Republic of Vanuatu available at <http://www.governmentofvanuatu.gov.vu/>. Accessed 22 February 2012.

¹⁶ This paper does not argue that the tensions and dangers related to culture and faced by contemporary ni-Vanuatu journalists are limited to the themes described above.

¹⁷ ‘Big man’ is a term often used in anthropology to designate the most influential person in a tribe, often a senior male of chiefly rank.

¹⁸ For more on ‘gift giving’ in Melanesia, see *Pacific Islands: An Encyclopaedia* (2000, p. 438).

¹⁹ Marks of disrespect towards journalists can range from “sidelining journalists from getting information to harassing them, threatening them and physically attacking them” (P2).

²⁰ *Men blong karem messages* means ‘the men who carry messages’ in Bislama.

²¹ In some instances, if the journalist is not a *taasila*, the source of the message can refuse to convey it to anyone else other than the journalist they were told to see, whereas in other instances, the *taasila* can accept to convey the message to someone else if this person happens to carry a chiefly status.

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