TOURISM AND TRADITIONAL CULTURE: LAND DIVING IN VANUATU

Joseph M. Cheer, Keir J. Reeves, Monash University, Australia
Jennifer H. Laing, La Trobe University, Australia

Abstract: The land diving ritual or naghol of South Pentecost Vanuatu is living proof of how tourism heightens community tensions when traditional culture is commercialised. Kastom, an overarching framework under which traditional culture is defined, is predicated on an agenda of reinforcing tradition. However, tourism imposes transformation and responds to contemporary livelihood priorities of traditional peoples. The increasing precariousness of customary livelihoods and questions over its present-day relevance has made inimitable aspects of traditional culture increasingly marketable. Reconciling the nature of naghol commercialisation and overcoming the constraints of traditional patriarchal authorities (“big-men”) and an entrenched tourism industry network is critical if widespread benefit and lasting legacies for the “grassroots” are to be realised. Keywords: cultural tourism, Vanuatu, land diving, kastom, traditional culture, cultural commodification.

INTRODUCTION

Tension surrounds the juxtaposition of tourism and traditional culture in indigenous and developing country contexts when economic utility of that culture becomes integral to contemporary local livelihoods (Snyder & Sulle, 2011). This article examines such tensions through the lens of the land diving ritual of the traditional Sa speaking peoples of South Pentecost, Vanuatu. Particular cognisance is made of Connell...
and Rugendyke’s (2008) commentary that “grassroots” concerns are often understated (this article assumes “grassroots” to comprise ordinary villagers as distinct from patriarchal authority figures referred to here as “big-men”). Apart from Bani (1989) and Abong (2007), indigenous or ni Vanuatu voices in the naghol discourse are rare. While a focus on mainly grassroots vocalisations at the expense of other actors may be regarded as a limitation, this article addresses what is arguably a disparity in the naghol debate. Challenging the notion that tourism empowers customary owners of traditional culture is a key motive given Connell and Rugendyke’s (p. 279) assessment that “tourism has rarely been about empowerment or equity, especially at the grassroots”. Of particular concern are modes of patriarchal authority underpinned by big-men common in the governance of traditionally owned assets, considered a hindrance to enabling gains from being more widely shared and invested in enduring legacy initiatives (Bainton, 2010).

Land diving, or naghol, nagol, nangol or gol, is the customary property of the Sa (naghol is adopted in this article). Its demonstration is built around outwardly death-defying feats, seemingly with scant regard to self-preservation and reverence for a practice from a primordial past (Figure 1). Testament to its enduring appeal is “bungy-jumping”; arguably a derivative of the naghol (Kellett, 2010). Recent analysis of the naghol by Tabani (2010), Taylor (2010) and Lipp (2008) highlight

Figure 1. Naghol, Pangi Village South Pentecost (Source: Author 2010)
exceptional cultural value while simultaneously advocating for caution over its commercialisation. This intensifies what Huffman (1987) and Jolly (1994) argue is a potential compromise to its integrity. Tabani (2010, p. 312) extolls that the *naghol* is an example of “spectacular ritualisation” while Taylor (2010, p. 33) pays homage to its allure to the tourist gaze. Jolly refers to the *naghol* as an “acrobatic spectacle” (Jolly, 1994, p. 134) and given the attendant risks for divers, Lipp (2008) questions whether the social and monetary rewards afforded is commensurate.

During the 1990s, Chiefs expressed antipathy toward the *naghol*’s utilisation for tourism, arguing that the wider community had received little of lasting value (Douglas, 1996). Since then, two persistent questions remain unanswered. Firstly, to what extent has the commercialisation of the *naghol* left an enduring and widespread legacy and secondly, who is entitled to preside over the terms of its utilisation? Forsyth (2012) argues that tourism heightens tensions centred on how traditional culture is deployed, especially where it is linked to critical livelihoods. Central to this article is the way that strident adherence to *kastom* is underpinned by an enduring veneration of traditional or *kastom* patriarchal authorities. Huffman (1987) terms this the big-men effect, arguing that this constrains effective governance. Sahlins (2005) argues that big-men are adept at turning a trade to their advantage—often through exerting their influence as guardians, leaders and pathfinders with scant regard for the wider constituency. Consequently, standoffs between big-men and their constituents prevail, given the complexities and disjunctures inherent in the monetisation of traditional assets (Wearing & Wearing, 2006).

Cognisance of the broad definitional nature of culture is assumed embracing Said’s concept of culture as “a source of identity, and a theatre where political and ideological causes are engaged” (1994, p. xiii). (Lindstrom and White, 1994a) take on culture as “a system of more-or-less shared, more-or-less conscious, knowledge and understanding by which people organise how they live” is also acknowledged. The *naghol* is a microcosm of the varied contexts and arguments for and against the utilisation of traditional culture for tourism (Amoamo, 2011). Traditional culture, axiomatically a central aspect of *kastom*, is defined by Gegeo (1994, p. 45) as ways of living governed by tradition, culture and behaviour. *Kastom* is inherently perplexing, multivocal, mutable and without rigid boundaries, and continuously transformed (Gegeo, 1994, p. 44). Traditional culture underpinned by values, beliefs, ideas and knowledge systems (Daskon & Binns, 2010, p. 497) rather than culture itself, emphasises the specificity of *kastom* to the *naghol* discourse.

**Negotiating Tourism and Kastom**

Vanuatu consists of around eighty islands 1,750 kilometres from Australia’s east coast (Figure 2). It became a joint condominium of France and Britain in 1906 with an extant multilingualism; English, French, *Bislama* (the local creole language) and local dialects an enduring
legacy. Prolonged debate, introspection and internal pressure to extricate itself from colonisation culminated in political independence in 1980. In 2013, Vanuatu’s population exceeded 260,000 with GDP per-capita of around US$3000 (EIU, 2013). Three quarters of its peoples are rural, dispersed throughout its outer islands (VNSO, 2009). Built infrastructure is limited outside Efate and Espiritu Santo and an enduring reliance on subsistence agriculture and the government sector prevails (Cox et al., 2007). With few avenues for economic diversification, Vanuatu relies heavily on tourism (EUROPEAID, 2009; Howes & Soni, 2009; UNESCAP, 2002). International arrivals doubled over 2000–2009 (UNWTO, 2009) and from 2003–2008 tourism receipts increased by around 50%, with tourism as a percentage of GDP growing to between 20% and 24% annually (Euromonitor International, 2009). At the end of 2011 international tourist arrivals had reached a high of over 225,000 (VNSO, 2013).

The southern coast of Pentecost Island is 190 kilometres north of Port Vila (Figure 3). Predictably, the onset of tourism has presented islanders with dilemmas related to the pressure of maintaining kastom, yet acceding to the need for economic self-determination (Jolly, 1982). This is symptomatic of what Patterson and Macintyre (2011) describe as traditionalism becoming anachronistic and antithetical to progress. Although the commodification of traditional culture for tourism is
seen to devalue its capital, selling it is an aspect that peoples choose to manipulate in the face of poverty and underdevelopment (de Burlo, 1996, p. 257). The intersection between tourism and *kastom* is complex—it embodies tradition and encompasses life, especially in the way business is conducted, resources are appropriated and proceeds distributed. Locally, it is a body of knowledge defining differences and marking boundaries—nationally it is connected to political process (Jolly, 1992; Tonkinson, 1982a, 1982b). As practice, it originates in cultural tradition and rooted in value systems (Stillitoe, 2000). *Kastom* is polysemic (Keesing, 1989) and polemical with the greatest support ideological (Tonkinson, 1982b).

Tourism creates a fertile context for the reformulation of *kastom*, ushering in new challenges to local forms of meaning, power, and identity (Adams, 1997). Utilising *kastom* for tourism enables money-making by doing what missionaries and colonialists had prohibited (Jolly, 1982). Linking *kastom* to tourism is derided for its infidelity to earlier manifestations and that unless it pays deference to an authentic past its revelation is illegitimate (Martin, 2010). Taylor (2001) suggests linking the *naghlo* to tourism necessitates some reproduction and
therefore it cannot be purely authentic. Whether in memory, political rhetoric or historiography, representations of the past are passed through filters of ideology, interest and perspective (Keesing, 1993). Lawson (1996) argues that the fragility of deploying culture for tourism demands closer scrutiny, especially of those who invoke tradition. Synthesising tourism and traditional culture is paradoxical, signalling that what is acceptable will vary (Lindstrom, 1982). De Burlo (1996) contends that the Sa proclaim their kastom identity through touristic performances of the naghol. This heightens the concerns of traditionalists although as Dunbar-Hall (2001, p. 174) outlines ‘‘culture bearers are the ones who delineate and maintain the different displays of culture, and cultural tourism is a discourse of diverse voices’’. 

The Naghol-Tourism Context

Tourism and the naghol have seldom been linked insofar as the transformation of livelihoods are concerned, with the exception of Sofield (2003) who surmised that ‘‘naghol tourism’’ aligns with the fundamentals of sustainable development and empowerment. Sofield draws from Bani’s (1989) characterisation of a sophisticated top-down, bottom-up governance arrangement where stakeholders work in synchrony to achieve equitable outcomes, lauding the naghol as an example of ‘‘symbiosis in ethnic tourism’’ (2003, p. 269). Invoking authenticity, Sofield (2003, p. 271) argues that ‘‘there is scant room to cast aspersions on its authenticity’’ and that the ‘‘alien presence of tourists does not seem to have changed the ceremonial, behaviour or activities of the people in any significant way’’. Sofield (p. 271) suggests that ‘‘the touristic element of the naghol is used to bolster traditional practices and power structures in a contemporary setting and to challenge contemporary alternative authorities’’.

In contrast, Huffman (1987, p. 13) chides that although monies from ‘‘naghol tourism’’ theoretically boosts the village economy, sociocultural considerations supersede financial ones. Huffman is especially critical of tourism’s capacity to appropriate ni-Vanuatu culture without the permissions of traditional owners, arguing that some aspects of culture should forever remain off-limits to outsiders. Tabani (2010) is also scathing of the monetisation of post-traditional ritualisations like the naghol, suggesting that it leads to profane reproductions under the guise of practising kastom. Tabani (p. 315) argues that ‘‘the use of kastom for commercial purposes can be a good thing, but only if its principles are respected by recognising the customary owner’s rights over their land as in their various indigenous cultural activities, productions and expressions’’.

The naghol was traditionally limited to the Sa (Huffman, 1987; Lipp, 2008). In the 1960s, international audiences caught a glimpse of the naghol through Attenborough’s (1966) pictorials for the Royal Society of London—he argued that the naghol had already become distorted at that time. Queen Elizabeth II’s 1972 visit sparked further interest in the naghol and this arguably heralded the onset of tourism. As a marker of tradition, the naghol is layered with contention. Its utility is defined by stakeholders; all have a pecuniary interest and therefore attempt to exert
influence over its use. Tensions surrounding it have been commonplace, especially between colonialists, missionaries and the Sa, amongst the Sa and between the guardians of *ni-Vanuatu* culture and the Sa. This is exemplified by what Huffman (1987) argues is an extension of big-man rivalries, between Sa leaders and groups intent on making their *naghol* preeminent.

Critical discourse on the *naghol* has mostly occurred in anthropology and cultural studies contexts (de Burlo, 1996, 2003; Forsyth, 2012; Huffman, 1987; Jolly, 1981, 1982, 1992, 1994; Lipp, 2008; Muller & Gardner 1972; Tabani, 2010; Taylor 2010). It is variously described as a rite of passage, ritual, cultural performance and grading ceremony invoking status. Tabani laments the aestheticisation of the *naghol*, arguing that such rituals are often reduced to their exchange value (2010). Whatever its categorisation, the *naghol* is living culture serving multiple purposes and connoting diverse meanings. Sofield (2003, p. 283) argues that *naghol* monetisation has empowered the Sa and that “the ghol exhibits the necessary qualities of community consensus and support, working within an environment provided by the government which reinforces and encourages that community effort”.

Two *naghol* narratives predominate; the first is of a brooding wife escaping from her husband. Seeking solace at the high point of a tree, she is located and pursued. Sensing confrontation, she attaches yam vines to her feet, and feigns jumping to her death. Unwittingly, the man follows suit jumping to his death. The second narrative is of an intimate relationship with the yam harvest; the quality of crop determines the safety and efficacy of the *naghol*, and its performance ensures the worth of the next harvest (Jolly, 1982, p. 352). The symbolism of the *naghol* is such, that it represents warrior power and resistance to European domination (Jolly, 1982, p. 353). Men gain entry because of their involvement and the height of the tower is a masculinity metaphor (de Burlo, 1996). *Naghol* towers are erected at the face of an incline, soaring to around 60 metres, with construction restricted to Sa men using traditional materials (Figure 1). In 1987, five to eight *naghol* were performed (Huffman, 1987, p. 11). Escalating tourism demand has seen the *naghol* season expanded from the traditional April and May to include June at Pangi, Bunlap and Lonorore. Given that performances are unregulated and commercially competitive, establishing the number of performances is problematic.

Commercialising the *naghol* challenges the authenticity of Sa commitment to their traditions (Jolly, 1994), invoking tensions hitherto unseen. Central to this debate is what Tabani terms “the transformation of great ritual ceremonies into neo-traditional artistic performances whose novelty resides in their quality as objective mediums for the representation of new collective identities” (2010, p. 311). This reflects Huffman’s (2011) lament that many aspects of traditional culture in Vanuatu are “secret”, meaning its very commercialisation undermines it. Abong (2007) and Martin (2010) argue that an ideal response is for customary owners (especially at the grassroots) to have a more profound voice concerning the commercialisation of their culture. This is a task of cultural policy formulation, innately problematic because
policies focused on cultural promotion are more challenging than those designed to preserve and safeguard culture (Lindstrom & White, 1994a, 1994b, p. 17).

Tourism as an expression of a shift toward the modern economy is considered detrimental to the safeguarding of kastom (Jolly, 1994, pp. 131–138; Tabani, 2010). Concerns over the commodification and distortion of the naghol gave rise to a Moratorium aimed at ensuring that cultural meaning is not lost, customary knowledge is maintained, bush resources are preserved, and that income is directed towards appropriate sustainable development (Vanuatu Cultural Centre, 2006). Defining the limits of naghol commodification though is complicated because the best way to safeguard traditional culture is to encourage communities to maintain its many aspects in their day-to-day lives (Abong, 2007, p. 2). If, as Martin (2008) suggests, the reproduction of living pasts rely for their power on the creation of an atmosphere of unchanging tradition and connecting participants and viewers to the past, the nexus between tradition and tourism must be challenging (2010, p. 537). After all, tradition and notions of the past are invariably subjective depending on their uses, ideologies and politics (Sahlins, 2005).

**Tourism and Traditionalism**

The contemporary context is characterised by bureaucrats viewing culture as a commodity for tourism where culture has a “narrow set of objects and practices” (Busse, 2009, p. 359). Busse (p. 359) argues that commodification exacerbates concerns about culture and tradition, causing two senses of reification to emerge; “reification as a fallacy regarding abstractions as if they were concrete things, and reification in which mutable, socially produced phenomena are thought of as unchangeable” . Busse (pp. 362–365) contends that culture as property is hegemonic and political, rather than intellectual, and implicit in a framework in which “power and inequality are exercised”. Traditionalism in tourism invokes uniqueness, stimulates visitation and commodification. Thus, it can be argued that the subjugation of traditionalism for commercialism is emblematic of the expediency that governs livelihoods nowadays.

Keesing (1993) submits that islanders asserting their identity and continuity with the past seek and proclaim an enduring essence of traditionality, widening the gulf between authentic and actual representations of the past in contemporary ideologies of cultural identity. Defining what signifies tradition and what role those customs should play in tourism is arduous because of differing perceptions, their meanings and rules (Flinn, 1993, p. 560). Cole (2007) asserts that culture may be commodified through tourism, but self-conscious awareness of culture as something people possess brings political legitimacy and a resource to exploit. The use of kinship ties and affiliations to mobilise scarce resources, and the use of traditional modes of leadership that support risk taking is what drives indigenous tourism (de Burlo, 2003). De Burlo argues that ni-Vanuatus optimise flexibility
and diversification, while asserting indigenous perceptions of the environment and social exchange relations. In tourism, this duality hinders financially sustainable business practice because kinship so relied upon is the antithesis of the market economy (Sahlins, 2005).

The issue of power and its influence is critical where some entities exert greater influence over the nature of tourism than others (Hall, 2007). Power and politics are imbued in cultural production and the symbolic material of cultures and rules imputed to ancestors, and rituals and myths serving ideological ends, reinforces the power of some and the subordination of others (Keesing, 1996, p. 166). Tourists seek essentialised stereotypes while locals are urged to value tourism’s economic value, fostering paradoxical encounters (Erb, 2005). This is typified in the way that although tourists have wide-ranging expectations, the anticipation is for a distinctive cultural experience (Connell, 2007). Consequently, host-guest interactions may be reduced to self-interested mutual exploitation, trivialised objectification and commodified experiences (Tilley, 1997). Islanders eschew their image as primitive and are eager to formulate their own identities (Stillitoe, 2000). Thus at stake is not the lack of authenticity, but the way its evocation disguises the despoiling of the environment, social and cultural coherence and local economic viability (Keesing, 1996).

Methodology

Juxtaposing historical and ethnographic approaches is essential to comprehending local understandings in supra-local political economic circumstances (Foster, 1993). Foster’s approach is adopted, framed around a qualitative, ethnographic scaffold principally employing semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviews. A historical, hermeneutic approach to reviewing pertinent literature is assumed (Murray & Overton, 2003). Fieldwork was conducted in English and Bislama over three phases. Phase 1 comprised exploratory observational fieldwork in situ during naghol season. Semi-structured interviews (18 in total) of tourism industry stakeholders in Port Vila (6) and of South Pentecost villagers (12) made up Phase 2. Phase 3 involved extensive field-based activity in Pangi village—informants (32 in total) were drawn from Pangi, Salap, Wali, Panas, Ranbutor, Panmatmat, Wanur, Ranwas and Bunlap villages including bungalow operators (2), store-keeper (1), service providers (2), pastors (2), teachers (2), government officers (2) and community-wide representatives including Sa big-men (3) and grassroots villagers (18). Convenience and snowball sampling was employed, with the key informant method framing sampling (Tremblay, 1957). Dyer, Aberdeen and Schuler’s (2003) attitudes toward research in indigenous settings, acknowledging ethical considerations of reciprocity, protocol, informed consent, confidentiality, data access and ownership, and negotiated through consultation is implicit.
CRITICAL FINDINGS

Grounded in Bani’s (1989) analysis of the naghol in the 1980s, Sofield yields metrics outlining financial success and effective governance, albeit acknowledging that constraints of kastom hinders equitable distribution of financial rewards directly to individuals. Regardless of the extent of naghol revenues, it is argued that at a local level, villagers are still mostly removed from any trickle-down effect (Lipp, 2011). While this is not unprecedented, the fact that it persists signals the presence of stubborn barriers to more community-wide benefit. Ascertaining a longitudinal picture of naghol growth is difficult given that the precise governance arrangements described by Sofield (2003) have mostly dissipated. The status quo is one controlled largely

Figure 4. Brochure for Land Diving (Naghol) Tour (Photo: Author 2010)
by a handful of Port Vila based private air charter and tour companies whose clients are predominantly day visitors (Figure 4) (Numake & Wambugu, 2012). Piecemeal visitation from international cruise liners and smaller expedition cruises and yachts supplement visitation. Overnight stay in South Pentecost is uncommon and limited to a trickle of independent travelers via one of two commercial flights weekly. The naghol is discernibly unregulated, meaning data on numbers of performances, volumes of tourists and inflows of income is commercially guarded, making mapping a growth trajectory difficult.

Naghol Control

The significance of the naghol as a semiotic of Sa culture is tacit, making a pressing need to control the terms under which it is commodified critical. Yet what is clear is that at the grassroots, excluding big-men, there is little in the way of practical control over the naghol. The phrase ‘kulja blong yumi wi mas holem taet’ resounds (translated from Bislama into English ‘we must hold on to our culture’). What is most contentious is that the promotion and conduct of the naghol is governed by a small cohort of big-men in concert with exogenous actors (Huffman, 2012; Numake & Wambugu, 2012; Soni, 2012). Assuming that islanders are incapable and unknowing is simplistic; rather it demonstrates how the capacity to engage with travel intermediaries is a debilitating hindrance. How a direct presence in the intermediation and marketing process could be manufactured is unclear, but unless this is reconciled, effective grassroots participation will remain constrained.

We don’t deal with the tourists so we trust the agents in Port Vila. But we hear that the agent in Port Vila is taking more than 60%. So we must control this better. All the money from the naghol that is paid to us is managed by a Trust (controlled by big-men) and then payments are made to the community. For me I can’t understand where the money goes. We trust that those in charge will be honest and fair—it’s our way. Maybe this is not a good way? (R3)

Although the naghol now serves a far greater economic purpose, unless governance structures are reformed, the disproportionate dominance of big-men and established tourism industry networks will persist (Huffman, 2012; Numake & Wambugu, 2012; Soni, 2012). This is suggested in Huffman’s (2012) lament that income generated is failing to be of grassroot benefit with little evidence of long-term advancements in education and health services.

When a group arrives from Port Vila on a charter flight for the naghol they spend little time on the island, spend no money except for what is paid to the big-men who manage and influence the tourism council. It is the same for cruise ship passengers and yachtsmen. So how much is actually coming into the community? And how much is being spent on community projects? So far I see very little because the facilities at the local school and health dispensary are still very poor. And we cannot afford to go to Port Vila if we need medical assistance. This is because what we get are very small amounts from around 1000 to 2000 vatu per person. (R19)
An estimate of naghol revenues reveals that from a 44,000 vatu (US$500) land dive tour (Figure 4) via Port Vila, the South Pentecost Tourism Council (SPTC) nets approximately 11,000 vatu (US$125) or 25%. An independent overnight traveller in Pangi Village pays around 22,000 vatu (US$250) for basic accommodation, meals, transfers and naghol with around 40% or 10,000 vatu (US$100) paid to SPTC. For cruise ship and yacht travellers making their own way to South Pentecost, a payment of 6000–8000 vatu (US$80) is payable to SPTC. Given that formal counting of attendees is not evident, little transparency from the SPTC or tour operators is discernible. However, informal estimates of annual naghol revenues amount to US$174,600 in 2010 and US$191,460 in 2011. This contrasts with Vanuatu’s annual GDP per capita of 286,844 vatu ($US3212). Whether advancing towards more effective governance remains the province of national policy or a function of changing societal expectations is unclear. What is certain is that a transparent grassroots-endorsed approach to overseeing naghol-led tourism is overdue.

It must be true that the naghol is bringing in a lot of money especially for the charter operators and tour operators in Port Vila. If we complain and ask for a greater share, the risk is they will take their passengers to Ambrym, Tanna and elsewhere. The same goes for the big-men who deal with them—there are rumours that they use this money for their own investments in Port Vila. Maybe this is true because it is only they who seem to be able to afford trucks and outboards and go to Port Vila for medical help. (R11)

Culture and the Livelihood Trade-off

The Sa understand that tourism is paradoxical—while promising to promote cultural revival, it threatens its very existence. This is contrary to the discernible perception of “outsiders” that islanders are oblivious to tourism’s potentialities and naively seek to develop tourism without cognisance of its drawbacks. Forsyth (2012, p. 18) highlights the case of preeminent Chief Telkon Watas alluding that kastom as commodity is a birthright and the key concern should be how the proceeds of its monetisation trickles down. Forsyth argues that at first glance, this would appear to be an excellent example of a community exercising agency over its traditional knowledge, however this appears misleading. The discourse about tourism amongst the Sa is characterised by an implicit acceptance that although tourism infers a necessary concession in terms of tradition, lifestyle, cultural heritage and amenity, the trade-off of possible cash income is considered fair recompense. This suggests that the nagol is considered amenable to cultural commodification and that tourism is indispensable given the dearth of options.

I don’t think we are “selling” our culture because we are not losing it, we are just showing it. In exchange for showing them the naghol we get cash. If we are able to rely on what we have in the gardens and lagoon, then maybe we don’t need them (visitors)—tourism is not
normal for us but it allows us to live a better life. What else do we have? Tourism is easy money, so we do it. (R21)

Such sentiments resonate with Martin’s (2010) exposé of kastom and the performance of living culture, where the monetisation is seen to encourage a more relaxed view to the utilisation of culture. Martin argues that for grassroots, perpetuating an outwardly primitive and savage disposition in the representation of kastom and culture plays to the desires of international tourists. While such a position is antithetical to the sacredness of the naghol, it signals a greater desire to extract economic value despite a nagging awareness that this leads to change. Incremental social and cultural change, although raising concerns with staunch traditionalists, is regarded by the wider community as necessary for generational advancement and control over customary owned assets.

Outsiders want us to remain uncivilised wearing nambas (penis sheaths) when we perform, so we do it. For us this is just a performance for them—it is not the real thing. Some women are now reluctant to dance without tops covering their breasts but the tour operators say that this is not what they come to see. We save the real thing for ourselves. This doesn’t mean we are damaging our traditions, it just means that we are making the most of the situation. (R17)

Negotiating Kastom

The naghol traditionally constituted a demonstration of power emphasising machismo despite the obvious danger. Older men participated in the naghol to reclaim a diminishing youth and declining virility. Sa women, particularly the mothers of land divers, revelled in the satisfaction of raising sons who negotiate what is a potentially perilous rite of passage. However, issues of status and grade, and the resistance to Westernisation that was typical of the period before independence has diminished and the naghol underpins this change, especially regarding present-day cog-nisance of its economic utility. Thus it can be argued that the duality of the naghol as status and power is increasingly making way for its livelihood potential. Tension lies in deciding the extent to which opportunities for economic advancement are balanced in the interest of maintaining the integrity of kastom. What is the extent to which tourism is accelerating the diminution of Sa culture? What are the limits beyond which Sa are willing to accept tourism, and who should decide how their culture is proffered? These questions are foremost to understanding whether tourism and kastom can co-exist:

By performing our culture we are allowing the young people to see what it is all about—we can then pass on our traditions. Some people say that this makes our culture weak and we are losing our traditional power. I don’t think so. No one else in the world can do what we do! It is we who have tradition and power, and that is why they (the visitors) want to see it. They say that culture should not be sold—but we
should decide for ourselves. How would they like us to tell them how to live? (R6)

The diminution of authenticity is relegated to the need for self-determination when it comes to performing the naghol. Martin (2010) argues that the tendency to promote or denounce a monovocal notion of authenticity is limiting because it is commonly assumed that authenticity is a positive trait, and that the fake is profane. For the Sa, considerable contestation surrounds the boundaries beyond which naghol exploitation can occur. As is the case with most traditional peoples, the top of the Sa hierarchy determines how the naghol is conducted, and how its proceeds are distributed. Fraenkel’s (2004) expose of the malleability of culture and kastom amplifies why livelihoods pragmatism is usurping the desire to remain traditional and why the old ways are less relevant now. Ghai (1985) argues that any negotiation of kastom has to operate in an environment whose dynamics are principally defined by the state and the market.

The performances we do for outsiders are not the real thing. How can it be when the real thing is really only for us? So when we perform we try to meet their expectations by making it as real as possible—like not wearing European clothes and shoes. Some things are only for us and should stay that way. As long as we are earning money we are happy to give them an idea of what this is all about. But they cannot possibly understand because they are not from here. I’m sure our ancestors would think this was alright. (R8)

Tourism and Traditionalism

Traditional peoples like the Sa are communal, where intellectual and material property is a collective asset presided over by a hierarchy of leaders. However, for tourism enterprises to be sustainable and profitable, they must operate under financially sound footings, steering clear of collectivism and ineffective patriarchal stewardship; often the bane of community based tourism efforts. Arguably, mixing tourism and traditionalism will remain paradoxical as long as deference for kastom and the superstructure that surrounds it persists:

I understand that tourism gives to us on one hand and takes on the other. What other choice do we have? Returning to a full kastom lifestyle is not possible. Tourism is good because we have something we can sell—so why not? Because of tourism we have some independence and it doesn’t worry me that our tradition is changing. (R23)

In the past our people shared everything. Nowadays things are different. If we want to benefit our own families we have to take care of them ourselves—we cannot rely on others. This can be a problem especially with those who expect that others will support them. I have to run my store like a business, if not I will be bankrupt. This means I have to be strict about giving things away. (R4)

Implicit in naghol tourism is the realisation that while the sanctity of tradition ought to be honoured, changes in its manifestation are considered tolerable. Such sentiments are supported by Fraenkel (2004) and
Gegeo (1994) and illustrative of how traditionalism is mediated to remain relevant and useable at the same time. Predictably, it is the unevenness of permissibility amongst the Sa that invokes debate about how to best arrive at a measure of acceptable change. Whether this is a “slippery slope” from which uncontrollable invention ensues, or emblematic of unremitting cultural change remains contentious.

I know some of our people don’t like to change and want to live like in the old days. But if we did that we will return to the days when the Europeans thought we were uncivilised. I want education for my children so that they can have good jobs and take care of their families. Changes are good—it means we are moving ahead. (R2)

The Tourism Dilemma

The prevailing view is that tourism is a precursor to further development—deepening linkages for local produce and services. Tourism as an expression of modernisation enhances the innate vulnerabilities of islanders by enforcing insidious change, albeit through their agency. It could be argued that the end result may be permanent reconfiguration of the Sa milieu. Such change necessitates a period of transition within which turmoil, reform, and a reframing of existing traditions is endured. Transition is bound to be divisive, with those gaining from tourism induced change in favour, and those with minimal participation rallying against it. To argue that this is nothing more than a postcolonial lament is facile; rather, it is reflective of the pragmatism that pervades the realities of island life here and elsewhere in the archipelago.

For us, tourism is the future. What else do we have here? Coconuts, kava and fish are not enough. Unless we can provide facilities that the tourist expects, the only type of tourists who will come will be those who fly in and then fly out the same day. I don’t think we are getting the most out of tourism. Only a small number are getting rich, the rest of us remain poor. If only we could use the money for community projects things will improve around here. Therefore we must do something useful for the community with the money we are getting. Maybe this will take time. (R4)

CONCLUSION

Aligning tourism and traditional culture is awkward—the former endorses change and embraces the non-traditional, while the latter espouses preservation. While giving voice to predominantly grassroots concerns may be considered a limitation, it addresses what is arguably a hugely underrepresented cohort in the naghol discourse. It is evident that tourism and traditional culture are prone to contestation, especially over control, income and ideology. There is now broad acceptance that the naghol as living heritage is subject to the vicissitudes of context, utility, and circumstance. Where the avoidance of the naghol’s commercialisation was once a vexed dilemma, this has dissipated. Instead, there is strong acknowledgement that the practicalities of
livelihoods are, at the very least, on par with the sanctity of tradition. What remains contentious is the extent to which more widespread benefit is accrued by the grassroots from its commercialisation, alongside the generation of enduring legacies.

In the 1980s, Jolly (1982, p. 354) presciently posed the question that still resonates—“what would an invasion of tourists do to the symbolic and practical vitality of South Pentecost kastom”? The transition from a traditional economy to a modern one is no clearer than the vexed commodification of the naghol. Arguably livelihood imperatives have taken precedence over the sanctity of tradition. The stance traditionalists take will not be their own (Jolly, 1982, p. 354)—this is presently evident. Kastom, in the form of the naghol is pliable and less bound to customary ties and open to monetisation. If, as Crocombe (1994) argues, policies to protect and uphold cultural sustainability are going to be workable, they must be realistically achievable and creatively adaptable. Crocombe rebukes anachronistic approaches that perpetuate the construction of decorative folklore and sustain cynical political rhetoric. This is particularly instructive to the debate around the naghol’s deployment for tourism.

Control over where, when and how the naghol is appropriated must be underpinned by contemporary and more democratic community-wide consensus—not outmoded patriarchal authorities. Increasing diminution of community-wide self-determination would be counter-productive to Sa prospects and support for tourism. Conventional acquiescence to big-men gives way to mismanagement and consequential investment of naghol earnings—this remains a formidable challenge. While such a context is prevalent in Melanesia and in Vanuatu, what is startling is that such structural impediments remain firmly entrenched. Lipp (2011) argues that “the massive inflation of gol performances is to a large extent his (Chief Telkon) work. He has always benefitted immensely—and often exclusively—from it, while the people actually doing the performance, have not—or not much. As far as I see it, this is yet another move by Chief Telkon, now a man in his seventies, to secure this kastom as commodity for himself and some of his sons. It has nothing to do with an interest in this outstanding and intricate performance itself. What would be much more needed, and would make more sense, is transparency with regards to what happens with the enormous influx of money that the gol tourism generates”. The views of Chief Telkon are emblematic of why maintaining tradition at the expense of income-earning concerns has become increasingly irrelevant. Gradually, constituents will contest the commercialisation of traditional culture and resources as their capacity to do so improves.

Arguably, Sa capacity to engage with the sophisticated and complex workings of global tourism is limited. While tourism is seen to enhance empowerment and self-determination (Britton, 1982; Sofield, 2003) such assertions are rebutted (Lacher & Nepal, 2010; Meyer, 2011; Pleumarom, 2012) reiterating its vexed nature. It is arguable that policymakers at the forefront of tourism expansion are preoccupied with attracting foreign investment and increasing international visitation and tourist expenditure while neglecting grassroots concerns. The
paradox is that the very thing that makes South Pentecost attractive if mismanaged, could, in all likelihood, compromise the naghol and life for the Sa. Perhaps the current context of the naghol debate is illustrative of transition from the traditional to the modern economy, and should be seen as such, and not as a “doomsday” certainty.

If broader Sa futures are to be assured, agrarian and subsistence livelihoods must be complemented with a curtailment of the mounting reliance on tourism. Rather than stymie naghol utilisation, what is critical is the development of frameworks that aid the governance and transparency of big-men and the entrenched tourism industry networks. Additionally, long term monitoring and evaluation of tourism in South Pentecost is required if tourism’s financial and non-financial impacts are to be adequately evaluated. This article raised two questions at the outset: to what extent has the enduring commercialisation of the naghol for tourism been beneficial to the broader community by leaving a lasting legacy and who is entitled to preside over the terms of its performance? It can be argued that despite several decades of the naghol enterprise, the broader Sa community, especially the grassroots, have not been bestowed with any long-term advantage. This seems so because effective utilisation of the naghol is overshadowed by the inherited custodianship of big-men who hitherto have done little to establish legacy initiatives.

Comparative research in similarly traditional contexts would be instructive to reconciling the problematic juncture that tourism and traditional culture invokes. This is arguably the case where traditional material and intangible culture, previously off-limits to outsiders has become more easily accessed. As livelihoods concerns mount, touristic use of traditional culture in developing country contexts seems a natural progression. Interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary longitudinal research must be encouraged, given the complex layers inherent in scrutinising peoples and contexts in transition, and where the economic, socio-political, psychological, traditional and modern worlds intersect and jostle.

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