

SYLFF Leadership Initiative Final Report

Catalysing cultural revitalisation in Western Province, Solomon Islands

Summary

Indigenous knowledge and practice is critical around Kolombangara, however is often ignored in discussions of conservation and resources management. In response, Sylff Fellow Joe McCarter and the Kolombangara Island Biodiversity Conservation Association (KIBCA) initiated a workshop to discuss cultural revitalisation, as well as teach practical documentation skills to rangers and community members. The workshop was held in Hunda, a village on Kolombangara Island in Western Province, and was led by representatives of the Vanuatu Cultural Center (VCC). The VCC team included three fieldworkers (ni-Vanuatu researchers) and the head of the Vanuatu Women's Culture Program. The workshop covered a variety of topics, including the challenges and ethics of cultural maintenance, techniques and best practice, and importance of such activities. On the final day, the group came up with several action points and next steps, including community and home-based recording and maintenance, as well as the creation of a new network focussed on Kolombangara Island and run through KIBCA.

Project background

Indigenous knowledge and practice are critical components of everyday life in Solomon Islands. Most people live in rural areas, and gardening, fishing and food gathering form the basis of income and nutrition. Most land is managed under customary tenure, and people trace back links to place over several generations. Local languages and cultures are important and diverse, and cultural practices guide interactions and governance over much of the country.

On Kolombangara Island, a high volcanic island in Western Province, local knowledge and practice plays a key role. Over 6000 people live on the island, largely in small rural communities on land that is managed under customary tenure. Kolombangara is a biodiversity hotspot, and KIBCA has been working since 2008 to coordinate and promote biodiversity conservation activities around the island. However, there has been little attention to the maintenance of language, *kastom* (a Solomon Island pijin concept referring to history and tradition) and culture to date, and KIBCA have been seeking to increase their focus on maintenance and revitalisation.

This work is driven by fears that elements of *kastom* and culture are being lost. In the present day, local language and knowledge are often not valued by education systems, cash economies, and the time pressure of everyday life. For example, school systems typically focus on western educational modes, and may not support traditional forms of knowledge transmission. There is concern that this may lead to the erosion of knowledge, practice and language over time. In everyday life, knowledge of language and history can help students to excel at school, and can guide healthy food practice based on local and organic food produce.

Moreover, and more pressingly, ongoing commercial logging on Kolombangara continues to threaten sacred sites and people's links to land. Often, logging operations will destroy cultural sites (for example, old villages sites or shrines), which in turn weakens knowledge and cultural histories associated with place. Because land is under customary tenure, and this is often orally transmitted, these activities can result in people losing their claim to land, and a reduction of the biocultural values of the landscape.

The workshop

With generous funding from the Sylff Leadership Initiatives, KIBCA Coordinator Ferguson Vaghi and Joe McCarter worked together to bring participants to Kolombangara to discuss the maintenance of knowledge and practice around the island. This was relevant to KIBCA's work, because they focus on maintaining ecosystem services and values associated with intact biodiversity areas. For this workshop, Mr. Vaghi led and facilitated the workshop, set workshop goals and objectives, and liaised with Hunda community to arrange accommodation and housing for the workshop, as part of KIBCA's day to day operations. Dr. McCarter assisted with the design of the workshop, liaison with the Vanuatu group, arranging logistics and assisting with setting the agenda for the meeting.

The major goal of the workshop was to allow the chance for exchange between Kolombangara and fieldworkers from the VCC. The VCC group were Evelyne Bulegih, Numaline Mahana, Chief Jamesan Sanhambath and Chief Joachim Moleli. The VCC has been working for over 30 years to promote the maintenance of traditional knowledge, practice and language. The heart of their operation is the presence of a nationwide network of over 100 'fieldworkers', volunteer indigenous anthropologists, who meet annually and are trained in various forms of cultural documentation. They typically work within their own communities to record items of value to the community, which are stored in communities and in the national archives. They also act as the gatekeepers for external agencies seeking to work in cultural or social spheres in Vanuatu, providing advice and guidance that ensure that ethical and intellectual property issues are addressed appropriately.

The specific objectives of the workshop were to:

1. Provide training in methods for documentation of oral histories, traditional knowledge and practice
2. Provide training in methods for mapping and recording of sacred sites using GIS technology
3. Provide a forum for sharing and exchange, between Solomon Islander conservation practitioners and ni-Vanuatu indigenous anthropologists
4. Produce and publish a short article for the national media about the importance of cultural knowledge and practice for the management of the environment

Attendance varied between 20 and 23 people across the three days of the workshop. Participants included KIBCA staff, including four rangers (responsible for carrying KIBCA's work, including enforcement and awareness activities); community representatives from neighbouring communities Votuana, Cana, Ireke, as well as from the host community Hunda; and community representatives from Vavanga and Kalina (Parara Island), who also form part of a biocultural network. Participants included two village chiefs. Attendance was largely male, however there were at least five women attending each day of the workshop.

The meeting was held at Hunda village on Kolombangara, a small village of around 200 people. All catering and accommodation was provided by the village.

Outline of events

Tuesday 20th February

Vanuatu participants arrived in Honiara. They crossed to Hunda by boat.

Wednesday 21st February

The first session was devoted to introductions and began after all participants had arrived (about 10:30am). The meeting was opened by the Chief of Hunda village, and then formally initiated by Ferguson Vaghi (KIBCA coordinator). While introducing themselves, the Vanuatu group spent around ten minutes each describing their home and the kind of work they do as fieldworkers. For example, Jimesan described mapping of sacred sites at his village. The Solomon Island participants introduced themselves and noted one thing that they were particularly interested to discuss at the workshop. The session resulted in a shared understanding of what the group was hoping to accomplish.

The second session was devoted to understanding the Solomon Islands context. The workshop split into small groups, with one fieldworker in each, and compiled lists of challenges around the maintenance of *kastom* and culture in their communities. They were asked to define some of the root causes, as well as think through some potential solutions. The Vanuatu fieldworkers were able to feed in to these solutions with their practical experience. This turned into a wide-ranging discussion, and it was particularly useful for the participants to understand the breadth of the issues on the table. Discussion particularly focussed on governance, and how it was important to record knowledge around genealogies and leadership protocol – it was felt that one of the key issues in the communities at the moment was a lack of legitimate leadership, combined with a lack of respect for leadership from youth.

In the third session, the Vanuatu fieldworkers went into greater depth about their work, including discussion of some of the challenges of maintaining *kastom* and culture in their communities. Joachim described starting a '*kastom* school' in his community, and how he had needed to work with parents of school children to come to an acceptable standard. Numaline described her work seeking to promote the maintenance of rights over land and the links between that and healthy foods and diets. She also noted the challenges of doing this work as a woman, which leads some men to question her right to speak in certain occasions. There was a healthy discussion and a number of questions from the floor, and the workshop closed for the afternoon at 5:15pm.

The outcomes of the day were an increased understanding of the work of the Vanuatu fieldworkers and of the needs of Solomon Island participants. This information was used to set the program for the remainder of the workshop.

Thursday 22nd February

The first session was devoted to a discussion of the '*kastom* economy', and the ways in which tradition and culture intersect with daily life in the village environment. The fieldworkers each gave details from their communities in Vanuatu, where the term '*kastom* economy' is used to describe the ways in which traditional knowledge and practice act as a good for trade and exchange. For example, Joachim discussed their initiative to use traditional wealth items, such as yams and pigs, to pay teachers in the *kastom* school, while Numaline discussed traditional marriage arrangements. In each, they described how they have worked to maintain these items of value, in an environment where people also need to rely on the cash economy. The participants then split into small groups to document the *kastom* economy in their communities, and groups focussed on a variety of

components including traditional medicines, fishing techniques, and exchange items. There were a number of questions from the audience.

The second session focussed on the practical maintenance and recording of *kastom* and culture. Each of the fieldworkers gave a short talk about an area within their expertise: Evelyne discussed the written recording and storage of *kastom* stories, Numaline the written descriptions of weaving and woven products, Joachim the recording of *kastom* stories, and Jimesan the use of GPS to document sacred sites. The focus on all these presentations was to try to make sure that participants understood that technology should not be the crux for this work – that it is better to record things in a basic format (e.g., pen and paper) and store it securely, to ensure it is accessible to future generations.

The third session was a field-based practical session. Some of the participants walked around the village to nearby sacred sites and discussed the GPS documentation and written description of these. This session was led by Jimesan and Ferguson – the former on the use of GPS units to map the sites, the latter on the possibilities of GIS software to visualise and record information. Another group of participants went with Evelyne and Numaline and discussed recording of weaving patterns and techniques. Weaving is an important cultural expression, which some participants were worried is being lost. The focus of this discussion was how to document weaving techniques using basic technology – pens and papers.

There was a brief summary session in the community after the field session, where the fieldworkers were able to recap the key points. The community then presented the Vanuatu group with gifts to recognise their contribution.

Friday 22nd February

Day three was focussed on distilling and defining next steps. The two morning sessions were combined and featured a discussion of what next steps the participants should take to maintain and revitalise *kastom* and culture in their own home. Participants worked in small groups, and there was input from the Vanuatu group around what were practical and feasible activities.

The following is a partial list from that session:

- Begin with awareness at the home level, with family members. Many issues around the interruption of knowledge transmission are at home, so need to be addressed there. Part of this will be speaking with elders, in order to identify what components of knowledge should be maintained
- Leaders were interested in beginning consultations in their communities, around which components of traditional knowledge and practice are at risk and important. The initial areas of focus were to be traditional farming techniques, cooking, and knowledge of genealogy
- KIBCA opted to diversify their work to include *kastom* and culture, and were to aim to facilitate a network around the island, with the aim of supporting community members to record and document important knowledge
- Maintain linkages with the Vanuatu group, through facebook and email, so that lessons could continue to be shared. One example is the upcoming slow food conference in Vanuatu, which will have relevant topics for the Vanuatu group.

Saturday and Sunday, 24th and 25th February

On the Saturday and Sunday, the Vanuatu group travelled to Imbu Rano field station on Kolombangara. The purpose of the fieldtrip was to see KIBCA's biodiversity conservation work in practice, as well as learn about threats to the area and the challenges that the rangers face on a daily basis. They arrived mid-afternoon on Saturday and spent the time walking on the mountain and talking with KIBCA rangers.

Monday and Tuesday, 26th and 27th February

The fieldworkers travelled back to Honiara on the 26th of February. All left on the 27th and arrived back to Port Vila. Numaline flew back to Tanna on Friday March 2nd, while Joachim and Jamesan took the ferry back to Malekula on Monday 5th.

Outputs and outcomes

The workshop was lively, well attended, and was able to produce the outputs that were intended. These included:

1. Provision of discussion forums and practical trainings around the maintenance of *kastom* and culture on Kolombangara
2. Initiation of efforts on Kolombangara to maintain *kastom* and culture, at a household level and through the networks of KIBCA
3. Creation of linkages and exchange between Vanuatu fieldworkers (experts in cultural maintenance), biodiversity conservation rangers and community members
4. A draft newspaper article (Appendix A), which has been submitted for publication in the Solomon Star and Vanuatu Daily Post

We are confident that these outputs will lead to a range of outcomes. For one, this workshop gave the Solomon Island participants (both rangers and community members) an introduction to the skills needed to monitor, record and maintain cultural knowledge and practice, including the mapping of sacred sites around their home communities. More importantly, the discussions and activities of the workshop provided a forum for the discussion of the value of cultural knowledge and practice, which can sometimes be lost in the day to day focus on livelihoods and living. With the solid and measurable next steps that the participants agreed, we believe there is a good chance this workshop was the first step for an ongoing network of cultural monitors, maintained through the KIBCA network.

Over the longer term, we see these efforts as being a small but necessary contribution to the overall goal of maintaining the biocultural resilience of rural communities in Solomon Islands. Both cultural and biological diversity are critical to the ongoing vitality of communities, and we believe that more of these kinds of activities and discussions are needed into the future.

Reflections

From both a personal and professional standpoint, it was a pleasure to be involved in organising this meeting. On a personal level, it was a privilege to re-connect with the VCC group after several years, and it was exciting to begin to foster some dialogue around the importance of kastom and culture on Kolombangara. The VCC has been a regionally leading institution, and there would be much to be gained from further collaboration. From a professional standpoint, it is clear that the maintenance of knowledge and practice should form a key plank of ongoing efforts to support conservation work around the island; to have played a small part in strengthening this aligns well with other work with KIBCA pushing for national park status for the area above 400m on Kolombangara. The partnership with KIBCA was absolutely critical to the success of the meeting, and while there were challenges (for example, including arranging logistics for Hunda, setting the agenda remotely, and the difficulties of scheduling across several different calendars), Mr. Vaghi and team worked hard to make the meeting a success. I look forward to working together to turn the discussions in the workshop into solid progress over 2018 and 2019.

Joe McCarter, April 30th 2018

Photos



Figure 1: Participants outside venue in Hunda



Figure 2: Vanuatu and New Zealand workshop participants -from left to right Joachim Moleli, Evelyne Bulegih, Joe McCarter, Numaline Mahana and James Sanhambath



Figure 3: Waiting for the workshop to start on Day One



Figure 4: Small ground work on Day Two (photo: Piokera Holland)

Appendix A: Draft newspaper article

Kolombangara Island Biodiversity Conservation Association runs workshop on cultural documentation and training

Draft article for Solomon Star, 1 April 2017

What is the role of traditional knowledge, stories and kastom in today's world? How can language and culture be maintained? How can communities record stories and knowledge before they are lost?

To discuss these questions, a group of community members, rangers, and representatives of the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (VKS) gathered in Hunda community, Kolombangara Island, between 20th and 23rd of February 2018. Over three days of discussion, practical sessions, and fieldtrips, the group worked together to set out a roadmap to maintain important links with kastom in today's world.

The workshop was an initiative of the Kolombangara Island Biodiversity Conservation Association, or KIBCA and Joe McCarter (Sylff Fellow). KIBCA have been working on Kolombangara since 2008, to protect the rich marine and forest environments of the island and promote sustainable economic and social ventures. As part of their work, KIBCA Coordinator Ferguson Vaghi wanted the rangers to be able to document tabu sites, kastom stories and histories from their communities, to maintain links to land in the current day. KIBCA rangers attended the workshop, along with representatives of Hunda, Votuana, Cana, Ireke and Vavanga (Kolombangara Island) and Kalina (Parara Island),

To do this, KIBCA invited representatives from the VKS to visit and run a workshop. The VKS was set up in Vanuatu after Independence and has worked to maintain and revitalise kastom for all ni-Vanuatu. Vanuatu has more languages per capita than anywhere else on earth, and the VKS promotes the idea that kastom, culture and traditional knowledge hold the key to building a strong foundation for success in the current day.

The mainstay of the VKS is a network of fieldworkers, in communities around the country. Fieldworkers are volunteer researchers, men and women who work within their communities to record language, cultural practice, and kastom. Every year they meet in Port Vila and report back to the group, and important knowledge and resources is stored in an archive in the Vanuatu National Museum.

Four representatives from the VKS came to this meeting. Evelyne Bulegih runs the Women's Culture Program and coordinates the fieldworker network. Numaline Mahana was one of the first women fieldworkers and works to maintain traditional food culture and land rights. Chief Joachim Moleli has been a fieldworker for many years and maintains a 'kastom school' in his community on Malekula to teach knowledge and kastom to children in the village. Chief Jimesan Sanhambath has been a fieldworker for over 20 years and has a special interest in mapping and protecting tabu sites around his community on Malekula.

The workshop covered a several topics. On day one, the fieldworkers introduced the role of kastom and culture in Vanuatu, and why it was important to everyday life. They noted that although sometimes it is easy to lose language and culture, this is dangerous: they are the base of society and identity. The Solomon Island group then outlined some of the issues in their communities, including lack of governance and leadership, and resolved that there needed to be more done to maintain traditional knowledge. For example, they discussed how logging operations sometimes damage tabu

sites, which makes it hard for people to remember their history and links with the land. Overall, much of the discussion was about the connectivity between people and the land - when this relationship is broken it affects livelihoods throughout the generations.

On day two, the workshop focussed on the 'kastom economy' and the role that it plays in everyday life. This day focussed on how traditional items, like weaving, medicine, and even stories are important for exchange in day to day life and help provide strength to communities. In particular, they help to stop people relying too much on goods which require money, and so help with maintaining friendship and family within the village. On day two, the fieldworkers also led practical sessions on recording kastom stories and practice like weaving and use of GPS to map tabu sites. One of the main lessons was that local researchers don't need to rely on outsiders with technology to come – it is better to go ahead with pens and paper only.

On day three, the workshop thought covered what some next steps might be. Some of the representatives from Kolombangara and Parara islands said that it was clear that some knowledge had been lost, it was important there were actions to maintain it now. Community members resolved to start working with family members right away to record knowledge and practice. KIBCA also resolved to begin a network, modelled on the VKS fieldworker network, which will work around Kolombangara to support men and women to record, maintain and revitalise traditional knowledge and practice. The group also thought it was important that there was support from Provincial and National government for the maintenance of kastom and culture, but that it needs to be clear that some tabu sites need to be kept secret.

Most importantly, as noted by Numalin Mahana from Vanuatu: *“Mifala I no tijim olgeta long samfala niu samting, be mifala I sherem ol experiences blong ol wok blong ol fieldworker. Oli se kastom blong ol I lus be during long woksop oli just luk save se oli gat I stap be I nid blong rivaevem bak. So oli must set up mo organized blong wok. Oli gat gudfala environment I stap. Hopefully bae oli save rivaevem bak kastom ekonomi blong olgeta mo mekem I wok.”* We hope that the discussions that took place in the workshop will be the start of work over time, as well as enduring link between the VKS and communities on Kolombangara and Parara.

Generous support for the workshop was provided by the Ryoichi Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund (Sylff) Leadership Initiative program, via the Sylff Association. This workshop was run by KIBCA in partnership with Ecological Solutions Solomon Islands and Joe McCarter (American Museum of Natural History, Wildlife Conservation Society, and Sylff Fellow).