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Performing Culture in the Global Village

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Abstract ■ This paper discusses the revival and performance of cultural traditions and 'ethnic lives' for a tourist audience in the third and fourth worlds using the example of a newly emergent development on Wala island, Malekula, Vanuatu. It examines issues of the commodification and objectification of culture, in the light of debates about the 'invention of tradition', in relation to a global tourist industry. A major concern is with the politics and values involved in an active appropriation on the part of indigenous populations of their past and how this might relate to a notion of authenticity in the context of a Melanesian culture.

Keywords ■ globalization ■ heritage ■ invented traditions ■ objectification ■ tourism ■ Vanuatu

The strangest thing in a strange land is the stranger who visits it. (Opening line in O'Rourke's film *Cannibal Tours*)

The Wala Island Tourist Resort is situated on a small coral island, one of a series, known collectively as the Small Islands, just off the coast of north-east Malekula, one of the large islands in the northern part of the archipelago making up Vanuatu (former New Hebrides) (see Figure 1, p. 68). An essential element of the experience for a visitor interested in anything more than sun, sea or sand, is a visit to the Small Nambas on the Malekulan mainland, who have been busily reviving their customs during the past few years. Our guide, part-time local family planning adviser, close relative to the resort manager and occasional escort to visitors, took the party of six across the narrow strait of water to the village of Sanaliu on the Malekulan mainland. Wearing a floral skirt and Chanel Paris T-shirt she told us we would be fed: 'They'll provide the rice, you provide the meat!' – a reference to the traditional practice of cannibalism, much stressed in the chapter on Malekula in the 'Lonely Planet guide to Vanuatu' (the visitor's bible: everyone seemed to possess one). We followed a path through gardens in the bush stopping at a huge banyan tree next to which were some small stone tables, the only visible remains of the site of an ancient *nimbaur* (men's house).

Nearby was a blue and white painted signboard. The overall organization of the design resembled that on a beer bottle. Highlighted areas in

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the top left and right hand corners read: 'Malekula 25 August '93' and 'Amel (dancing ground) Bouas'. Beneath in an oval band: 'Welcome to Small Nambas in Malekula Region'; inside: 'Walla Kajja Club Organization of Foil Art. To promote understanding between people. Custom Dancing'.

Shortly, drumming broke the silence, and we were led into the dancing ground. Chief Stephan greeted us, dressed in penis sheath supported by a bark belt, decorated arm band, and a curved pig's tusk hanging around his neck. A group of men, similarly dressed, were playing on upright and horizontal slit drums in the shade of an open high-roofed thatched house surmounted with a hawk sculpture with outstretched wings. Lining one side of the rectangular-shaped dancing ground on both sides of the central structure were ten houses, each with palm leaf thatched roofs bound with lianas covering a coral monolith at the rear with small stone tables and a carved wooden anthropomorphic sculpture in front (Figure 2). Each sculpture, individually carved and utterly distinctive, had a large face, and an extended upper torso. In two cases arms were represented, none had legs. Some of the faces of the effigies were painted in two halves blue and red, divided down the bridge of the nose. In one ancestor house an unpainted black tree-fern carving substituted for one of the wooden sculptures (Figure 3).

The two houses next to the central structure with the slit drums also had hawk sculptures affixed to the end of the roof ridge poles. Each of these houses was surrounded by a square of coral stones, behind them a wall surmounted by a bamboo fence. Our guide explained: these were the ten ancestor houses erected along the men's side of the dancing ground in connection with the great *Maki* ceremony that inaugurated it on 23 August 1993, the first such ceremony in living memory. Much smaller coral stones and stone tables, without any wooden sculptures or ancestor houses, lined the women's side of the dancing ground where we stood. Behind is a house with plaited bamboo walls and palm thatch. An awning provided welcome shade, a wooden table and benches stood outside.

Posted on the wall of the house was a small piece of paper with writing: a rota of duties connected with the maintenance of the dancing ground.

The women, more of our 'Small Nambas' hosts, clustered on their side of the dancing ground, dressed in pandanus mat skirts, bare breasted, with decorative arm bands, feathers in their hair and multiple strings of white beads hanging down to their stomachs. They give us a cooling coconut welcome drink. Small bamboo straws are provided to drink through a hole bored in the top of a coconut, complete with outer husk.

The six white British and Canadian sweating guests are laden with all the latest reproductive technology: video and automatic cameras, tape recorder and, more primitively, notebook and pencil. The event is going to be framed and recorded in the greatest possible detail, from sight to sound to movement and back again. There is no mechanical means of recording touch and taste and smell. Our guide says we can photograph and look at

Figure 1 The Location of Wala Island

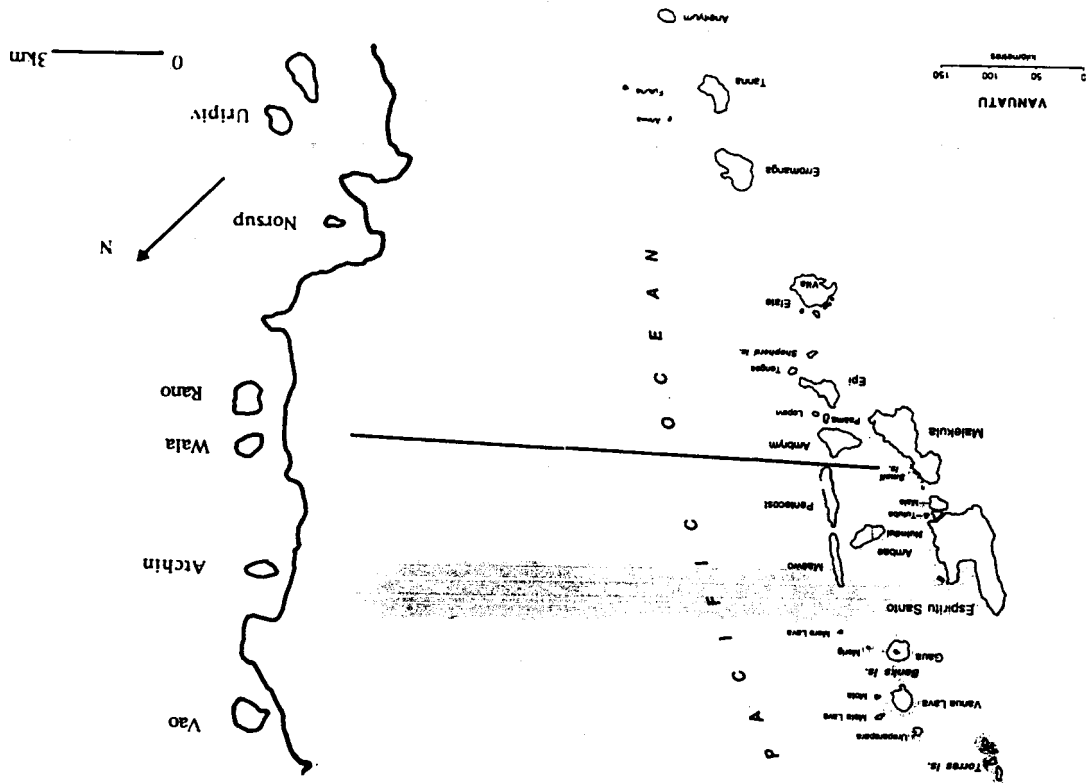




Figure 2 The Central Part of the 'Small Nambas' Dancing Ground - Men's Side



Figure 3 Ancestor House with Tree Fern Carving

whatever we want, ask questions, obtain information about traditional customs.

The drum beat changes. A male dance troupe with elaborate head decorations, nambas, ankle rattles and dance staffs, rushes out into the centre of the dancing ground (Figure 4). A succession of three lengthy dances are performed: men at the centre; women on the periphery. The visitors watch from the sidelines, cameras flash and click, the video and tape silently record. Sometimes they watch the dancers intently, sometimes they look at other things: the buildings, and each other. Next a visit to the male side of the dancing ground: past the ancestor houses, through the central structure, beyond the slit drums, to see another house. At one end there are two small wooden sculptures and a coral table on which a large conch shell has been placed (Figure 5). The ridge pole of the house, open at both ends, is supported by a tree-fern carving. Inside it there is a coral platform with two parallel rows of pigs' jaws. The two in front have spectacular curved tusks. Chief Stephan looks directly into the cameras. He explains in *islama* (pidgin English) that this is the proof that a big *Maki* (grade-taking ceremony) took place involving the sacrifice of pig wealth (tusked boars). The fact that there is only one line of stones along the dancing ground demonstrates that there has only been one such ceremony. We are then taken to the men's house: another traditional structure of bamboo and palm thatch, an old canoe hull covering the ridge pole on the outside. At the entrance is a carved roof support: a complex face design painted red and white - 'the colours of initiation' it is explained. Only initiated men may enter the house (guests excepted as they are honorary initiates and honorary men). Inside, hanging from the wall and roof, various pieces of traditional culture are displayed: brightly painted paddles with attached feathers ('used in the paddle dances'), carved club ('ritual pig-killing club'), headdresses and other items of dance costume. After leaving the *nimbar* three men display fire making techniques. After a number of abortive attempts smoke begins to rise from the hollowed log and is fanned into flames.

We are taken to see the women sitting in the shade weaving different types of baskets from coconut fronds and pandanus. The partner of one of the tourists is complimented for having fed him up so well (it turns out he does the cooking). Two women with painted faces display techniques of yam planting and then it is time for lunch. *Lap lap* (made from grated yams and cooked with chicken) wrapped in banana leaves is taken from a smouldering stone-lined fire pit and is brought to the table, served with rich coconut milk (Figure 6) on the women's side of the dancing ground. We wash our hands in water contained in a banana leaf and are shown how to cut the pudding with bamboo knives and dip it into the milk before eating. The second course is a choice of paw paw or grapefruit. A pink and white check cotton tea towel lies on the table.

During the meal the Small Nambas observe the ungraceful eating



Figure 4 The Male Dance Troupe



Figure 5 The Coral Platform with Display of Pigs' Jaws



Figure 6 Serving *Lap Lap*

habits of the tourists at a distance. The male dance troupe then performs three more dances, each telling its own story. The show is over, or almost, for we are given a brief display of leaf magic as an afterthought. Chief Stephan shows us a photocopy of an old photograph taken from the archives of the Port Vila Cultural Centre, showing his grandfather from whom he learnt about traditional culture, and some notes copied out from Layard's anthropological account of the island of Vao, north-east Malekula, *Stone Men of Malekula* (1942): dual proofs of the authenticity of what we have seen. Some traditional artefacts, mainly wooden carvings, are available for sale. Purchases are duly made. Chief Stephan collects our 2,500 vatu each (£14). The show has lasted over four hours. The dancers line up, the tourist 'big man' makes a thank you speech, describing the show as the best he has seen. Delighted, Chief Stephan presents him with a large wooden carving. We all shake hands with our hosts before leaving.

The six tourists were anthropologists and their affines.

Cultures in performance

Everywhere, throughout the world, local peoples in response to the opportunities afforded by the global tourist industry are putting their culture on display. The Small Nambas, in common with other indigenous populations

of the 'periphery', are earning a living through selling traditional artefacts, villages, music, dance, shrines and ritual acts.

This performance of 'ethnic lives' for a transitory and travelled audience is the equivalent in the developing 'Third' and 'Fourth' Worlds of the heritage boom in the developed one. The staging of medieval jousts in a medieval castle or civil war battles in Britain or in the United States has its counterpart in the Small Nambas' show, in 'cannibal tours' up the Sepik River of Papua New Guinea or a visit to a Bali Aga village on the shores of Lake Batur. In all these cases it is the 'past' and 'tradition' that is being put on display.

This has become the only potential locus of a search for cultural authenticity in the hyperreality of a global culture increasingly characterized by massive transnational flows of people, information, money and things. In a postmodern 'economy of signs and spaces' (Lash and Urry, 1994), and an age of 'travelling cultures' (Clifford, 1992), localized places and global processes intersect in an increasingly creolized and hybridized world of peoples, and experiences. The isolated village culture, the hallmark of a traditional anthropology in search of native simplicities, has become, like everywhere else in the world, a kind of borderland. A highly ambiguous 'contact zone' (Clifford, 1997) of competing, changing and emerging identities is created wherever ethnicity and tradition is placed on display and becomes the focus of attention.

Global culture has been frequently imagined to be the spread of otherwise localized artefacts, products and technologies. But it is much more than this: an imploding world of diasporic 'ethnoscapes', 'finanscapes', 'mediascapes', 'technoscapes' and 'ideoscapes' (Appadurai, 1990). Another might be added to this list: 'travelscape'. The world is significantly fashioned by tourism – now the planet's single biggest industry, generating the largest mass movement of peoples outside wartime. In an age of tourism the sojourn of the anthropologist is no longer isolated, if it ever was. To escape Western modernity in the ethnographic present is now solely the consolation and domain of an archaology. The global travelscapes of tourism are entirely dependent for their success on the production or finding of authentic cultural difference. The world becomes an array of localities which might be experienced. There must be different things to look at, eat, touch, buy and see. As such the study of tourism forms part of a revitalized interest in the anthropology of consumption (Miller, 1987, 1994, 1995). What is being consumed in touristscapes, however, goes far beyond commodities extending to an economy of signs, images and places which can only be carried away in snapshots and memories, but nevertheless may constitute a significant, if largely intangible, element of personal cultural capital and a means of self-distinction and self-definition. It is a peculiar form of consumption insofar as it usually entails producers and consumers actually confronting each other in person.

The negative consequences of tourism resulting in the production of the past and 'primitive culture' as commodities have been foregrounded over and over again in the critical sociological literature on the subject (see discussions in MacCannell, 1976, 1992; Crick, 1989; Urry, 1990). The tourist has been almost universally reviled and condemned as an (unwitting) agent of cultural destruction. Many tourists themselves are increasingly embarrassed by the pursuit: far better to be a 'traveller'. Or finding 'out there', in distant places, a simulacrum of what may be already consumed 'back home', the 'post-tourist' (Feifer, 1985) revels in decoding the games of traditional culture and staged ethnicity which 'primitives' have learned to play.

If the effects of global tourism on peripheral peoples have turned out to be cultural differentiation, 'revivals' and inventions of ethnicity, rather than cultural homogenization, as initially predicted, the analysis of the results has nevertheless been pretty much the same: an inauthentic post-modern pastiche is being produced in which populations pretend to be pre-modern in order to continue to purchase their modernist identity spaces in a world of mass movement, mass production and mass consumption. Peripheral peoples market themselves simply because they have little else to sell and this is what the tourists have, after all, come to see. Combining a calculating market rationality, while donning banana leaf skirts and featherers they can cynically be regarded as being as much 'exploiters' as the 'exploited' from this perspective. The gullible tourists are only transitory 'guests', easily manipulated by the wealth of experience acquired by their welcoming 'hosts'.

There is something, however, that seems to be deeply disingenuous about much of the critical literature on tourism (as opposed to that nakedly concerned with its promotion, marketing, planning, etc.) in that we can be sure that the self-same critics are, have been, and will be tourists, travellers or post-tourist cynics. The interactions between tourists and indigenous groups are seldom simply reducible to various forms of self-interested mutual exploitation, manipulation, marketing strategies and trivialized objectified and commodified experiences. They may involve all of these elements, of course, but the literature has generally been insensitive to relationships which are both more complex and more muted. An anthropology of tourism is still in its infancy and there has been little sustained analysis. Books by Graburn (1976), Smith (1989) and Gewertz and Errington (1991) or O'Rourke's (1987) film *Cannibal Tours* are exceptions which prove the rule. Part of the reason may be an uncomfortable kindred between anthropologists (sophisticated or dedicated long-stay tourists) and non-professionals similarly interested in the cultures of Others (Crick, 1985).

I want to attempt to discuss here what it means to perform traditional culture for tourists in a Third World context. In the account which follows I attempt to highlight and emphasize the contradictions involved in both

the performance of the Small Nambas' show itself and its reception by tourists and local people, emphasizing that it is a site of a great many paradoxes and different interpretations that have no easy resolution.

The Political and Economic Context

The format of the Small Nambas' show is basically the same for each group of tourists, although the dances vary. The Small Nambas started out as a local dance troupe, one of many within Vanuatu, and a development stimulated by politicians who have vigorously promoted *Kastom* (custom) as a means of constituting national consciousness since the country became independent in 1980. The former deputy prime minister, Sethy Regenvanu, born on the Small Island of Uripiv, with his constituency in north-east Malekula, arranged for the group to go to represent Vanuatu in an 'exposition of *kastom* and *kaija*' in New Caledonia in 1993. Chief Stephan put the dance troupe together and acted as leader and spokesperson. Having been paid a fair amount of money for the New Caledonian performances the commercial potential of 'performing culture' became evident. The eventual outcome was Chief Stephan going into partnership with the manager of the Wala Island Resort to create the Small Nambas tourist attraction. The present location of the dancing ground on the Malekulan mainland opposite Wala Island is basically a matter of expediency and compromise following a long series of financial and land disputes, and splits between various local factions. It is cut from the bush on land Stephan owns, and is only visited by tourists staying at the Wala resort.

The Wala resort opened in July 1993 with virtually only word of mouth publicity in a few tourist centres in the capital of Vanuatu, Port Vila on Efate island. It is a small resort consisting of six bungalows built with traditional materials, and a dining hall in the style of a *nimbar* or men's house. The resort manager and owner, Peter Fidelio, financed the entire project himself from savings built up during fourteen years working away from Wala in the Hotel Rossi, Port Vila and on merchant ships plying Asia and the Pacific. Peter and his immediate family do all the catering and cleaning. Facilities are basic: an el san toilet is complemented by upturned oil drum serving as a water source for a shower. The resort is run as a collective between Peter and the five clans *namil* on Wala between whom the profits are shared. The government of Vanuatu provided no financial support and demonstrated little interest in the project before it started. A small amount of finance capital was provided by the New Zealand High Commission who gave money for a generator to provide electricity for the dining area and have subsequently financed the recent installation of two flush toilets and showers (August 1995). A solar powered telephone was also installed at the time when the 11th annual meeting of the Melanesian heads of state (the

Melanesian Spearhead Group) (MSG) was held on Malekula island in August 1995 involving a Sunday afternoon visit to the Wala resort for lunch and a seminar. This visit was also promoted by Sethy Regenvanu, and resulted in the upgrading of the airstrip at Norsup on the Malekulan mainland from a grass to tarmac surface, and improvements being made to the pot-holed roads both north towards Wala and south to the administrative centre of Lakatoro on the Malekulan mainland.

Prior to the establishment of the Wala resort the islanders had no experience of tourists and were dubious with regard to their impact and the benefits which might be forthcoming. The location of the Wala resort, like the Small Nambas dancing ground, is a compromise. Other possible locations were blocked by land disputes. The resort is situated in the village of Serser by the coast on the south-east tip of Wala island where virtually the entire population lives today and there is no room for further expansion. The manager has plans to establish another and much larger resort on land he owns along the coast on the Malekulan mainland opposite Wala. He hopes to develop package tours from Port Vila in the future which will involve tourists flying out to Malekula for short visits of one or two nights and back again. The present resort on Wala island might cater more to a 'luxury' end of the market, a 'real Pacific island experience', while the proposed one on the mainland to more of a cheaper 'mass tourism' market.

So far visitor numbers to Wala have been low. In 1993 only seven visitors stayed at the resort, in 1994 seventy-nine and in 1995 (January–August) fifty-four. Two nights is the average stay. Most tourists arrive from Port Vila. Others, exploring the coastline of Vanuatu, arrive on private or hired yachts. Most, but not all, visit the Small Nambas during their stay at Wala. A party of six tourists watching the show is large, the average being three or four.

The Wala resort is the first to have been established in Malekula, and at present is the only one. Until the early 1990s the policy of the Vanuatu government was to restrict tourism to a few of the islands of the archipelago: Efate with the capital Port Vila, where the bulk of the c. 30,000 tourists/year to visit Vanuatu (mainly from Australia and New Zealand) (Jayarama and Andeng, 1993) remain, Tanna and Espiritu Santo. The state has recently adopted a more liberal, *laissez-faire* attitude and is now actively stimulating further tourist development throughout the archipelago. The inclusion of a write-up about the Wala resort and the Small Nambas in the second edition of the Lonely Planet guide to Vanuatu (Harcombe and O'Byrne, 1995) will, no doubt, considerably increase visitor numbers in the future.

The Small Nambas' show has to be understood in the context of other activities connected with, and stimulated by, tourism on Wala. These include the demonstration of traditional sand drawings together with a project to market these as T-shirt designs, to be produced on Wala as a

cottage industry and sold there and in shops in Port Vila; guided tours around Wala island to visit the old dancing grounds (three of which have been cleared from the encroaching bush), the manufacture of wooden artefacts (canoe prow-heads, clubs, miniature slit-drums, etc.), mats and baskets to be sold to tourists. Kava (a mild narcotic beverage) drinking can also be arranged for tourists in the Serfer bar next to the resort dining hall. The visit of the MSG stimulated the building of six new canoes in traditional style to carry the heads of state, and subsequently tourists, over to the island (Tilley, 1996). There are also plans to write down the history of Wala island and perhaps set up a small museum and exhibition centre to display and increase knowledge of traditional culture for both tourists and local people alike. The brother of the resort manager, employed by the Vanuatu Culture and Historical Sites Survey (VCHSS), is actively involved in trying to promote this last scheme. The total package is conceived as a vibrant revival of local *kastom* providing entertainment for tourists and increased local knowledge of traditional practices.

Justifications and reactions

It was stressed to me on many occasions by Peter Fidelio that tourism would act as a catalyst to preserve traditional *kastom*. It would act as a counterweight to colonial and missionary influence which had all but destroyed local traditions. Western influence, having had such pernicious corrosive effects in the past, would now, in the era of independence and decolonization, act through tourist development to regenerate a culture in danger of being lost. It would also stimulate the local economy providing jobs and income and act as a counterweight to people migrating to Port Vila and beyond Vanuatu in search of employment. While tourists might expect the luxuries of showers, electricity and flush toilets, the rest of the island population should retain their traditional ways and not be seduced by such amenities. His brother was keen that the people learn their own history so that traditional knowledges and practices could be maintained. Chief Stephan stressed that it was important to perform culture if it was to be preserved. It was no good just writing it down. To keep culture alive it must be lived. While most of the Small Nambas group were willing to perform only because they were paid for it, Stephan expressed a wish to actually live and dress in the style portrayed in the show. The motives were somewhat contradictory. A growing cash economy made it expensive and difficult to live and money was needed. However, in the past people were much richer and happier and had all that they required. They had no need for money. And yet, the show was being performed for cash, the money obtained was being banked. By performing the past one could purchase a better future.

Many tourists staying at the Wala Island Resort wrote comments in the

visitors' book. Virtually all mentioned the Small Nambas' show and most seem to have been genuinely impressed and wrote that they felt that they had learnt a great deal about traditional customs. Only a few of the tourists I interviewed did not appreciate the show. Preferring to describe themselves as 'travellers', they felt it was all make-believe. They were much more interested in seeing how people really lived today: watching people walking down a road or buying things in a trade store. One couple, who had been shown around the ancient dancing grounds on Wala island, and then attended the Small Nambas' show the following day, said that they enjoyed the visit to the old stones far more: 'We knew the guide was just telling us stories about them and they weren't really true, but we weren't concerned about the real meanings of the stones. We were just happy to look and be told stories.' They were appalled by the show: 'We have not seen anything like that before. A Disneyland in Vanuatu. We did not come for that.' What is interesting about these comments is that while these tourists were quite happy to listen to a story made up for them about the past, they reacted very strongly to the Small Nambas making up a story about their own lives in the present: 'custom living'.

Wala islanders themselves had similarly different sets of reactions to the Small Nambas' show. Naturally, those working for or connected with the Wala resort regarded it as an entirely positive thing providing jobs, income and strengthening *kastom*. Other people, not so closely connected, criticized the show for being 'fake'. First of all it was felt that since Stephan was already connected with one ancient clan dancing ground on Wala it was entirely inappropriate for him to go and set up a new one on the mainland and pretend to be a chief. He was described to me as a 'rolling stone' and stones should not roll. Stones (those in the ancient dancing grounds) fix and root your identity in the land and this cannot be changed. 'A true *Maki* [pig sacrifice] ceremony should last for thirty days, Stephan's only took place over two days and proper tusked boars were not sacrificed.' The women's skirts were 'correct', the men's nambas were 'made up'. But the most bitter criticism was that the Small Nambas were only doing it for the money.

An 'authentic' culture?

Information providing the basis for the Small Nambas' show came from a variety of sources. The traditional dances and music were taught to Stephan by his father and grandfather. Chief Stephan says he knows 23 different dances, all of which are 'authentic' and he claims not to have invented any new ones. Many of the general ideas permitting the construction of the dancing ground came from the same sources. The work of the anthropologist Layard, *Stone Men of Malekula* (Layard, 1942), who lived on the

neighbouring Small Island of Atchin between 1913 and 1914, was consulted for 'details', principally the photographs and illustrations in the book. Information on traditional culture was also provided by Kirk Huffman, former director of the Port Vila cultural centre.

The Small Nambas' show clearly works for most tourists. It is precisely the kind of traditional culture that most have come to this still rather remote area of Vanuatu to find. It satisfies the kinds of expectations anticipated and generated by brochures and guidebooks: unaltered and ancient customs. The show itself is clearly a bricolage of different knowledges: memories of Wala islanders, the work of Layard, information from the Port Vila cultural centre and its former director. Layard's book was not about Wala island, nor about Atchin island where he lived for most of the time, but the most northerly of the Small Islands (see Figure 1), Vao. Towards the end of the book running to 816 pages he states:

We have gained some idea of the complex series of rites that go to build up the Maki on Vao. . . . I have myself records of the corresponding institution on Atchin, enough to occupy at least one volume without repetition of any of the material here published on Vao. The same applies to the neighbouring island of Wala. (Layard, 1942: 687-9)

Throughout Malekula, as elsewhere in Melanesia, there is enormous linguistic and cultural diversity. The details derived from Layard's work for the Small Nambas' reconstruction are those pertaining to Vao rather than Wala island culture, and being re-presented as their own. The events and reconstructions in the Small Nambas' show provide, at the very least, a generic representation of a variety of Small Islands cultures rather than a 'pure' sense of indigenous Wala culture. The carving style of the slit drum orchestra does indeed resemble depictions in Layard's book as does the carved pole supporting the roof of the reconstructed men's house (Layard, 1942: Plate XII). The anthropomorphic wooden ancestor images, appear to be adaptations combining traditional and modern elements (in particular the addition of more 'realistic' human faces), with no formal counterparts in Layard's book. Tree-fern ancestor images, present in one of the ancestor houses in the Small Nambas' dancing ground and by the platform displaying the pig's tusks, were not traditionally used in any of the Small Islands of north-east Malekula. Only a couple of the sacrificed pig's jaws on display have curved pig's tusks of the requisite size and shape for a traditional *Maki* ceremony. The ancient dancing grounds on Wala are all shaped in the form of canoes and bear little resemblance in form to the rigid rectangular morphology of the Small Nambas' dancing ground. The penis wrappers from north-east Malekula depicted by Layard and by Speiser (1990) bear little resemblance to the modern counterparts worn by the Small Nambas. A banyan tree, shading the dancing ground, an essential element of any traditional dancing ground, is absent. The name 'Small Nambas' (literal

meaning: small penis sheaths) is a European classificatory device, used by missionaries and traders and adopted by Layard (1942) and Deacon (1934), not an indigenous term, and bears no correspondence to any real single ethnic group in Malekula, past or present. The term as used today owes much to its vigorous promotion in tourist guide books. The name, with all its implied ethnicity, as applied to Chief Stephan's dance troupe and show, fits well with the expectations raised by such tourist discourses (our guide had, on occasion, dressed and danced as a 'Small Namba'). The Small Nambas are devout Catholics worshipping at the nearby Wala/Rano mission. Many have close relatives on Wala. Stephan and Peter Fidelio both belong to one of the five exogamous patrilineal clans on Wala, each connected with an ancient dancing ground (*namit*) in the centre of the island. The Small Nambas effortlessly slip out of their nambas and mat skirts and into their modern Western cotton clothing and back again.

It would be only too easy, in the above manner, to continue to deconstruct details of the Small Nambas' show and demonstrate its 'inauthenticity', a point of evident concern for some Wala islanders too. But this raises the wider question of whether any reconstruction could hope to be authentic and whether this term 'authenticity' is either useful or relevant in understanding what the show means or its relationship to cultural tradition. At stake here is an issue of what the terms 'ethnicity' and 'culture' might actually refer to in north-east Malekula anyway.

Commodification and the past

One way of describing the Small Nambas' show is that it is an empty vessel of tradition, form without sentiment. The performance of culture within the reconstructed dance arena is essentially divorced from mythological structures, ritual and cosmological beliefs. The culture on display is reduced to a series of material structures, ancestor houses, etc., dance routines and drum beats: a parody of their original meaning and moreover a parody in which the performers sell their own bodies as part of the event. Visually striking, it lacks credibility simply because it is a show, theatre. Certain traditional elements of culture may be conveyed but they are not felt. Tradition does not outlast its performance. It is a kind of cultural gift wrapping paper concealing an empty void. The show is a mixture of what might be termed living elements of contemporary Wala culture (dance and music, yam planting and laplap) and dead revived elements (ancestor houses and images, fire-making, erasure of modern elements, costumes, reference to *Maki* ceremonies and pig sacrifice) which only have any meaning within the context of the show that deliberately sets out to resurrect a sense of cultural alterity. Like some Wala islanders it is easy to conclude that an invented tradition is simply being marketed and sold to a

gullible tourist public who can capture the spectacle on film for the folks back home and confirm the Lonely Planet message that Malekulans have indeed successfully preserved their customs and we were able to see them: the bare-breasted women and men dressed only in penis wrappers. Western influence having successfully destroyed traditional culture is now having the effect, through tourism, of picking over its bones in a show which heartlessly reduces it to an exoticized spectacle for entertainment. The relationship between the dominant and the dominated is simply being reproduced in the post-colonial context in a new virulent form, a prostitution of culture. The exploitation involved substitutes the physical violence and land alienation of colonialism for a more subtle and insidious symbolic violence in which people sell themselves as part of a pan-Pacific human zoo, and thereby their souls. The tourist is a metaphoric cannibal, in an ironic twist, in the Small Nambas case, being taken on a cannibal tour of ex-cannibals. With MacCannell it is only too easy to agree that:

... the image of the savage that emerges from these primitive performances completes the postmodern fantasy of 'authentic alterity' which is ideologically necessary in the promotion and development of global monoculture. The 'primitivist' performance is *our* funerary marking of the passage of savagery. In the presence of these displays, there is only one thing we can know with certainty: we have witnessed the demise of the original form of humanity. (MacCannell, 1992: 19)

Objectifying culture and inventing tradition

All Wala islanders I spoke to were as deeply concerned with preserving their past, and being knowledgeable about it, as they were with securing their future. Tourism is undoubtedly an easier, potentially more secure, and more lucrative way of obtaining cash than selling copra (the other main local source of cash income), subject to wild price fluctuations on the global market, has ever been. Chief Stephan wanted to put on a good show for the tourists and this was clearly a matter of personal pride and prestige in the presentation of traditional culture going considerably beyond simple financial gain. There would seem to be a fundamental difference between putting on a show, confined in space and time, and for the Wala community itself to become a 'museum' or a frozen time-lapse image of itself in which its participants become full-time *representations* of a vanished way of life. The past is part of the inalienable wealth of the people of Wala: something that they can sell and give away while still keeping it. It is their history, their interpretation, their empowerment. This past requires an active and creative production on their part. The Small Nambas needed to research their show and in so doing informed themselves of part of what the European

colonizers and missionaries and anthropologists have destroyed or taken away. Their invention of tradition is simultaneously and necessarily an interpretation of that tradition: a present-past.

A considerable amount of anthropological attention has been devoted to the theme of the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1988), both in Vanuatu and the Pacific more generally (e.g. Keesing and Tonkinson, 1982; Linnekin and Poyer, 1990; Carrier, 1992; Jolly and Thomas, 1992; Keesing, 1992, 1994). At issue here has been the symbolic construction of community through the past. The Small Nambas' show is clearly an invented tradition insofar as it is a deliberate and conscious creation. However, to leave the analysis at that would be to miss a great deal. The entire discourse on the invention of tradition is clearly predicated on a notion that while some cultural practices are invented or objectified, others are not. Anthropologists, in one form or another, have been particularly concerned to unravel 'authentic' from 'inauthentic' customs, the latter being those indigenous productions of ethnicity and difference arising either from colonial encounters, or the post-colonial experience of nation-state building involving the promotion of *kastom* by a Westernized administrative elite. These are conceptually distinguished from *ur*-original forms not so produced in which some kind of direct continuity might be claimed from an unaltered pre-colonial, pre-contact and pre-modern past. While a notion of 'authenticity' has great salience or relevance for some anthropologists, the same cannot be claimed from the 'naïve's point of view'. A very recent concern with knowing the 'true facts' (in a very empiricist sense) about an unsullied pure cultural past on the part of Wala and other Pacific islanders is a product of the same modernist Western sense of historical discourse which anthropologists concerned about these matters inhabit – and are beginning to increasingly critique.

A recurrent feature of the early anthropological works of Deacon (1934) and Layard (1942) on Malekula is reference to the fact that individual and group rights to cultural productions from magical spells to dances to carving styles of artefacts such as slit drums to details of ritual performances to styles of roofing on ancestor houses were continually being bought and sold between different individuals and ethnic groups. This caused both Layard and Deacon insuperable problems in being able to either isolate or define an 'essence of ethnicity' conceived in terms of a stable body of beliefs, practices, routines, traditions, rituals or style horizons of material culture. Subsequent research in Malekula (Larcom, 1982, 1990) has faced exactly the same difficulty. If we are looking for a cultural essence of ethnicity in Malekula, or in Melanesia more generally (see Harrison, 1993), it is to be found in continual creativity, diffusion and change in which it is often the *combination* of different elements, drawn from outside the ethnic group, and being combined and reinvented inside it in new forms, that creates cultural distinctiveness, not their simple presence or absence.

Viewed from this perspective virtually all expressions of culture or ethnic identity are equally 'inauthentic' or borrowed. Furthermore, this very ethnicity was characteristically something which was being continually constructed or 'invented' through *commodity-like* forms of exchange, which Gell has convincingly argued preceded colonial contact in Melanesia rather than being a substitute for gift exchange (Gell, 1992).

From such a perspective it would seem entirely inappropriate to develop a deeply moralistic critique of the Small Nambas' show as being a spurious invention of culture or to criticize Wala islanders for selling their past. In fact it can well be claimed that in inventing their traditions and selling their culture these people are, in fact, expressing, through their actions, two of the most fundamental and original structuring principles of the constitution of their culture. By constructing a bricolage of different elements from different sources they are true followers of 'ancestral ways'. Selling this invented culture to tourists rather than to neighbouring Atchin islanders, as in the past, is merely an adaptation to the exigencies produced by global modernity under conditions which are not of their own choice.

Constructing self-images

Setting the Small Nambas' show in such a prior context further underlines the futility of asking whether or not it is an authentic or truthful representation of culture. It also highlights the power relations involved in any attempt to do so, most especially by an external commentator. Instead there is a need to stress that ethnicity and culture are not ontological givens and discrete holistic cores but always-already historically constituted. This requires a more nuanced understanding of the show as something bound up with sharing and controlling, recollecting and forgetting. It would seem to be more fruitful to ask: what kind of image are these people self-consciously constructing of themselves? and whom do they wish to be? A good performance of the show is not simply to please tourists, and for them to evaluate. It is a dialogic encounter which is as much about self-worth and self-evaluation, and as the tourists gaze and take their photographs they are also being observed. By performing culture for tourists the Small Nambas are presenting an image of themselves which they want others to see and *feel* dramatic dress, intricate wooden carvings, megalithic architecture, complex acoustics emanating from the mouths of the slit drums, elaborate dance movements. This is an image which is self-consciously not of Western modernity, but of a vibrant culture independent of it. What is being explicitly rejected here is that a desirable future will owe nothing to the past. But it is a past of a particular sort: a self-censored image excluding elements such as cannibalism (reduced to a joke by our guide) and warfare, which they themselves find unacceptable as part of their contemporary

modernity (representation of these elements, of course, would constitute a more memorable tourist spectacle). The wearing of 'custom dress' by men in Vanuatu has a very powerful significance going far beyond simply being a display of the 'past' or a 'primitive' culture. It is part of a local political culture of *truth*: you simply can't trust a man in a suit: 'If you see someone who goes naked this man is one of yours, naked people of Santol! Someone who goes naked you can vote for' (political speech by Jimmy Stephens, insurrectionist leader in Espiritu Santo, cited in Philibert, 1987). Here traditional ideas of political legitimacy are expressed through nakedness and traditional knowledge in which the second skins of clothing and Western knowledges are distrusted. The Small Nambas' show, and associated tourist developments on Wala island, are ways of negotiating an external relationship with outsiders through a project which is rebuilding a sense of *locality*. This does not at present represent, in any sense, a form of oppositional discourse, or resistance to the Vanuatu state or Western practices in the manner of the Kwaio traditionalists of the Solomons (Keesing, 1994) or the *kastom* villagers of south-east Pentecost in Vanuatu (Jolly, 1994). At the moment it is 'safe', depoliticized and contained within the 'unity through difference' rhetoric of the modern state and its own production of generic symbols of *kastom* unity through the symbolism of flags, anthems, plants, pigs' tusks, etc. (Philibert, 1986; Jolly, 1992). The power relations enabling the production of Small Nambas 'ethnicity' are translocal in origin and impetus, with both the state and tourism providing normative hinges. But once this production has taken place the seeds for a future oppositional discourse have been planted.

The present show is already the subject of a different kind of internal contestation to a certain extent. It is self-evidently both male-oriented and male-dominated. The male dancers take centre stage. Their activities and dances are foregrounded. The women and their activities remain on the sidelines. The women, I was informed, were embarrassed about performing in 'custom dress' and deliberately decorated themselves in multiple strings of beads to conceal their breasts. With an increasing social awareness and concern with traditional gender roles and inequalities within Vanuatu (Bolton, 1993) the show itself may change to increasingly emphasize traditional women's activities. The future is likely to provide a reinterpretation and re-representation of the past in which an increasing place for women will be found.

What time is this place?

The meticulous and scrupulous attention to detail in the Small Nambas' show is quite striking. Virtually all signs of modernity have been erased. Only tiny details (the sign-board – soon forgotten, the hand-written note

on the hut wall, the check cotton tea towel on the table) 'give the game away' that the Small Nambas may not actually live like this, that it is a reconstructed past that is on display for tourist consumption in the present. This same meticulous attention to historical detail is, of course, a basic element in most attempts to recreate folk life-ways in the West. The major difference would appear to be that while everyone knows and participates in the fantasy that a medieval joust in the past is in the present, for just the length of the show, the Small Nambas' event is designed to provide the overriding impression that the past is a lived present-day reality, that the Small Nambas really do live like this, that the show is something more than a re-enactment. In a highly equivocal way the Small Nambas are both 'here' and 'there', of the present and of the past. This impression is only possible to convey because of the location of the show in a remote Pacific island which has supposedly escaped the full ravages of modernity. This highlights the ambiguities, the entertainment of the possibility that 'then' might be 'here', that the past might be present, a sense of conflicting temporalities pervading the entire structure of the show. More precisely, what we have here is a *third* space and time of representation in the Third World, neither exactly here or there, of the present or of the past, inside culture or outside it: an interposed 'liminal' structure of communication. This third space is both supported and made possible by the presence of an exterior discourse for the show's audience in which distance in space and time become coeval. We can read in the Lonely Planet guide to Vanuatu that 'while townspeople's lives in Vanuatu have altered considerably in recent times, village life is much as it has always been' (Harcombe and O'Byrne, 1995: 37), 'generally speaking, Malekulans have preserved their traditions more successfully than other ni-Vanuatu . . . these small islands are among the world's last megalithic cultures' (1995: 184) and, more specifically:

the deep, primal throbbing of a tamtam [slit drum] shattered the quiet as I walked along the jungle path to Amelboas natsaro. I was with Peter Fiedlo, manager of the Wala Island Resort, and we were on our way to see something of the ancient traditions of the Small Nambas people. The drumming had a menacing quality, perhaps because of the gloomy conditions. . . . Suddenly we broke out of the trees at the edge of a large, fenced clearing lined with thatched shelters and carved nimanangi figures. Chief Stephan Lelektei, 'bigman' of this particular natsaro, stepped forward with a smile of welcome. He was a young man resplendent in blue and yellow body paint, and wearing only a penis sheath, a headdress and a pig's tusk. The latter hung around his neck as a symbol of his chiefly status. (1995: 193)

Conclusion

By virtue of the practice of objectifying culture in the show people are beginning to learn that they have to *negotiate and transform* it. The show is

not, and can never be, a representation of Bourdieu's (1977) 'habitus', a realm of reproducible practices and dispositions. Instead it provides an arena for the exercise of conscious choice, contextualizing practices, modes of representation, rationalization and justification. In short it promotes increasing self-reflexivity. Wala islanders are very far removed from Hobart's 'terminally tranquilized natives enacting tableaux of their former selves' (Hobart, 1995: 54). The culture displayed by the Small Nambas is thoroughly mediated by performing it to tourists, and this is indeed its origin, but it is in no simple sense determined by the expectations of such an audience. It contains the warp and weft of signs of an imagined community which, once woven, has the potential of being spun again in a different way, and by so doing, providing community empowerment. Through constructing this past they are better able to talk about themselves to themselves and secure a place in the global future. The contradictory capacity of the Small Nambas' show is the production of a performance which can simultaneously evoke a vanished past and constitute an imagined future.

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