On sinking, swimming, floating, flying and dancing: the potential of cultural industries in the Pacific islands

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Sinking, swimming and floating

In a recent workshop on the six-month anniversary of the 2006 Fiji coup, Satish Chand provided a poetic overview of the economic situation of the country (Chand 2007a). Chand reflected on current Interim Finance Minister Mahendra Chaudhry’s comments of 30 March on the revised 2007 Budget, the cutting of government expenditure, and particularly civil service salaries, in order to stay within a 2 per cent net deficit. Chaudhry’s response to the Ministry of Information’s queries on pay cuts for ministers and other constitutional office holders was

[t]he number of Ministers is less than half now and the workload has multiplied several fold whilst the pay has dropped. Now this is necessary, and I hope that the civil servants understand the situation as such. We are faced with two choices, either we cut back on expenditure and retain the employment of the people or we give them five per cent and lay off 1,500 people. Now what is the choice, because as I said financially we either sink or swim. Now what do they want us to do, swim or sink? If we sink, they sink with us (Mahendra Chaudhry, quoted in Chandra 2007).

Taking Chaudhry’s cue and extending the appropriate oceanic metaphor to the economy as a whole, Chand (2007a) describes Fiji’s options as indeed perhaps sinking or swimming but more likely, floating. According to the numbers, that is, GDP per capita growth per year, every coup in Fiji set the economy back three years. In between coups there was enough growth so that by the time another coup was mounted, Fiji was back to where it had been three years earlier. So dividing the number of coups by the length of time between them, that is, 20 years divided by four, Fiji had reached a state of equilibrium that would remain if there was a coup every five years or so. Chand adds another option to the mix, suggesting that the only citizens who could avoid sinking, swimming or floating were the ones who could fly, that is, emigrate.

The focus of the 30 March interview by the Ministry of Information with the Finance Minister that resulted in the ‘sink or swim’ discussion was Chaudhry’s May 2007 trip
to Brussels. There he was to participate in discussions with the European Union on strategies for restructuring and securing Fiji’s sugar industry. The Interim Government’s priority for economic development is to bolster Fiji’s agriculture, fisheries and forestry sectors and the Brussels meeting focused on the needs of the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) sugar-supplying states. Of course, with Chaudhry as Finance Minister, sugar is a priority for the Interim Government.

On 24 May 2007, I happened to be returning from a UNESCO meeting in Paris on mainstreaming culture for sustainable development and encountered the Finance Minister in a shuttle speeding between terminals at London’s Heathrow airport. As we walked together towards the security checkpoints, I asked him how his meeting had gone. He seemed in a very good mood and said that despite the challenges ahead, things were definitely looking up. This moment, crossing paths with Mahendra Chaudhry in Heathrow airport, inspired this contribution to the Pacific Economic Bulletin.

While sinking, swimming, floating or flying might appear to be the only options available to Fiji citizens under the current challenging economic and political circumstances, if one pays attention to the popular Suva-based newsletter, Kulcha Vulcha, there are at least a few other possibilities including singing, painting, carving, rowing, jogging, walking, watching, learning, listening and dancing. In many regions of the world where people struggle every day to meet their basic economic and social needs under less than ideal political conditions, creativity in arts and culture necessarily emerges as a strategy for maintaining dignity, confidence and a sense of hope.

Paying attention to culture

My own research is not in economics but in Pacific history, arts, culture and society. In this context I understand culture to include the values, traditions, norms, customs, arts, knowledge, history, and institutions that are shared by a group of people, unified by connection to place, ethnicity, genealogy, language, nationality, or religion. Specifically, I have researched the impact of phosphate mining on the history and culture of the Banabans of Banaba, also known as Ocean Island, in Kiribati and Rabi in Fiji (Teaiwa 2005). It is from this work that I came to link major economic industries such as mining to culture, and specifically to music and dance as modes of strategic survival for displaced Pacific communities.

There is a direct connection, for example, between resource extraction and the ensuing content and methods by which islanders remember and transmit knowledge of the activities surrounding the mine and the impact of mining. This leads to the creation of new cultural content, forms, styles and annual events, as islanders try to reconcile what has happened to their environment with their current social and economic predicaments. So, for example, drawing upon their interactions with labour and management personnel brought in by the Australia, New Zealand and British jointly administered Pacific Phosphate Company (1900–20) and subsequent British Phosphate Commission (1920–81), and with Japanese occupying forces during World War II (1942–45), Banabans, by choice or not, participated in an intense exchange of knowledge, ideas and materials that they later drew upon to create new forms of cultural expression, after relocation in 1945 to Rabi in Fiji.

All aspects of Pacific artistic and cultural production have major economic dimensions and implications. The annual
15 December Memorial Day celebrations on Rabi, for example, featuring Banaban music and dance, require financial, material and labour-intensive commitments and activities that involve all villages on Rabi, attract visitors and members of the Banaban diaspora, and contribute to a strengthening of Banaban identity. Music and dance across Oceania have traditionally been tied to and reflective of everyday economic practices such as farming, fishing, and hunting, or based on observations and reflections of island environments including plant, animal and marine life. Experts in these art forms were considered central to the process of archiving social knowledge, reflecting political dynamics, and providing a vehicle for the expression and maintenance of strong communal identities. Arts and cultural knowledge were intangible resources that worked in dialogue with tangible resources such as the land and sea, resulting in sustainable and creative economic and social practices that kept Pacific peoples mobile and thriving for centuries prior to European contact. Today, tangible Pacific resources are greatly valued but the associated cultural knowledge and practices are increasingly undervalued, eroded or discarded and replaced by global, neo-liberal economic models for development.

While the primary industries across the Pacific are always in need of support and development, they obviously cannot compete globally without special conditions or subsidies. While ACP countries persist in their discussions with the European Union on the need for guaranteed markets for agricultural industries, they rarely turn to each other to ask what kinds of materials, knowledge and practices inherent to African, Caribbean and Pacific cultures and societies might be shared between themselves in the service of sustainable development or peace. While agriculture and fisheries must remain central for Pacific island economies, all primary resources in the Pacific are limited to some extent and more attention needs to be paid to at least one highly under-researched and rapidly growing sector. Cultural and creative activities, in both the formal and informal economic spheres, are some of the most promising areas for growth, potentially translating directly into an expansion of local products and services, and yet are still absent as priorities for policy development, aid, and investment.

A regional analysis on culture conducted for the Pacific Plan stated

[Regard,]less of the continual reassertion by Pacific Island governments of its importance, currently little priority and limited financial resources are allocated to culture at the national or regional level. Many governments have not integrated it into national development policies; stakeholders, planners and donors do not acknowledge its central role in economic and social well-being and development in the Pacific Island region...The cultural sector contributes to the Pacific Islands economies through the employment and opportunities that it provides, the output it produces and the income it generates (Pacific Plan Regional Analysis 2006:167).

Changing this persistent trend in ignoring culture requires aid donors, policymakers and economists to talk to, for example, anthropologists, cultural studies scholars, educators, arts and heritage administrators, and cultural practitioners, to identify and support economically the inherent strengths in island cultures. The Pacific will never be globally competitive in most of the dominant sectors and any amount of channeling aid into projects that are not informed by cultural and historical knowledges and practices will not change that. Culture, beyond a superficial
and caricatured packaging for tourism industries, remains untapped as a genuine source of economic survival, and social and political stability. In much of the developing world, populations compete and thrive by capitalising on what they do best, or on what their environments have to offer. In the spirit of preserving our precious marine and land based resources we might ask: what else is unique to islands or islanders? What has sustained Pacific peoples for thousands of years? Is it too much to ask that we build from those strengths?

The current development, security, capacity building and good governance frameworks as promoted by institutions such as the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) where ‘investing in people’ does not mean ‘investing in culture’, view the islands as economically and politically operating from a vacuum that must be filled by knowledge, training and expertise from the outside. In this context, culture is seen as a barrier to economic growth. And yet, cultural practices and institutions represent unique Pacific island technologies for survival. Such technologies combine embodied, material and conceptual resources resulting in a specific set of skills and a kind of confidence and efficacy that is unique to the Pacific. More importantly, these cultural resources complement the political and economic action that is needed in daily life in order to keep communities strong and allow families to feed, clothe and provide for their needs.

Reflecting on UNESCO’s continuing push for prioritising and indeed mainstreaming culture, and its associated attention to valuing diversity and intercultural dialogue, I suggest that we need more work that monitors and strengthens areas in which islanders do not have to rely on our limited natural resources, that is, the areas involving the exchange of cultural ideas and creative materials. The necessary research and frameworks for measuring the economic value of cultural and creative activities, and the associated frameworks for the protection of intellectual property, need to be prioritised by Pacific governments, policymakers and scholars. While these needs have received some attention in both the Forum’s 2006 Pacific Plan and the Pacific Community’s Cultural Affairs 2006–2009 Strategic Plan, and while the discussions have been consistent amongst associations such as the Pacific Council for the Arts, and the Pacific Islands Museums Association, the very influential economists who feature regularly in the Pacific Economic Bulletin, have yet to comment on a cultural industry other than tourism. And yet, if there is to be any further discussion on the potential and local benefit, for example, of niche markets, then cultural trade and emerging creative industries have to gain more attention from Pacific economists.

Valuing culture as a whole system with built-in mechanisms for efficiency, sustainability, efficacy and pride in one’s work and identity, will make a difference and fill in a growing gap between aid and performance. Economists in the Pacific must pay more attention to culture and more specifically to creative and knowledge industries so that we have the appropriate frameworks for measuring, valuing and sustaining the very areas in which we may have an actual comparative advantage.

Engaging culture for development

In May this year I attended two meetings organised by UNESCO that brought together scholars and administrators reflecting on the potential of culture and intercultural dialogue in policymaking for sustainable development. The first in March 2007, in the Seychelles, focused on cultural diversity and the translation of this into policies for
development in small island developing states in the Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Oceans. The second, in partnership with the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization, went further to include intercultural dialogue as a key ingredient for sustainable development. In both these meetings a clarification of the key terms was required in order to make recommendations on the potential of culture.

As culture is such a broad and complex phenomenon that permeates all aspects of human life, the engagement with culture in the context of development attempts to include tangible and intangible heritage, the production, consumption and exchange of symbolic goods, and the activities of living cultures including language and creative expression such as dance. In order to facilitate our understanding of how these link to the marketplace the UNESCO online portal features 25 questions and answers on cultural industries, trade and globalisation that are useful here.1 According to the site, cultural industries are understood as industries that combine the creation, production and commercialisation of contents that are intangible and cultural in nature. These contents are usually protected by copyright and can take the form of goods or services. Depending on the context, cultural industries may also be referred to as creative industries, sunrise or future oriented industries or content industries. They include printing, publishing, audio-visual, phonographic and cinematographic productions, crafts and design, visual and performing arts, and depending on the context, sometimes include aspects of architecture, sports, advertising and cultural tourism (Table 1).

According to UNESCO, the concepts of ‘cultural goods’ and ‘cultural services’ or together, ‘cultural products,’ are continuously debated internationally. Cultural goods generally refer to those consumer goods that convey ideas, symbols, and ways of life and are reproduced and disseminated by industrial processes. They are the result of individual or collective creativity and are thus considered intellectual property. The issue of intellectual property is of special concern to indigenous peoples as much indigenous knowledge is primary, rather than secondary in nature, and often

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<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Trade of core cultural goods, 1994–2002</th>
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<tr>
<td>Core cultural goods</td>
<td>2002 value</td>
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<td>(billion US$)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heritage goods</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Printed media</td>
<td>18.2</td>
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<td>Books</td>
<td>11.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newspapers and periodicals</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other printed matter</td>
<td>2.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recorded media</td>
<td>19.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visual arts</td>
<td>11.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audiovisual media</td>
<td>8.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total of core cultural goods</td>
<td>59.2</td>
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Figure 1  Export by region of core cultural goods, 2002


Figure 2  Imports by region of core cultural goods, 2002

directly tied to land and other resources. In the contemporary Pacific, however, globally distributed materials such as books, magazines, multimedia products, software, records, films, videos, audio-visual programs, crafts and fashion design also constitute a whole range of cultural offerings. The growing importance and use of the internet also provides an increasingly trafficked highway for the dissemination and exchange of Pacific ideas, sounds, symbols and sights.

In UNESCO’s report on the International Flows of Selected Cultural Goods and Services, between 1994 and 2003 an attempt was made to discern the global activity in cultural goods and cultural services (UNESCO 2005; Figure 1 and Figure 2). Cultural services are those activities aimed at satisfying cultural interests or needs. They do not represent material goods but typically consist of the set of measures and supporting facilities for cultural practices that government, private and public institutions make available to the community. Examples of such services include the promotion of performances and cultural events as well as cultural information and preservation such as libraries, documentation centres and museums. Tracking cultural services is difficult, compared with the flow of goods, and the 1994–2003 report relied on very limited balance of payments data. The report revealed that trade in core cultural goods increased from US$38 billion in 1994 to US$60 billion in 2003 with 40 per cent of the world’s cultural trade products produced by the United States, the United Kingdom and China (UNESCO 2005:19). Core cultural goods exclude related goods such as equipment or musical instruments but include heritage goods such as antiques, books, newspapers and periodicals, other printed matter, recorded media, visual arts and audiovisual media (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Current discussions, policy frameworks, and research focus on three areas of mainstreaming culture for development. These include the commercialisation of culture, the preservation and protection of culture and heritage, and integrating principles drawn from cultural concepts and practices in planning for development. In discussions with S. Charusheela, feminist economist and co-editor of *Postcolonialism Meets Economics*, these were articulated as

A. creative industries potential (commercialising culture)

B. cultural heritage potential (preserving and promoting culture)

C. cultural epistemologies potential (integrating cultural knowledge)

We will call these the A, B and C potentials of mainstreaming culture. While there is often a rush to practice A, the commercialisation of culture, especially in the context of tourism, C, the least supported area of activity in the Pacific Islands, is needed in order to understand what and how to integrate cultural knowledge, materials or practices in the most appropriate and sustainable ways. Bringing cultural epistemologies, concepts and principles to bear on development is necessary if culture is to be mainstreamed effectively. In Charusheela’s words, ‘[i]f one does B and C together, they set the ground for A to be of the most desirable variety’ (Charusheela, pers. comm. 2007). At all phases, clarity is needed on the definition of terms and the overall goals of such a process. When it comes to culture, ‘growth,’ for example cannot be an end goal alone. We need to imagine outcomes of development at the level of the individual or community, rather than just the national economy.

While both the Pacific Plan and initiatives by the Cultural Affairs Program of the Secretariat of Pacific Community...
Figure 3  Exports of core cultural products, 1994–2002 (US$ billion)


Figure 4  Imports of core cultural goods, 1994–2002 (US$ billion)

acknowledge and include the protection and development of culture, the economic valuing of culture is still very much a fuzzy area in the Pacific. It is clear that the commercialisation of culture cannot be driven by a thin concept of the market. ‘The market’ must be expanded to include the generation of and exchange of ideas, creative practices, cultural knowledge, motifs, symbols, and so forth. This requires creative methodologies, monitoring and reporting strategies for tracking the flow of cultural knowledge, services and products. Additionally, timeframes for assessing the impact of investment or support in the cultural sectors cannot be short-term if the potential is to be fully realised.

Educational and public institutions such as national museums and galleries which provide a service in researching, disseminating and promoting cultural knowledge best facilitate the heritage potential. In this area, the work of the University of the South Pacific, the Pacific Arts Council, Pacific Islands Museums Association, and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community is important. Organisations such as the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland Museum, Fiji Museum and Tjibaou Cultural Centre are leading the way forward for the heritage agenda. However, support for the institutions outside New Zealand and New Caledonia is still low on the list of government and aid donor priorities.

In the 2006 report by the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs in New Zealand, *Current Trends and Economic Status of Pacific Peoples*, one particular sector was singled out as representing the fastest and most promising growth. Under the section on Emerging Industries, the report stated Pacific peoples are more highly represented in the music and broadcasting categories and in the other categories of ‘cultural industries’ compared to the national population (New Zealand 2006:29).

Pacific participation and particularly amongst youth in New Zealand, in niche areas of film, television, music, digital media, screen production, publishing, fashion design and experiential tourism is remarkably disproportionate when considered against the fact that Pacific islanders (not counting Maori) are only 6 per cent of the total New Zealand population. Currently, New Zealand hosts the largest cultural festivals in the whole Pacific region, including the two-day Pasifika Festival in Auckland which attracts up to 200,000 spectators every year, and the wildly popular ASB Bank’s three-day Polyfest, the Auckland Secondary Schools Maori and Pacific Islands Cultural Festival that attracts up to 90,000 spectators.

While the figures on how this translates directly into employment have to be updated, the activity within creative industries can be observed by noting the high visibility of Pacific peoples in popular media and monitoring the rising number of submissions to and corresponding success of Creative New Zealand funding applications. As information technology and creative industries are considered the cutting edge sector for New Zealand, Pacific peoples rising participation in these areas is promising in terms of employment prospects. Similar initiatives and support for creative industries do not exist in the broader Pacific islands region, sorely in need of a regional funding organisation similar to Creative New Zealand.

**Conclusion**

A comparison of patterns of growth and poverty in the Pacific islands is alarming (see Chand 2007b, this issue). Across many Pacific islands, subsistence economic
practices are diminishing and people are moving into towns and cities seeking regular waged labour. With few employment opportunities, islanders then experience disproportionately high expenses for municipal services and transport compared to the cost of producing basic food needs in the rural areas. This has contributed to increased poverty and lower standards of living and health. Much of the economic survival in the rapidly urbanising Pacific is played out in informal economies, and that means under the radar of current reporting frameworks for monitoring the flows of goods, services and ideas.

In Fiji, despite the arrival of shopping malls, boutique hotels, cappuccinos and BMWs in Suva and Nadi over the last 20 years, according to Chand, the country currently has a far higher rate of poverty than it experienced before the first coup in 1987. Rapid urbanisation and drastically transformed consumption practices, have resulted in a far lower quality of life in urban Fiji than what the population experienced in the earlier, and predominantly rural Fiji. If poverty and the informal economy are indeed a growing reality in the urbanising Pacific, it doesn’t take much of a stretch of the imagination to consider expanding economic priorities to include culture, knowledge and creative activities.

A World Bank article by Yusuf and Nabeshima (2003) discusses the shrinking agriculture sector and rapidly expanding creative sector in Asian economies. In 2003, creative industries accounted for 7 per cent of world GDP. While Pacific Islanders are hardly about to start producing high-tech services or a film industry on the order of India, there is enough room and scope in the creative sector globally for the Pacific, and particularly underprivileged Pacific islanders and youth, to participate. The World Bank’s CEERD (Civic Engagement, Empowerment and Respect for Diversity) approach to strengthening ‘pro-poor’ cultural industries, states for example, [i]n countries with a strong oral tradition (including all of Africa), music plays a critical role in community life and is an important way for people to tell stories that raise issues and social problems. In addition to the domestic market in live performance and cassettes, electronic commerce of digital recordings and new forms of encryption are presenting new opportunities for poor musicians to sell directly over the internet to a global market, without having to contract with large companies for production and all distribution. Particularly in small economies, pro-poor music industry development can have a major impact on growth and poverty reduction (World Bank 2007).

Despite the growth in musical and other creative activities across the region, the link between poverty alleviation and strengthening cultural industries is yet to be prioritised by Pacific island governments or aid and development partners. UNDP’s poverty reduction strategy in the Pacific, for example, does not mention culture. And yet, in the 2004 review of the Pacific Islands Forum by the Eminent Persons Group led by the Rt. Hon. Sir Julius Chan, it was stated [o]ur cultures link us with other Pacific peoples, and with our sea, land and ancestors. They stimulate national unity and self-confidence and provide a constantly renewed source of wealth...Yet with each passing year, they are eroded by growing migration, urbanisation and material aspirations...This represents an obvious loss, not only to our sense of Pacific identity but also economically. We should not forget that traditional industries create wealth and
employment while maintaining and strengthening community relations, particularly in rural areas. Trade in cultural goods has grown immensely over the past two decades but often its present and potential monetary value is unrecognised…it is possible to combine modern economic ideas with traditional and cultural practices to create stronger national economies (Chan 2004:19–20).

Surely it is time that economists and policymakers in the Pacific start to pay more attention to the region’s strong and dynamic material, conceptual, oral, embodied and musical traditions and practices. If diversity is one of the key ingredients of sustainable development, in terms of cultural diversity per capita, the Pacific is the most diverse region in the world. Building on this, Pacific peoples surely have at least a shot at not just sinking, swimming or floating, but perhaps dancing our way towards economic prosperity.

Notes

1 The UNESCO portal is at http://portal0.unesco.org/culture/admin/ev.php?URL_ID=2461&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC. This section has been adapted from the 25 questions and answers to explore key concepts and ideas related to culture and trade in the context of development.

2 The Secretariat of the Pacific Community produced an excellent draft of a Regional Framework for the Economic Valuing of Expressions of Culture in 2003 which appears to have been integrated into the Cultural Affairs Program Strategic Plan 2006–2009. However, the statistical frameworks for achieving this are yet to surface.

3 The strategies listed at UNDP’s Fiji Multi-Country Office website do not include strengthening cultural practices and industries. See http://www.undp.org.fj/index.cfm?si=main.resources&cmd=forum view&cbegin=0&uid=poverty&cid=37

References


