TEKS: Promoting & Safeguarding Biocultural Diversity Through the Arts in Northern Vanuatu

Text by Delly Roy and Thomas Dick, Photos by Cristina Panicali and Sarah Doyle, with contributions by Ham Maurice Joel, Augustin Leasley, and Len Jacob Tafau

Traditional: Habits and ways built over the years that are flexible and change in relation to new circumstances and situations.

Entertainment: An opportunity for the people to express and adjust, to adapt, safeguard kastom music and acts using contemporary arts in the face of overwhelming foreign influences.

Kastom (custom): Practices that bind people together in relation to the land, their leaders, and the environment.

Support: Using appropriate tools to promote and support positive kastom and traditional practices in ways that are respectful of our people.

In the South Pacific island nation of Vanuatu there are over 130 different languages spoken. With its population of approximately 263,000, this means Vanuatu has the highest rate of per capita linguistic diversity on the planet. For many people in Vanuatu, one of these languages is the first language that they learn from their mother. These languages—and the knowledge and practices that they represent and articulate—are important expressions of cultural diversity. As the cash economy penetrates deeper and deeper into the islands of Vanuatu, communities are identifying the need for alternative, locally based approaches to the promotion and preservation of important traditional wisdom practices including dances, music, songs, stories, carving, weaving, painting, drawing, and fabric art. There are two principal ways that TEKS engages with communities to support these activities: firstly, by assisting village groups to organize and host Mini Arts Festivals (MAFs); and secondly, by documenting these MAFs through co-produced audiovisual content in vernacular languages.

Delly speaks fluent English, French and the local creole Bislama (the lingua franca of Vanuatu) in addition to her father's vernacular language, Mwerlap. She says: "I feel that I understand enough about diverse Vanuatu cultures and that I have a reasonable understanding of many foreign cultures. I created TEKS as a unit to serve as a bridge between the different conceptual worlds."

TEKS supports a range of traditional wisdom practices such as dances, music, songs, stories, carving, weaving, painting, drawing, and fabric art. There are two principal ways that TEKS engages with communities to support these activities: firstly, by assisting village groups to organize and host Mini Arts Festivals (MAFs); and secondly, by documenting these MAFs through co-produced audiovisual content in vernacular languages.

Delly explains that her "idea is that if each culture can understand or at the very least acknowledge each other, a platform can be set for mutual respect." TEKS aspires to be there to facilitate that platform and foster the connections.

At the time of preparing this photo essay (March 2015), Vanuatu was severely hit by a tropical cyclone, which affected more than seventy percent of the population through the destruction of ninety percent of homes, gardens and infrastructure. Many people were left without adequate shelter, food, and safe drinking water. The Further Arts office was completely destroyed along with most of the equipment in it. Without the office facility to provide stability to TEKS, its work with communities, local youth, artists and musicians is unlikely to continue. All the communities TEKS works with are in the process of rebuilding their lives but need as much support as possible to restore healthy cultural and lifestyle practices. People wishing to donate for the reconstruction of Further Arts and TEKS initiatives can do so at http://rebuilding.furtherarts.org/.

The full 35-picture version of this photo essay is available as a member-only feature on the Langscape website.
Photo 1: Volcano on Gaua, the largest and second most populous of the Banks Islands in Torba Province of Northern Vanuatu.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 2: Kastom performers from Fanafo village, Espiritu Santo.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 3: Preparing leaves for traditional dress for a performance at Lukaatem Gut Santo Festival in Luganville, Espiritu Santo.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 4: A traditional performer from Gaua blows the conch shell at the opening ceremony of Singaot Musik Kamp, Espiritu Santo.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 5: A Leweton Cultural Village performer, Charlie, playing the bush bass at Lukaatem Gut Santo Festival in Luganville, Espiritu Santo.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 6: Dancing at the opening ceremony of Singaot Musik Kamp, Espiritu Santo.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 7: Women kastom performers at the Salav Festival in Namasari village, Gaua.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 8: Lily Weul, leader of the Salap women’s water music group, Gaua.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 9: Men performing Qwat kastom dance at the Salav Festival in Namasari village, Gaua.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 10: Children performing na-Mag kastom dance at the Salav Festival in Namasari village, Gaua.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 11: The Salap women’s group performing their mesmerizing water music at the Salav Festival in Namasari village, Gaua.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 12: Whole community song and dance at the Fanafo Indigenous Kastom Day in Fanafo, Espiritu Santo.  
Photo: Ham Maurice Joel, 2014

Photo 13: The volcanic landscape of Ambrym, visited by performers during the Emyo Tinyo Dance & Music Festival in Emotungan village, Ambrym.  
Photo: Sarah Doyle, 2014

Photo 14: Delly Roy, founder and leader of TEKS unit: “I face enormous challenges in my work as a female, but I am committed and passionate about ensuring that the voices and stories of both men and women are heard to strengthen harmony and respect between people as a foundational value.”  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo 15: Local and regional Melanesian musicians and dancers perform at the Emyo Tinyo Dance & Music Festival in Emotungan village, West Ambrym.  
Photo: Sarah Doyle, 2014

Photo 16: Delly Roy looking at historic photos with Merion Roul of Namasari village, Gaua.  
Photo: Cristina Panicali, 2013

Photo: Sarah Doyle, 2015

Further Reading


Further Arts YouTube Channel. (n.d). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/user/furtherarts

