

Coconuts and Parchment: The Challenges of Culture and Information Management in Vanuatu

Terri Maher, tmaher@vanuatu.gov.vu

The Republic of Vanuatu is a wonderfully vibrant nation of over 80 inhabited islands and a population of around 215,000 people. It is a hybrid of traditional culture known as *kastom* which in itself is a myriad of separate islands each with their own distinct culture, mixed with a Western and strong Christian influence. There are over 110 different local languages spoken in Vanuatu along with three national languages – Bislama, (pidgin English) French and English.

Traditionally, Vanuatu is an oral society; knowledge is transferred primarily through stories, dances, art, craft and songs. Likewise information is transmitted verbally or through mediums such as *tam tam* drums to contact nearby villages or the placement of particular leaves in front of objects or places to signify importance or sacred places. It is generally acknowledged that there was no written word in Vanuatu prior to Western contact in 1606 and many of the local languages are only spoken with no writing in that language even now.

Statistics show that the literacy rate in Vanuatu as of 2003 was 74%¹ as opposed to Australia's 99%² and there is a distinct lack of library and research skills outside of those who have attended school to the age of 17 or 18. About one third of ni-Vanuatu³ have completed secondary education and around 5% attend university⁴ although the number of scholarships to overseas universities is increasing through Aid donors.

Information gathered from the Members of Parliament by the Parliament Library about their previous education shows that only about half

of the Members have a higher level of education than junior secondary school (approximate age 14 or 15) and only a handful have university degrees. This does not preclude them from being capable of effectively running the country, particularly since most of them have been trained at a young age to be community leaders. However their ability to conduct and manage their own research for parliamentary debates and parliamentary matters is not of a high standard, possibly due to the lack of western style education which stresses the importance of written information that Australians, for example, are privy to.

This article will not examine information management (IM) principles or practices, but perhaps introduce a new way of thinking about IM in situations where the role, value, and communication of information is different from the norm in Western cultures. The problems faced by libraries and records departments across Vanuatu are not entirely different from those in Australia but are rather more accentuated due to the Melanesian culture in Vanuatu and a more pronounced shortage of financial and physical resources and highly trained library staff.

Westernisation of Vanuatu has shaped the Government and local government councils, particularly in the two main towns; the capital Port Vila on the island of Efate with a population of around 33,000 people and the town of Luganville on the northern island of Espiritu Santo. Outside of these two towns many ni-Vanuatu live without electricity, running water, quality health

1 CIA, *CIA – The world factbook* < <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>> viewed at 20 July 2008.

2 Ibid.

3 *Ni-Vanuatu* is a demonym used to refer to all Melanesian ethnicities originating in Vanuatu.

4 United Nations, *UN Data* < <http://data.un.org/>> viewed at 20 July 2008.



Tam tam drums in Vanuatu.

care services, sealed roads or regular and reliable communications. Nevertheless, the country has adopted many of the administration legacies left behind from the French/English Condominium and the Government is organised in much the same way as the English or Australian Governments with only a few small differences.

The Vanuatu Parliament is based on the Westminster model and is a unicameral parliament of 52 Members. Parliamentary records are kept in English and French while Bislama is primarily spoken inside the Chambers during parliamentary sittings. The Parliament Library is open to Members of Parliament and the public and has a decent monograph collection relating to law, politics, history and social issues particularly in relation to the Pacific but also including material about Australia, New Zealand, China, Europe

and America. The Library holdings include –

- Serials, many of them donated by various international organisations;
- Local newspapers;
- Parliamentary records such as the Minutes of Parliament (referred to as Hansard, although they are not a verbatim account of Parliament);
- Vanuatu Legislation;
- Parliamentary Committee reports;
- Vanuatu Government reports; and
- Materials such as maps and photographs.

The Library has just acquired three new computers through a New Zealand Aid grant for Members of Parliament, which allows it to have access to the Internet and use a Vanuatu Government email address.

I have worked at the Vanuatu Parliament Library for almost two years now through two different Australian volunteer programs. I am working closely with the Parliamentary Librarian, a wonderful ni-Vanuatu woman, who obtained her librarian qualification at the University of the South Pacific, and the Clerk of Parliament, who has been in that role since Independence in 1980.

I am currently working on a number of projects relating to the Library and Parliament in general, most of which are based on IM principles and stressing the importance of the library and the value of the information held within it. Some of these projects include:

- Creating databases relating to Legislation to track changes to the law;

- Biographical information on past and present Members of Parliament;
- Putting together information on Parliament and how Parliament works in Vanuatu for schools;
- Managing the Parliament archives and conducting an information audit of Parliament; and
- Recommending changes to ensure that the library is current with its information and can efficiently pass that information to Members of Parliament and other library users.

Before I started my new volunteer contract late last year, I read as much as I could on information management to prepare for my projects here in Vanuatu. I found that very little of the information I read looks at the process of information management with a cultural perspective and



Interior of Parliamentary Library, Vanuatu.

does not take into account anything more than a workplace culture. There is virtually nothing written which addresses cultural differences between Western countries and the oral cultures of developing countries such as Vanuatu. In the field of knowledge management, recent research addresses the role of social and cultural aspects of knowledge, but in the literature those concerns are limited to organisations, or if national culture is mentioned, it is seen as fixed across nation states and over time.⁵ Plus, much of the work done with information and knowledge management assumes a certain level of technology, access to technology and education levels of users.

I recently conducted an information audit for the Parliament to ascertain information seeking behaviour and promoters and barriers to information flow. The audit confirmed my suspicion that information flow in Parliament is very informal – usually verbal, and at best, will reach all parliament staff and Members of Parliament eventually. This is entirely acceptable in a traditional Vanuatu society where the ‘big men’ in a village (chiefs, church and community leaders) have all the information and let it trickle down to the rest of the village over time, usually through the *nakamal* (a meeting house which is generally only open to men) at first, then to the wives who verbally disperse information to other women while they garden, cook or look after children. It does not suit a Western model of Government however and important information often stops short of reaching its destination or is delayed to the point where it is no longer useful or has become inaccurate.

In addition, while information may reach its destination verbally albeit usually slowly, the written

format is yet to be fully recognised in Vanuatu as the medium of choice for communicating complex or large amounts of information. Interactions with and between ni-Vanuatu are best done face to face, even phone calls with ni-Vanuatu are difficult at times and emailing between Government Departments is virtually non-existent. It is not uncommon to have a consultant come to Vanuatu at a very high cost to the Government or an Aid donor to do a report on an issue, only to have the report duplicated by another department a year later because they were not aware of the first report or they could not locate it. Written reports and information are simply not valued in the way that the Western world values them. Ni-Vanuatu people may have excellent memories for stories and *kastom* knowledge, but the sheer volume of information being generated by the Government and other organisations in Vanuatu is larger than any community or village would traditionally be expected to recall and pass on and this is where the primary problem lies. Unless the ni-Vanuatu recognise the value of written (print and digital) information and then adopt ways and means of storing, accessing and transmitting written information in a manner that suits their *kastom* and work styles, then valuable information will be lost at the expense of the country and the people.

Furthermore, the number of languages spoken in Vanuatu adds another dimension to managing information as all official records should be held in at least French and English as is set out in the Constitution, plus in Bislama if it is available. This effectively triplicates information, which must then be processed and stored, adding to the workload of records and library staff.

5 Nguyen, T T & Johanson, G, ‘Culture and Vietnam as a knowledge society’, *Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries* 1–16.

Male and female customary roles in traditional society also make effective working relationships and information sharing difficult. On most of the islands in Vanuatu, men are the primary decision makers and information keepers outside of the home. Rarely do women voice their thoughts publicly in traditional settings. In Port Vila and certainly elsewhere in Vanuatu men often go to a nakamal to drink kava after work and this is a place where work is often discussed openly, while their absent female counterparts miss out on the sharing of information. Meanwhile women will more likely share information over domestic duties while the men are absent. In addition, families are very large and relationships are complex and can be restrictive and hinder effective information flow as well. This is particularly important since a lot of information transfer still occurs verbally.

Access to technology, as well as education levels, is also problematic for effective information management. While computers and Internet access are found in most government departments, levels and competencies of use are highly varied. It is not unusual for a high level government employee to leave all his or her Internet and email duties to the secretary. The Government Internet access is also highly controlled and restricted with net nanny software while Government emails are monitored for inappropriateness thus sending a message to public servants that these information seeking and transfer mediums are not something the Government trusts its employees with.

Attitudes towards work and the relaxed lifestyle of many ni-Vanuatu further hold back effective

information management practices. While Vanuatu was found to be the happiest place in the world in 2006,⁶ the work ethic in Vanuatu creates challenges. Family, village, church and community are often considered to be more important than work and an individual may not turn up to work for a number of days or weeks if there is something else that needs their attention such as a death in the extended family or a cultural festival. Perhaps this is something that Australia and the Western world could learn from to strengthen the family unit and enhance community spirit. However it is not conducive to workplace productivity.

There is also a lack of trust in the written word and any 'Western methods or concepts'. Frequently overseas ideas are taken on in Vanuatu and not tailored to the culture and as a result the project or concept fails due to the lack of cultural sensitivity. After 28 years of independence, ni-Vanuatu are conscious of their own past and identity and mistrust many Western attempts to fix a problem or try something the 'Western way'. Introducing an Information Management policy may very well put a lot of staff off purely because it sounds foreign and it looks like it would create more work. A certain level of trust needs to be established with the staff before attempting to implement any new processes; processes which must take into account the ni-Vanuatu way of doing things if it is to be successful.

Trusting colleagues enough to share information is also another barrier to effective information flow in Vanuatu. As with a lot of societies worldwide, information is a source of power and there will always be individuals not wanting to share

6 New Economics Foundation, *The Happy Planet Index* <<http://www.happyplanetindex.org/list.htm>> viewed at 22 July 2008.

with others in what they know or information they have access to. In Vanuatu, those who have been 'apprenticed' for years to learn about *kastom* medicine or who have studied black magic, for example, do not talk about what they have learnt as this information is considered sacred and is not to be shared freely. Similarly, there will always be high-level public servants or employees in other organisations who are reluctant to share information related to their job or role as it is the seat of their power and influence.

Future planning is also a stumbling block for many ni-Vanuatu and certainly the administration of the country. Foresight is not a developed notion in ni-Vanuatu culture which traditionally only looks to the next season and crop, and as such, important documents are not considered for their future value. An earthquake damaged the National Archives building in the late 1990s and the resources kept within the building have only just been placed under the care of the Vanuatu National Library this year. Some very important documents were held in the archives and it is only now that they have been recovered and included in the National Library collection.

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are making their way into the Government system. The Government's IT section which shares some important whole of government information has established an intranet. In Parliament, the Library, the Clerk and Speaker's offices and the Finance section all have access to the Internet and Government email, with the Library's new computers to add access to Members of Parliament and other staff for Internet and email access. There is no Parliament website or intranet at this stage, nor is there a common server to store records which means document and information

sharing between sections of Parliament is done manually usually through verbal communication.

So in light of all this, what can be done to aid the promotion of written documents and information sharing in Parliament? When looking at the information seeking behaviour of parliamentary staff, almost all staff members come to the library to read the local newspapers. As part of a grant two years ago, the library purchased some couches and a coffee table to create a reading area in the library and this is where the newspapers are located. To enhance information flow and provide a medium which is in line with Vanuatu *kastom*, we are in the process of putting up some notice boards in this area to inform staff of important matters relating to Parliament; for example the next Parliamentary sitting dates or general Government information posted on the Government intranet which many staff do not have access to. It was also decided that information of a social and personal nature, such as fliers promoting staff church fundraisers, or notices letting other staff know of a wedding or birth would be encouraged. Ideally we want to make the library and in particular the newspaper area into the *Nakamal* of Parliament, where both men and women are encouraged to visit for seeking and sharing information, both verbally and in written formats.

There is a general election of Parliament in September this year and an Induction to Parliament is being organised by the Centre for Democratic Institutions. During this 3-day session the library is allocated 20 minutes to showcase its resources and promote library usage to the newly elected Members of Parliament. This election is gearing up to be one of the most contested elections since Vanuatu independence with many younger and more educated ni-Vanuatu running for election;

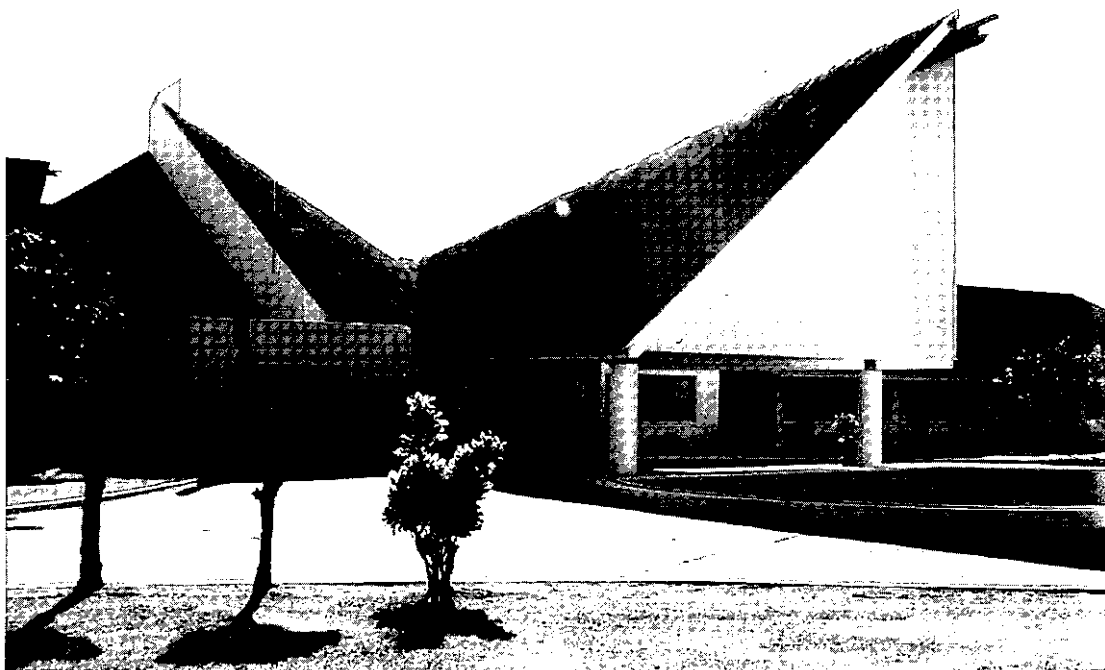
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certainly an exciting time to be working in Parliament in Vanuatu. For the induction program, the Parliamentary Librarian and myself are planning to use examples in story format to let the Members of Parliament know why the library is useful rather than listing what resources we have. One information science researcher working with farming communities in Africa noted that traditional people often do not realise that they may lack information that could help them solve a problem.⁷ So by gently pointing out to Members of Parliament that the library has resources they need in order to fulfill their roles as MPs it is hoped that it will generate use of library resources.

I would hope that this article has not only given an idea of some of the challenges and rewards of

working in a developing country library, but also create an interest in the implications of culture when working in Australian libraries. Indigenous Australians or other ethnic groups whose background is traditionally from an oral society can be forgotten in library and information planning and another approach may need to be taken to incorporate them into an effective information management plan.

There is no easy solution to changing information management practices in Vanuatu and the Parliament in particular. More and more young ni-Vanuatu in their 20s who have been to universities in Australia and New Zealand are gaining high level positions in the Government which will hopefully lead to an eventual change in



Vanuatu Parliament building

7 Meyer, H W J, 'The nature of information and the effective use of information in rural development', (2005) 10 (2) *Information Research* paper 214.

recognising the value of preserving, communicating and using written information. This change, like all changes in Vanuatu will happen at its own pace or as the saying in Vanuatu goes, 'as the coconut falls' and it may take many years before information in a non verbal format is recognised

as a highly useful and important resource for the development of the country. Meanwhile, the Parliament Library will be aiding verbal and written information transfer as far as practicable and will be an information scavenger in Parliament to ensure that vital information is not lost.