Industry Paper
Wantok Stori, Collaboration and Exchange: Towards the Development of Creative Industries in Solomon Islands

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Abstract
This paper outlines and analyses our experience of the establishment of Wantok Stori, a community collaboration team, and the completion of the short film ‘Wea nao mi?’ (Where am I?). Wantok Stori brings together Victorian Pacific Islander and Solomon Island young people. The joint production team of producers, artists and communities spread between Honiara, Solomon Islands and Melbourne, Australia have worked together since 2011. ‘Wea nao mi?’, the first project, shared stories and skills using online discussion, film-making and training to explore and celebrate the diversity of Pacific culture. The film premièred in 2012 at the 11th Festival of Pacific Arts in Honiara. The project attempts to invite participation by diaspora communities, engage human power, and use simple and accessible communications forms and training styles to ‘create and industry where there is no industry’.

Biography
Adriel Tahisi, is an independent producer in the Solomon Islands with Bachelor of Performing Arts and Media Studies. Samantha Cooper is an international community development worker and has a long term connection with Solomon Islands.
Introduction
As two of the producers and instigators of Wantok Stori we have come together under the shade of a raintree in Honiara, to reflect on the experience and share our thoughts. The project is both a personal journey and a community journey. It is appropriate to share some of our stories as to how we came to be working together as Wantok Stori was instigated in direct response to our experiences in the development and government sectors. Adriel Tahisi, the Solomon Islander independent producer with Bachelor of Performing Arts and Media Studies, found himself in a government position working with great job stability but far from his personal passions and ambitions. Travelling on a ship between two island provinces he met an Australian missionary named Joe Matthews. As the ship powered through the white water the two began to talk about life and work. Adriel told the new friend that he was working in the government, though trained in and passionate about music and arts. He said he aspired to work in the industry, but found there to be limited jobs available. In a statement that had a great impact on Adriel’s future and career choices this man said ‘Create an industry where there is no industry’. This short interaction led Adriel to become independent in 2011.

Working for a large development agency, previously as a counterpart to Adriel in government, Samantha Cooper moved into the arts and culture sector in late 2010. An Australian working in Solomon Islands in various capacities since 2006, Samantha worked alongside an inspiring government team on various program, planning and policy activities. With a background in grass roots indigenous community development she came to reflect on the role of large development organisations and expatriate individuals such as herself in building stability and national pride. In a country rich with culture and creativity, Samantha, began to seek out development processes that are created and directed by the community itself.

Through networks, family and friends, we got in touch with Australian Pacific Islander communities who showed support and introduced us to two established film makers: Amie Batalibasi and Lisa Hilli, who became interested in co-producing. In a short time, we came together to form a collaboration now called Wantok Stori.

Community Cultural Development
Wantok Stori is grounded in community cultural development theory. Adams and Goldbard define community cultural development as ‘the work of artist-organizers (‘community artists’) who collaborate with others to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts and communications media, while building cultural capacity and contributing to social change’ (2002:8). In this way we see Wantok Stori as an opportunity to address the issues affecting young people in the Solomons and Australian Pacific Islander communities by exploring and promoting the diversity of perspectives, experiences, identities, and responses. Our views are supported by Solomon Islands national research which identified the arts as a medium to support social development (Noble et al., 2011; Solomon Island Government 2010). Participation in arts and cultural activities is widely considered to have positive social impacts, build resilience, provide empowerment and build community.

Examples of the success of community cultural development projects in reaffirming identity can be found in other communities also experiencing the negative impact of social change and intergenerational conflict. In reference to work done with communities in Australia by Big hArt Productions, an evaluation undertaken by Peter Wright stated that community cultural development practice can reaffirm the ‘reciprocal relationship between art and life, and between asking questions and providing answers’ (Wright 2009:10). According to Wright, Big hART challenges the usual definitions between ‘what is real and what is fiction’ or ‘imagination and authenticity’ (ibid). In so doing attention is drawn to how personal identity is constructed through narrative, and communal belonging constructed through identification with the narratives of others.
Wright says that a:

creative process of giving form to feeling is an ‘act of knowing’ where participants re-order, reshape and re-evaluate the stories and knowledge they already possess to gain insights into their own situation (2009:11).

There is also support for the view that culture makes an intrinsic contribution to sustainable development. Indeed, Jon Hawkes has posited that culture is the fourth pillar of sustainability, along with social, economic and environmental. He states in the summary of The Fourth Pillar that: ‘society's values are the basis upon which all else is built. These values and the ways they are expressed are a society's culture’ (2001). In the face of globalisation, culture is all the more essential to sustainable development. However, sustainable development practices are largely informed by a Western world view and funded according to the agenda of multilateral, bilateral, non-governmental and philanthropic donor agencies. Keith Nurse argues for culture to be placed at the centre of development policies to ensure a ‘non-deterministic approach that breaks out of progressivist, universalistic and dependency-creating development thinking and promotes self-reliance, social justice and ecological balance’ (2006:38).

It is with these views in mind that we set out to create a community cultural development collaboration which would build on existing cultural assets and strengths, and bring increased confidence, connection and community engagement in a way that is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

**Project Blong Mifala – Our Project**

*Wantok Stori* is a community collaboration instigated by Adriel Tahisi and Samantha Cooper, co-founded with Amie Batalibasi and Lisa Hilli, that aims to support the exchange of stories and skills between Victorian Pacific communities and Solomon Islander young people. We conduct short term community cultural development activities that are based on ideas and creative responses to social issues and educational needs and interests of young people in Solomon Islands and Victorian Pacific communities. Once learning of the initial concept of an international artistic collaboration, Victorian Pacific Artists became involved in co-founding and developing *Wantok Stori*. Organisations including Solomon Islands Victorian Association, Multicultural Arts Victoria, Youthworx Media, Solomon Islands Ministry of Culture and Tourism, One Television Solomon Islands and Ministry of Women, Youth, Children and Family Affairs became involved with the intention of developing long term supportive relationships. Representatives from these community organisations, the Pacific Victorian artists and community producers conceptualised the specifics of the project to ensure it was mutually beneficial through a series of meetings held in Victoria and in Solomon Islands’ capital Honiara. The inclusion of the community and existing community based organisations in the conceptualisation of the project was crucial in ensuring its relevance to and ownership by the community. This consensus was reached through extensive internet communication and drafting and redrafting of the project documents.

*Wantok Stori* aimed to build on the success of recent community cultural development activities using film making undertaken with Pacific Islanders in Victoria. The premiere of ‘Pacific Stories’ in 2011, an earlier film-making project co-produced by Amie Batalibasi and Lia Pa’apa’a and participated in by Lisa Hilli, was sold out weeks prior to the event indicating its popularity within the community. Community members who attended the premiere at Footscray Community Arts Centre, highlighted film as an effective medium to support the maintenance of oral histories and to share stories across generations and between countries. Some community members saw the potential for future projects between Victorian Pacific Islanders and communities in the Pacific to strengthen a sense of shared identity and appreciation of diversity.

Victoria is home to Pacific Islanders from all parts of the Pacific. While the Pacific Australian community is predominately Polynesian, there are significant numbers of people who identify as Melanesian including Solomon Islanders. The Solomon Islands
Victorian Association (SIVA) was established over a decade ago and currently has 90 members including Australian born Solomon Islanders, Solomon Islanders who have migrated for marriage, education, employment and/or asylum and non-Solomon Islanders interested in supporting Solomon Islands. The aim of SIVA is to promote fellowship and goodwill amongst its members, all Solomon Islanders throughout Australia and anyone who has an interest in the Solomon Islands. It actively promotes the Solomon Islands culture through a variety of organised functions, provides moral and social support to Solomon Island students and supports the Solomon Islands in times of national crises. SIVA is involved in fundraising for various causes faced by the Solomon Islands. Some of its members have formed an association called Forum Solomon Islands International which takes pride in promoting proactive advocacy towards change and good leadership in the Solomon Islands and currently has 2500 members of Solomon Islanders based throughout the world. Amie Batalibasi and Lisa Hilli, the lead artists engaged for Wantok Stori, identify as part of the Pacific Australian community and are actively involved in various community associations and community cultural development projects specifically in support of the Pacific Australian communities.

The stakeholders based in Solomon Islands were motivated by a concern regarding youth risk issues. Solomon Islands is a post-conflict nation with 29% of the population between 15-29 years of age and 40% under the age of 14 years of age. National research on young people, such as the recent Urban Youth In the Pacific (Noble et al., 2011) and Child Protection Baseline Research (Solomon Islands Government, 2010), have highlighted the need for young people to have greater access to meaningful activities that promote a sense of identity and belonging. Young people experience a number of risk factors such lack of access to training and employment, high rates of child abuse, continuing post-conflict recovery process and substance abuse. In response to these concerns, the Festival Organising Committee of the Solomon Islands and One Television Solomon Islands requested support to build the capacity of emerging film makers, producers and young people and develop quality content in the lead-up to the 11th Festival of Pacific Arts.

All stakeholders agreed that such a project would be mutually beneficial providing a unique opportunity for Victorian Pacific communities to connect and collaborate with Pacific homeland communities and at the same time provide an opportunity for Solomon Islander young people to receive training from skilled professionals that more closely represented and identified with their cultural heritage.

The realisation of the film ‘Wea nao mi?’ involved four components or phases. The first was community discussion. During March 2012 young people from Victoria, the Solomon Islands and beyond who identify as Pacific Islander were invited to take part in online discussion on the Facebook LIKE page (www.facebook.com/wantokstori) convened by Victorian Pacific artists. Discussion centred on the theme of the 11th Festival of Pacific Arts; Culture in Harmony with Nature and was facilitated by Amie Batalibasi and Lisa Hilli who invited and responded to posts made by young people and asked follow up questions. In March around 175 people became involved in the site, including 50 from Honiara, posting poetry, lyrics, essays, ideas, songs specifically recorded, photographs, links and other contributions. Young people who contributed explored such issues as globalisation, identity, diversity, climate change, social change, relationships between generations, Kastom and tradition, knowledge systems, respect and social relations, and more.

Here are some examples taken from the online discussion:

I recommend us to be proud of our cultures (the way we do things Before) and take great care for nature and culture and keep it cos that is our uniqueness. You cannot find it anywhere in the world, and our cultures are all important and useful, good according to our own set up of our societies. (Sedeanisia)
...there is still one last string that holds us children of today’s generation to the nature. Our CULTURE. Coz it gives us a sense of feeling that our ancestors are here with us. (Re-g)

There was also discussion on how culture and nature relate:
This environment embraces me but my culture defines me. Together we walk this journey. But where ever I may be in this world, nothing compares to being surrounded by my own people with our natural surroundings that has provided for us for generations. (Jess)

Young people have also spoken about how culture and nature is central to life:
I regard nature and culture as essentials of my life. For example: custom medicine, housing style and materials, garden and fishing methods etc. Basically, we cannot go or live without nature and our culture, therefore we must learn to appreciate and respect our own culture and nature around us. (Zax)

Others have reflected on these issues over time:
Culture and nature have kept the stability of our existence since the beginning of time. (Kc Zinck)

Sammie talked about the importance of cultural events like the Festival of Pacific Arts in bringing together people:
Culture creates and brings Harmony, where there is a cultural event one can’t see Harmony but somehow will feels it, for instance, it comes through Respect, love... all these harmonize one’s culture. (Sammie)

Of those who contributed to the online discussion six were selected to take part in the film making process based on the creativity of their responses and their ongoing participation in the discussion including Charlie Piringi, Moses Au, Kerrie Jionisi, Neil Cassidy, Regina Mae, Francis Bele.

As the second phase of the project, Victorian Pacific artists travelled to Honiara in April 2012 to conduct a participatory film-making and training process with young people and also involved Solomon Islands National Museum staff Glen Deni and Sosimo Narasia. The film was created through shared facilitation styles and approaches of Amie Batalibasi, Lisa Hilli and Adriel Tahisi and included ‘an adaptation of training techniques, timelines and processes to specifically suit the time, place, culture, environment and people involved in the project’ (Batalibasi, personal communication 2012). The workshop began with further exploration of the theme ‘Culture in Harmony with Nature’ and other issues raised by those who had contributed in the online space.

Each young person developed an idea or concept for the film based on their own reflections and interpretations of the discussion and then pitched their concept to the group. Together the group selected one idea to make into a reality and collaboratively wrote the detailed script. The script was then divided into seven scenes and each young person storyboarded and directed a scene each.

During the workshop program local talent was highlighted, with independent film makers and One Television Solomon Islands staff participating in a panel discussion, responding to questions from the young people about the industry and the pathways their career had taken. While the overall local production was led by the Solomon Islands co-producer, participants also took leadership in some aspects, such as setting up locations and engaging local actors.

The film created, ‘Wea nao mi?’ (‘Where Am I?’), is a story ‘about a village boy who wants to go to town, falls asleep and finds himself in a nightmare that will change his life forever’ (Regina Mae, personal communication 2012). It is a short drama that explores the festival theme ‘Culture in Harmony with Nature’ and highlights the cultural and social change taking place in the Pacific. The film premiered at the Festival of
Pacific Arts in July 2012, in Honiara as a special feature within the festival program. Young people had the opportunity to present their film to a full auditorium of up to 500 people and each spoke about their role in the process and their lessons learnt. Regina Mae, who pitched the concept for ‘Wea Nao Mi?’, described her own experiences as an urban Solomon Islander and of social and cultural change within her family and community. She highlighted that the choice to create a drama piece came about as the participants felt that frequently their culture was represented in documentary but rarely in drama format. Kerrie Jionisi highlighted the importance for young women to have the opportunity to take part in projects which supported their voices to be heard. Francis Bele said he felt that this project highlighted how much talent young people have and that with appropriate mentorship and access to relevant equipment they are able to make high quality work and tell stories that are engaging and important to the whole of the community.

In addition, the theme of this film ‘Culture in Harmony with Nature’ and the process of making a film allowed for a collective reflection on cultural change and the changing relationship with nature. The film also offered a means of engaging with older members of the community about change and highlighted the challenges this presents. During the presentation of the film at the Festival of Pacific Arts an older audience member from the Kwaio language group commented on the way his language had been used and interpreted in the film, stating that it had been misinterpreted. Young people had specifically used Kwaio language because it represented one of the ‘strongest’ traditional cultures in Solomon Islands, however only one member of the group spoke this language. The way it was used and translated was done in an urban, contemporary style, which different from the ‘traditional’ use. This incident demonstrated the cultural change explored in the film in a very practical way, as well as highlighting the cultural difficulties associated with using and interpreting indigenous oral languages in film.

In August 2012, the film was launched online and a set of teaching materials aligned with the Victorian Essential Learning Standards curriculum are in the process of being finalised to accompany the film. These will be freely available for communities and schools across the Pacific and Australia as a lasting resource to support discussion, education and celebration of cultural diversity.

**Implications and Observations**

**Diaspora Involvement**

Linking the ‘transnational’ Pacific community or the Pacific diaspora of Victoria and young people in the Solomon Islands, Wantok Stori harnessed the skills, knowledge, resources as well as their emotional or sentimental connection to support homeland development. It can be seen as a process which Rubin Patterson (2006) describes as ‘diaspora-homeland collaborative development.’ This is an opposing perspective to that of ‘brain drain’ (or ‘human resource flight’) which commonly describes the large scale migration of people with technical skills or knowledge from their homelands in search of better social and economic opportunities. ‘Brain drain’ is a long term debate in the Pacific nations and is a current topic of conversation among Solomon Islands government leaders. Patterson disagrees that the migration of a skilled workforce renders a country with a skills shortage, but rather suggests that strategic collaboration and ‘brain circulation’ between the diaspora and the homeland can improve the status of these transnational communities. He states that ‘diaspora-homeland collaborative development is founded on sentimental and material arguments for a bounded ethnic group, both within the diaspora and between it and its homeland’ (2006:1896). The President of the Solomon Islands Victorian Association supporting the project could similarly reflect on these benefits: ‘We see this as a great opportunity to work together to promote our identity and strengthen connections to our island heritage. This is particularly important for our young people’ (SIVA President, 2011).

Young people who participated felt the project had a positive impact on the film industry in the Solomon Islands. One said ‘This is just the beginning of a life changing experience for me in film making.’ Strong working relationships were developed.
Another participant said; ‘Amie and Lisa thank you so very much for giving your precious time helping us out...your contribution in the film industry here in the Solomons will be treasured.’

**Human Power**

*Wantok Stori* has harnessed the energy of passionate community members in order to inspire, develop and fund its activities. While some funds were sought from donor and philanthropy organisations, a large amount of energy and time was put into engaging local community members in fundraising and contributing to the work of *Wantok Stori*.

A tight budget, though often seen as a hindrance, allowed for creativity, dynamism, increased community involvement and participant control. For example in the lead up to the travel to the Solomon Islands the Solomon Islands Victorian Association, Pacific Women’s Weaving Circle, Pacific Stories and other Pacific community members rallied together to support an event which raised a significant contribution to the project. Likewise crowd funding through ‘Go fund me’ was used to source funds. This was the first time that those involved in the project had used these mechanisms to involve others in the community in a project of this kind. At the fundraiser the President of the SIVA stated that he felt that involvement in such activities was very important to the work of the association and that he was happy for the opportunity for his community to come together, learn about the project and show support (personal communication 2012). In this way we found the fundraising doubled as a community engagement tool, enabling the community to feel directly involved in the project and its future.

Similarly in the Solomon Islands during the workshop process, the volunteer spirit of the project led young people, local organisations and community (even those passing by shoots taking place on the street) to be willing to support, take part in and contribute to the project. The community approach allowed people to feel empowered by contributing to the goal. For example one young participant shared their networks with a community drama group, which enabled *Wantok Stori* to source experienced actors and locations for filming with no charge. Another organised for further marketing and promotion through contacts at a local radio station which then interviewed *Wantok Stori* crew. For some young people this was the first time they had seen a radio studio. With many large scale development projects taking place in Solomons there is often a large amount of scepticism involved in development activities. In this way the budget limitations actually enabled creativity, generosity and shared ownership to blossom. As Adriel now reflects, Solomon Islanders can not wait for government to set out a platform or program to support their ideas and projects, but need to use their networks and entrepreneurism to make their projects happen.

**Simple, Accessible Media**

Many immigrant communities form associations and increasingly maintain connections, promote their homeland and advocate for their communities in Australia and their homeland communities through social media. *Wantok Stori* has made use of simple accessible online media and training processes to engage community. For example, Facebook was used to connect participants and communities from Victoria and Solomon Islands. As described, ideas for the film were collected through the online space, and participants were selected by their involvement in it.

Two years ago a telecommunications service provided a competitive mobile service in the Solomon Islands allowing increased access to families of all socio-economic circumstances to have relatively affordable mobile and phone-based internet access. This has allowed a ‘boom’ in internet usage, particularly Facebook as suddenly there was a platform for increased and high-speed expression of ‘wantok’ (kin) relationships. A number of sites have also been developed that explore, for example, political issues and government accountability.

The best way to engage young people and communities has been shown to begin with interest-driven platforms rather than those directly relating to political/activism. Research into the links between online participation and civic participation ‘suggests
that online, non-political, interest-driven activities serve as a gateway to participation in important aspects of civic and, at times, political life, including volunteering, engagement in community problem-solving, protest activities, and political voice’ (Kahne et al 2011). This supports a case for the use of Facebook, as it largely starts with interest and social networks where people are recommended to political and/or advocacy sites by people within their network. Similarly participation in online spaces could have a long-term influence on young people in other areas of their life.

However Elkins found that the platform will not ‘determine’ the community, it is merely a means to an end. He says that ‘technology enables (or disables) rather than determines situations. It opens up or makes more visible previously blocked or unnoticed options; but having more or newer options does not guarantee which option a person or community will choose’ (1997:146). Similarly by comparison to other established networks, Wantok Stori project got relatively limited ‘traffic’ with 180 direct followers compared to Forum Solomon Islands with over 5000 followers.

Niezen (2005) discusses the 'digital divide' or the disparity between those who can access and take part and those who can not at both the 'local' and 'global' level. He states that those who are computer ‘savvy’ have the power to represent their people, and ‘in the process redefine their people's values, opportunities, and even their criterion for group membership’ (2005: 548). There are also global differences between countries in relation to access.

This digital divide can also be as a result of economic, social, geographic or cultural reasons. For example participation in the Wantok Stori online space (2012) can be analysed according to age, gender and geographic location of participants. In March, the majority of all LIKES were aged between 25 and 34 years old and overall 61% of Wantok Stori LIKES are female. Despite this, those who are actively contributing to the page are largely male. 55 of the 175 people who LIKE the project identify as being based in Solomon Islands, with 50 in Honiara. Other issues that may have contributed such as socio-economic background of participants and language barriers are more difficult to identity. These are areas to explore in future so as to fully utilise this resource in engaging and connecting diaspora and homeland communities.

The training approach created an engaging environment for learning but also for laughs, exchange and working relationships to be developed. Young people who participated, took part for free and saw this as an exciting opportunity. Without formal qualifications young people often face difficulties entering the formal employment sector, however accessing a scholarship to formal training in a field of your passion is difficult. These young people came with a commitment to learn, wanting to ‘soak up the atmosphere’.

Conclusion
This paper has been a reflection on some of the processes of setting up Wantok Stori and the development of the first project, ‘Wea nao mi?’ Specifically we reflected on the mutual benefit of engaging diaspora communities, engagement of human power, and use of simple and accessible communication forms and training styles. Wantok Stori is excited to have presented at the Festival of Pacific Arts 2012. We are now looking to develop future activities that build on these networks and lessons learnt. We aim to continue to encourage other creative people and young people of Solomon Islands ‘create an industry where there is no industry’.

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References