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## *Vaka Moana*—the ocean roads

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The debates and discussions which laid the foundations for the UN's World Decade for Cultural Development had their origins in Resolution 27 of the 1982 World Conference on Cultural Policies, Mexico City, which declared that '...culture constitutes a fundamental part of the life of each individual and of each community, and that, consequently, development—whose ultimate aim should be focused on man—must have a cultural dimension.'

In 1987 the General Assembly of the United Nations resolved that the period 1988 to 1997 would be the World Decade for Cultural Development and that the responsibility for implementing the Decade would be given to UNESCO. Subsequently, the twenty-fourth session of UNESCO's General Conference invited member states to implement, at national, regional and international levels, significant activities and projects drawn up along interdisciplinary lines. Among the large-scale projects that were developed in response to this invitation were the Integral Study of the Silk Roads; the Iron Roads of Africa, The Baroque World Project, Roads of Faith Project, The Maya World Project; The Slave Route and The Memory of the World and Latin America-Caribbean 2000.

## ***Vaka Moana***

The Pacific member states' somewhat belated response was the *Vaka Moana* project, which grew out of discussions at the July 1991 sub-regional consultation meeting of the Pacific member states. The meeting asked the New Zealand National Commission to initiate moves to seek funding for a regional project using the Pacific Ocean as an integrating theme. *Vaka Moana* was one of the possible titles canvassed at the meeting, and the one that was eventually agreed upon. *Moana* is the common word for 'ocean' in all the Austronesian languages of the Pacific and *vaka* is the common word for 'canoe', the vessel developed for the exploration and settlement of the whole region. In many Pacific languages *vaka* also connotes a social group linked by tradition of common descent and migration. *Vaka Moana* thus evokes a host of associated meanings, those linked with groupings for a common purpose as well as those associated with wide-ranging exploratory sea voyages—enterprise, daring, trade, wide kinship links, intimate knowledge of star navigation and marine development together alongside land use.

It was decided that the project should have the following broad goals

- the reinforcement of links between Pacific peoples through a better knowledge of their shared historical roots and common dependence on the ocean
- the promotion and dissemination of all forms of knowledge, both traditional and scientific, concerning the sea, the land and their resources
- the conservation, management and appropriate uses of these resources for the benefit of the people of the region
- the promotion of all forms of art bearing upon the common theme of the sea
- the involvement of all peoples of the various islands of the Pacific Ocean, including those from non-independent countries.

The New Zealand National Commission took a draft resolution (DR 315) to the October 1991 UNESCO General Conference, seeking support for the draft program and budget for 1992–93 of a major regional project entitled *Vaka Moana*, to be implemented during the period 1994 to 1997. The resolution invited the Director-General to

support the project from UNESCO program funding, to provide technical assistance for the establishment of a sub-regional committee to undertake the preparation of a plan of action for the project, and for the mobilisation of extra-budgetary funds, to consult with other United Nations organisations within the region with a view to obtaining their co-operation in planning and implementing the project.

This resolution was supported by all the Pacific member states at that time (Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Western Samoa) as well as by France. Solomon Islands, Niue, Nauru, Marshall Islands, and Vanuatu, which have since become member states, also gave their support to this resolution.

The response from the UNESCO secretariat was most positive and supportive, and the New Zealand National Commission then lodged a participation program request for US\$15,000 at the end of 1991, to be used for detailed planning for the *Vaka Moana* project. That request was granted, and a further US\$20,000 was allocated to the UNESCO Apia office was also earmarked for *Vaka Moana*, bringing the total allocation to US\$35,000. This money was basically to get the project mobilised in the Pacific.

During this period the nature and scope of the program was further developed and refined. Antony Hooper, then a member of the New Zealand National Commission and the originator of the *Vaka Moana* proposal, suggested a three-part program: the first would deal mainly with linguistic scholarship, archaeology and biological anthropology; the second would consist of cultural matters such as the re-establishment of links for the discussion of genealogies, traditions, and the re-enactment of canoe voyages. The final development aspect of the project would cover predominantly the economic importance of activities in the areas of sea resources and tourism, taking note of the concerns regarding conservation.

The Hon. Russell Marshall, as chair of the NZ National Commission, worked ceaselessly on the organisational aspects. He not only sought views of academics, arts and cultural administrators in New Zealand, but he also reached out to the UNESCO national commissions and Pacific member states and regional organisations such as the Forum, the South Pacific Commission, the South Pacific Regional Environmental Program and the University of the South Pacific. He ensured that all the UN agencies based in the Pacific were also informed and consulted about the program.

## **The *Vaka Moana* working committee**

At the consultative meeting of the Pacific member states in February 1991, a working committee consisting of a representative of each of the geographic ethnic groups was formed: Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, Melanesians, Micronesians, and Polynesians. The committee was to be assisted by both Australian and New Zealand national commissions. Further conceptualisation of the project also took place during the Pacific Arts Symposium which was held in conjunction with the 6th Festival of Pacific Arts in Cook Islands. Between the 1991 meeting in Rarotonga and the Apia meeting in May 1993, there were a number of consultative meetings held with various regional and national organisations. The Apia Meeting of May 1993 finally decided on the activities to be included in UNESCO's program and budget for 1994–95. A decision was also made to expand membership of the working committee to include representatives from the University of the South Pacific and the South Pacific Commission, the Secretariat members of the UNESCO Apia office and a staff member from the World Decade for Cultural Development in Paris. The coordination of the whole project was to be done from the office of the regional adviser for culture in the Pacific—the Pacific member states being fairly confident at that point that the Director-General, Mr Federico Mayor, would fulfil the promise that had been made to appoint a cultural adviser for the Pacific states in due course. During the general conference in October 1993 in Paris, the Pacific member states agreed on a number of regional participation programs which were duly lodged for consideration.

I was appointed culture adviser for the Pacific member states, and took over the responsibilities of coordinating the project. In December 1993 the program was really launched, in the sense that the *vaka* had a 'house and caretaker', a place which disseminated information about it and coordinated its activities coordinated. A work plan was endorsed at this meeting, and the working committee now constituted itself as the board of *Vaka Moana*.

## **The dilemmas of *Vaka Moana***

Russell Marshall predicted funding difficulties from a very early stage of the program. This project was specifically conceived to address the peculiarities of the Pacific situation, but these had to be addressed in

the context of the world's contemporary development concerns and the consumer society. *Vaka Moana* encountered not only funding constraints but also negative attitudes from the larger countries towards the small size and populations of the island countries involved. From the beginning of the *Vaka Moana* experience it appeared that those that had the financial resources and who would receive little assistance from the project were not particularly interested in the noble philosophical directions of the Mexico Declaration—even if they were fully endorsed by the United Nations. A perfect example of a mismatch of endorsing a decision on the one hand and doing something else on the other.

The Pacific is a vast ocean and the islands are scattered over almost one-third of the surface of the earth. Such a scattered nature presents not only communication problems to island people but also hampers coordination. Then there are also the difficulties presented by the 1200 or so different languages of the region, not to mention the English, French, and Spanish that Pacific peoples have to learn in order to communicate with each other. Only a handful of Pacific countries have internet facilities, and some of them have only just installed facsimile connections. They rely very heavily on airmail services, which are often very slow. The telephone facilities mostly exist but then tariffs are usually very high. Airline services in many islands are either unreliable or the schedules are such that a two-day meeting can involve participants in five to seven days away from work. In addition, the costs of accommodation in many of the Pacific islands are high and therefore the idea of rotating collaborative meetings is very much restricted to one or two venues.

In addition, innovative programs such as *Vaka Moana* cannot expect much help from small and already overburdened public services. In many countries, one person has to carry responsibilities for two or more regional activities. For example, the director of the museum in several of the countries is also the chief adviser to the government on national cultural policies, and carries out all the administrative tasks of both positions. In a four-window organisational structure, this person may have the following policy functions: decision-making; consultation; implementation and evaluation! Then, over and above all these 'national' duties there are also the competing demands of regional organisations. In the culture sector, such demands may come from the quadrennial Pacific Arts Festival, or from regional

participation programs which involve meetings of the heads of cultural agencies, or training programs on aspects of museum or heritage management—and others matters as well.

There were some initial misunderstandings as to the nature of *Vaka Moana*. Many of those who read the brief information flier thought that it was only concerned with canoes and the sea, and thus of no direct interest them. More than this, many of them were either too shy to request more information or else they were too busy with their routine duties to try to understand this new idea of addressing development from its cultural dimension. Even within the circle of those who employed in 'culture' (culture administrators, museum managers, cultural centre managers) there were those who saw this new concept as a threat to the institutions under their control. Why should they be interested in activities that might be seen as money-making activities? After all these are not supposed to be the functions of their institutions. Their respective states are responsible for providing them with annual grants to run their affairs. Even within the culture institutions there was some opposition even though the public funding for their institutions has been dwindling over the years.

The program has also had to face the traditional hard-nosed economists who regard the idea of considering development from cultural dimensions as so much grandiloquent academic hanky-panky rather than a practical economic reality. It was also claimed that *Vaka Moana* was too ambitious. For example, many potential donors, the World Bank included, have heavily criticised the traditional land tenure system of Papua New Guinea. What such people tend to forget is that their notion of development is based on the belief that when a nation becomes materially rich, its people all have a high standard of living, but even in the rich OECD countries, and particularly in their cities, we find that there is an increasing proportion of their populations that are either dispossessed or excluded from the mainstream activities of their societies. The second problem is that investors generally want quick returns on their investment, and will go to great lengths to achieve them. Many potential donors to *Vaka Moana* were put off by the fact that they could see no direct pay-offs for themselves.

The wider Pacific values about the use of natural resources need to be taken into account with regard to land and land tenure systems in the Pacific. There are merits in some of these values. For example the harvest of oysters that grow on mangrove roots is regarded as an

inferior 'second rate' practice by anyone on the Aroma Coast of Marshall Lagoon District, Central Province in Papua New Guinea. Instead, in particular among the male population, they encourage fishing at the reefs near the open sea, saying that this is what 'true fisherman' do. When one seriously examines this traditional value system, there are obvious scientific merits in encouraging the people not to harvest oysters from the roots of mangrove trees. In most circumstances, the roots would be cut, as an easier task than carefully extracting the oysters, and the damage inflicted on the trees would lead to environmental degradation. Giving in to the commercial demands of the consumer society in this way would interrupt the life cycle of fish breeding and lead to the depletion of the source of sustainable supply of fish, which is the local people's daily protein source.

There are many traditional values, throughout the Pacific, which the indigenous people have come to espouse on the basis of centuries of practical observations on the interactions between themselves and the natural world. The results of these observations have become accepted as an integral part of their daily living. In short, the basis for sustainable development is a holistic approach to the relationship between nature and man. This is a common thread running through Pacific belief systems. For example, when Foua Toloa conducted his research into the traditional marine management practices of Tokelau (funded by the *Vaka Moana* program) he found that to be a good and reputable fisherman there, one needed to be knowledgeable in natural sciences, astronomy, marine biology, and seasonal changes, as well as social, political, economic and cultural matters. This situation is in marked contrast to that in industrialised societies where universities encourage and promote specialisation and the compartmentalisation of knowledge.

This is to give an illustration of the fact that any attempts to 'tailor-make' developmental packages elsewhere and impose them here, will not work. Therefore it calls on higher learning institutions to re-think and re-design their courses of studies to have broad-based training programs and develop thinkers rather than emulating thinkers.

By the same token it may be worth mentioning the introduction of the so-called value-added goods and services tax to a number of Pacific island countries. This policy may work in countries where about 95 per cent of the working population is in the formal sector. In such situations one can argue that the consumers should pay taxes on

what they consume, and that may be one way of penalising excessive consumerism. However, in many Pacific island nations only a very small proportion (around 15 to 25 per cent) of the working population is in the modern sector. This sector has been paying income tax to support the state and its services. Now it is also paying value-added goods and services tax. In practice this small sector has been milked yet again to contribute to the consolidated revenue.

These are some of the not so obvious aspects of the Pacific Island societies. To these it may be added that there are still strong kinship systems in the Pacific that work as a social security net for the unemployed, retirees and old-age care. Any 'development' must be framed from within Pacific island cultural dimensions if these developments are to remain viable.

## Conceptual development

One of the original aims of the *Vaka Moana* program was to promote an understanding among Pacific peoples of their common heritage and unique accomplishments. The intention was to accomplish this through studies of history and migrations which would be published for use in schools and other educational institutions in the region. The aims were in fact very similar to those of the leaders in the late 1960s when they requested the South Pacific Commission to consider the establishment of a regional gathering in which their cultural identities as Pacific Islanders were recognised and promoted. The response to this was the establishment of the South Pacific Festival of Arts, the first of which was held in Suva in 1972. Like all organisations, it grew, changed and adjusted to the changing circumstances of the Pacific. The South Pacific Festival of Arts is no longer called by its original name. The name is now the Pacific Festival of Arts and it is governed by the Council of Pacific Arts and managed by a board.

The *Vaka Moana* program has evolved in a somewhat similar way, with each of its separate projects and activities being allowed to adjust to circumstances and assume a life of its own. The project on traditional marine management may be taken as a case in point. The project drew some criticism on the grounds that it was not preceded by a proper academic research plan, and that the research itself was done not by an ethnographer, but by a marine biologist. However, traditional knowledge in Tokelau is shared only among family members, and the project managers took the view that the validity of the project's findings in this case could be assessed only by the members

of the society concerned. A satisfactory assessment was duly made in this way using the local kinship system before the results were passed to a team of technical experts to decide how the knowledge might be used, while giving due recognition to the owners. This method of operation was preferred because in many cases foreign researchers were, and still are, given either incomplete or inaccurate information. The consequences have been misrepresentations of factual information at the local level.

In his unpublished research, Foua Toloa, himself a Tokelauan, observed that the practice of traditional marine management is only an aspect of a whole body of knowledge that one must master before the status of master fisherman is earned. Such knowledge includes a wide range of subjects: reef structure (inshore, reef fringe, open sea etc); seasonal changes; traditional lunar calendar; land animal and plants behaviour; celestial knowledge; economic and political structure of Tokelau society. This may give the impression that Tokelau demands that a fisherman be 'jack of all trades and master of none', but the issue is really one of specialised and partial education versus general education—general with the view of understanding the total system before practicing a particular sector of the whole body of related knowledge.

A similar approach has also been made in regards to the *vaka* (Youth to Youth Health Canoes) project that was established at Marshall Islands in 1996. In this project the youths are taught the whole process of canoe-making from the tree to its construction; sailing and navigational skills and canoe maintenance. The tourism industry is also brought in through a hotel offering tourists canoe trips involving the youths.

The framework of a project consists of three principal parts. The first is the expressed need of the local people themselves as a group: they must make a decision on a project or activity that they know they are able to carry out within their existing system. Second, the project should be designed to ensure that it involves a gainful economic activity so as to sustain itself. Third, where change to an existing way of life is envisaged, careful planning is recommended with the view to minimising disruptive elements in the community and internalising development as a growth factor to an adjusted way of life.

The original ideas of the *Vaka Moana* program have continued to guide its project or activity planning. There are, however, added dimensions which are consistent with the philosophical directions of

the World Decade For Cultural Development, wherein Pacific member states choose to explore the option of addressing developments from a cultural dimension. However, this philosophical direction—addressing development from a cultural dimension—remains difficult to grasp because different people have their own perceptions of culture. The word has been used in different ways, and definitions abound in literature. This is why the implementation of the *Vaka Moana* program was initially very difficult. Its location within the culture sector did not help either, since many people (including some from learned educational institutions) immediately assumed either that it was culture specific, because of its location for planning and implementation, or canoe-related because of its title.

Most people in the Pacific probably associate culture with songs and dances, performing arts, painting, books and crafts, but on a different level, culture is also characterised in terms of creativity, intellectual activity and abstract thinking. Still other definitions of culture see it in very wide-ranging terms including behaviour peculiar to *homo sapiens*, and material objects used as an integral part of behaviour. Or again, in much more specific terms, culture consists of language, ideas, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of arts, rituals, ceremonies—and so forth.

Just as individuals differ, so does their culture. For this reason the *Vaka Moana* program did not attempt to come up with tailor-made projects or activities for the people to do. Rather it allowed the creative impulses of people to come up with projects or activities within which they were better able to express themselves. This process encourages and rekindles self esteem, particularly among youth in the contemporary urban situation, where an increasing proportion have been excluded from meaningful participation in the life of their respective societies in the Pacific.

There are two definitions of culture that this writer prefers, the first being that of Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society*, which consists of four jointly applicable meanings

- a general state or habit of mind, having close relations with the idea of human perfection
- a general state of intellectual development in a society as a whole
- the general body of the arts
- a whole way of life, that is material, intellectual and spiritual.

This last meaning is the one that this writer prefers. Culture is, and can be, both general and specific. It is general in the sense that it covers all aspects of human life as it is lived in collective groupings, sharing many common things. But it is also specific because individuals have both peculiar and particular make-ups that may not necessarily be shared in common, and these are as important as things that are shared in a group. This ‘double nature’ makes culture difficult to hem into a rigid definition. Instead, culture ought to be perceived as dynamic, growing and adjusting through time, space, circumstances, and people.

The second preferred definition of culture is the one that laid the foundations of the World Decade for Cultural Development. This was the definition proclaimed at the World Conference on Culture in 1982. It adds a further dimension to Williams (1958), although it corresponds quite closely to the fourth aspect of his meaning.

[Culture] comprises the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

Buried in this declaration is a holistic view of all human activity, involving certain steps of change or development. ‘Change’ and ‘development’ are used interchangeably as both terms involve a new stage or event, or moving from one point to another. To move onto a new stage, it is necessary for the existing stage to provide the foundations for the new. The movement is a continuum, from ‘here’ to ‘next’—not imposed from outside but suggested and adjusted and accommodated endemically.

## Description

*Vaka Moana*, the ‘ocean voyaging vessel’ is an initiative that has come from the peoples of the Pacific. Although it came into being as a direct response to the UN’s World Decade for Cultural Development, now, as the Decade ends, it has emerged as more than just a UNESCO program. It has become a symbol of the collective yearning of the peoples of the Pacific to retrieve, and retain their identity as gifted and unique human beings.

The intention of the planners of the *Vaka Moana* program, however, is that it should address a broader range of activities, including the study of traditional and contemporary cultures, the reinforcement of

traditional links, the conservation of resources, traditions, and economic development based on careful use of the region's resources. Fundamental to the philosophy of both the World Decade for Cultural Development and the *Vaka Moana* program is a commitment to the recognition of cultural, spiritual and social values in the development process.

### **Development objectives**

The intention of the program is that it will lead to

- a better understanding and appreciation of the cultural heritage and diversity of the Pacific peoples
- the development of cultures and attitudes which build on that heritage while taking advantage of contemporary technologies and opportunities
- a greater understanding of, and tolerance for, the values, practices and attitudes of others.

### **Operational goals**

The *Vaka Moana* program has the following operational goals

- the reinforcement of links between Pacific peoples, the principal resource, through a better knowledge of their common historical links and dependence on both the ocean and land
- the promotion and dissemination of all forms of knowledge, both traditional and scientific, concerning the sea and the land resources
- the conservation, management and appropriate use of these resources for the benefit of the peoples of the region
- the involvement of all peoples of the various island countries of the Pacific, including those from non-independent countries
- the preservation of their individual and as well as collective identities as the people of the Pacific.

### **Outcomes**

- Craft revival
- Culturally relevant education programs
- Revival of *vaka* building and sailing skills including the teaching of traditional celestial navigational skills

- Strengthened language and oral traditions
- Promotion of art and craft industry in new markets
- Community fulfilment
- Increased international awareness of Pacific cultures
- Better records of cultural knowledge.

### **Central themes**

- Peopling of the Pacific
- Linguistics, archaeology, anthropology
- Migrations
- Trade routes
- Re-establishing links.

### **Culture and tourism**

- Ecotourism
- Marketing and promotion of the cultural tourism.

### **Culture and Science**

- Marine resources
- Medicine
- Technology.

### **Contemporary Pacific societies**

- Traditional and contemporary
- Economics
- Political and other structures
- Cultural pluralism
- Law and society
- Communications
- Religion.

### **Culture and education**

- Archives
- Museums
- Libraries
- Mother tongues
- Cultural Centres
- Craft techniques

- Oral history and traditions
- Arts education
- Heritage sites.

### **Culture and environment**

- Land and sea uses
- Belief systems
- Recording of traditional land and sea resources management.

### **Resources**

Funding is being sought from various sources, to be used for activities under the *Vaka Moana* program within the following categories

- Research and publications
- Education and training
- Cultural events
- Conferences, seminars and workshops.

### **References**

Williams, R., 1958. *Culture and Society, 1780–1950*, Harper and Row, New York.