5 Debunking Pacific utopias

Chief Roi Mata’s Domain and the re-imagining of people and place in Vanuatu

Joseph M. Cheer, Keir J. Reeves and Jennifer H. Laing

Introduction

The view of Pacific island countries (PICs) as paradise has persisted since the arrival of Europeans over two centuries ago (Daws, 1980; Connell, 2003). Juxtaposed against utopian ideals is the reality that island countries in the region labour under a multiplicity of serious threats including climate change, economic vulnerability, political upheaval and persistent underdevelopment. Yet the paradise narrative endures in the imaginings of people and place, most notably through tourism destination marketing that constructs and manipulates place image. Associated with this has been the attendant fetishising of islanders as stereotypical noble or ignoble savages (Campbell, 1980; Fry, 1996), or their infantilisation as congenial, subaltern hosts, reinforcing notions of Pacific island communities as a latter-day Shangri-La in the Pacific (Douglas, 1997). In stark contrast, PIC prehistory suggests that islanders had enormous resilience, ingenuity, fierce warrior cultures and a reputation as seafarers of enormous competence and sophistication – attributes far removed from the docile and indigent exemplifications of recent times.

Crocombe (2001) and Denoon et al. (1997) allude to the paradoxical nature of PIC conceptualisations, highlighting that in fact pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial historiography suggests that islanders have always endured a vexed, fickle and challenging space. For example, the practice of cannibalism and the waging of inter-island warfare are thought to have been common prior to the arrival of Europeans and the ensuing Christian missions (Matsuda, 2012; Oliver 1989). This was followed by a prolonged period of colonial dominance and native subjugation, where indigenous islander cultures and symbols were decried as antithetical to Christianity and civilisation (Campbell, 1989). The independence era of the 1960s to the 1980s ensued, promising self-determination and emancipation (Denoon, 1997). Yet decades later, islanders face precarious futures – beset by natural and man-made encumbrances (Crocombe, 2001; Connell, 2010). As Samoan scholar Sina Va’ai (2005) argued, so-called ‘Pacific utopias’ are dissonant and far removed from the realities of contemporary island life.
This chapter adopts Va’ai’s stance and explores the paradox of the imaginings of people and place, using the case study of Chief Roi Mata’s Domain (CRMD) (Figures 5.1 and 5.2) – Vanuatu’s only United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, designated a ‘continuing cultural landscape’ (Wilson, Ballard and Kalotiti, 2011: 5). Vanuatu’s historiography is imbued with themes of hurricanes, sorcery, warfare and cannibalism (Spriggs, 1986) and the mythology of CRMD is an archetypal narrative of the harsh and distinctive Melanesian socialities predating the arrival of Europeans. CRMD is a mass burial site for the legendary Chief Roi Mata and his people, and symbolic of a dark and disturbing side to the country’s past (Garanger, 1982). CRMD is examined in this chapter to illustrate how the utilisation of such cultural heritage can serve to replace hackneyed and patronising imaginings of people and place with a more reflective understanding of a sophisticated and nuanced historical and extant milieu. This chapter sets out to achieve this by connecting dark tourism and archaeotourism, as reflected in CRMD, to the construction of people and place conceptions. This argument complements Trau’s (2012b: 4) assertion that:

Given that it is the local Indigenous community – and not the state – that is primarily responsible for World Heritage in Vanuatu, it is vital that this glocalised brand of CRMD’s Wol Heritij (with all of its complexity, fluidity and unpredictability) is seriously recognized and adequately supported.

The invocation of CRMD is used to argue that an urgent re-imagining of PICs and islanders is pressing if they are to be accurately portrayed within the wider global gaze. In scholarly tourism parlance, CRMD aligns with what is defined as dark tourism – tourism that leverages aspects of death and disaster (Lennon and Foley, 2000). CRMD is also a rare case of archaeotourism at work in PICs – visitation to sites of archaeological value (Giraudo and Porter, 2010). Together, dark tourism and archaeotourism mechanisms, as exemplified in CRMD, are arguably the antithesis of contemporary PIC imaginings, and may serve to moderate tourist expectations and in turn lead to a more productive and fulfilling exchange between ni-Vanuatu (indigenous people of Vanuatu) and their guests. Thus, collectively, they may well enforce more expansive and erudite conceptions of people and place.

Context: New Hebrides to Vanuatu

The island nation that makes up the Republic of Vanuatu is a curiosity given that it holds the unique distinction of being the only PIC that was subject to dual colonial powers – the condominium of France and Britain. The condominium was formerly known as the New Hebrides or Nouvelles Hebrides until it gained political independence in 1980. For the most part, Vanuatu’s
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Figure 5.1 CRMD in relation to Vanuatu
Source: Republic of Vanuatu, 2007

Figure 5.2 CRMD signage for proposed World Heritage listing
Source: Photo by Cheer, 2008
location in the south-west Pacific and its close proximity to Australia has been beneficial, enabling the countries to develop close trading and diplomatic ties. Tourism has become a cornerstone of the country’s economy, with sector activity predominantly limited to leisure tourism. Vanuatu’s natural landscapes have arguably been its biggest draw for visitors to the country (Figure 5.3). However, a renewed emphasis by tourism authorities to showcase its unique cultural heritage for tourism development has started to take place. This heritage includes the inimitable land diving or naghol in the southern area of Pentecost Island, the John Frumm and Prince Philip cargo cults on the island of Tanna, Second World War heritage sites and the wreckage of the SS Coolidge on Espiritu Santo, and the historic cannibal sites and caves on Malekula island.

Vanuatu is typical of small island developing states (SIDS) in the region in that its population is widely dispersed with the greater majority considered to be residing in rural and outer island locations. The country’s economy labours under the weight of a narrow set of exploitable sectors including tourism, fisheries, copra and offshore banking. In the main, Vanuatu is considered a less developed country, meaning that it is subject to underdevelopment, poverty and its vulnerability to internal and external economic and climate-related shocks is high. Vanuatu’s political milieu is notoriously fickle and volatile with effective governance considered its major impediment to economic growth and development.
Chief Roi Mata’s Domain: semiotics, masculinities and place making

Chief Roi Mata’s Domain is associated with the life and death of the last holder of the title Paramount Chief, or Roi Mata, who lived around 1600 AD (Garanger, 1982). CRMD was listed as UNESCO Site 1280 and officially ratified in 2008 after its initial tentative listing in 2004 (Garanger, 1982). It is made up of sites on Efate and Lelepa Island, the whole of Artok Island and the body of water that separates them. The tiny islands of Lelepa and Artok are located off the north-west coast of Efate (Figure 5.4). These three sites are recognised as part of the last Roi Mata’s domain as Paramount Chief of Efate and the surrounding locale, as imbued in collective memory and substantiated through the path-finding archaeological works of Jose Garanger. Garanger’s excavations commenced in 1967, whereupon he uncovered the burial site of men, women and children – all assumed to be part of the last Roi Mata’s familial and domestic entourage.

Wilson, Ballard and Kalotiti (2011: 6) point out that ‘Roi Mata appears to have been one of the more senior titles associated with the arrival on Efate of new chiefs and a system of “court” positions between about 800–1000 AD. The legendary Roi Mata thus probably represents the conflation of several

![Figure 5.4 Boundaries of World Heritage property and buffer zone of CRMD](Source: Republic of Vanuatu, 2007)
centuries of deeds associated with successive holders of the Roi Mata title’. Garanger (1982) expounds that Chief Roi Mata had a profound impact on islander sociality and that his legacy endures in the present day as a talisman for the moral values he advocated, including the social reforms central to conflict resolution and the cessation of inter-tribal warfare. According to Chief David Richard, patriarch of the Malvatumaui (National Council of Custom Chiefs of the Republic of Vanuatu), the Roi Mata legend is steeped in the sanctity of traditional culture and inextricably linked to ancestor veneration (Richard, 2011).

In adding to the Roi Mata legend, Garanger (1982: 15) wilfully conflates the past with the present, arguing that ‘there is great unease in these Melanesian Islands where the past was brutally thrust aside and where the present is marking time between the wish to oppose and the attempt to adapt to religious ideas, principles of authority and foreign socioeconomic systems’. Garanger’s sentiments argue that the spirit of Roi Mata was also imbued in the struggle for independence and autonomy, and is now observable in the drive for economic development. As well as the immense folkloric semiotics that permeate CRMD at a local level, nationally this spirit bolsters the country’s cultural heritage and sense of pride, given that Roi Mata is the archetypal patriarchal figure – so dominant in local socialities – inspiring masculinity and Melanesian warrior pride. However, CRMD today represents much more, particularly for its custodian communities; it has the potential to serve as a vital mechanism for livelihood diversification and cash income.

**Dark tourism: re-imagining and interpreting people and place**

The polar opposite to the tourism product currently being promoted in connection to Vanuatu, both in a philosophical and marketing sense, is the dark tourism site. This term might ‘allude to the “dark deeds” (e.g. genocide, assassination, murder, war) that animate such sites and the “dark mood” or morose tones such events might invite’ (Bowman and Pezzullo, 2009: 188). The CRMD site is arguably an example of dark tourism and represents a complex and problematic site to interpret and promote to tourists, in comparison to the more traditional ‘sun, sea and sand’ holiday. Nevertheless, its potential to forge a re-imagining of people and place in Vanuatu is profound given the muscular pervasiveness of Roi Mata folklore.

Dark tourism products can be categorised using the typology developed by Stone (2006). He notes seven types of dark tourism suppliers: dark fun factories, dark exhibitions, dark dungeons, dark resting places, dark shrines, dark conflict sites (connected with wars and battlefields), and dark camps of genocide. This typology focuses on what is being presented to tourists, rather than being based on visitor perceptions of a site or their motivations to visit it (Biran, Poria and Oren, 2011; Stone, 2006). These products may be multi-layered (Stone, 2006) and thus may cross over or combine several categories. CRMD might be conceptualised as a dark resting place (although it is not a
formal cemetery) as it marks the graves of over 50 men and women along with the remains of Chief Roi Mata. It might also be labelled a ‘dark camp of genocide’, given that many of the family and court members were buried alive with the Chief and it is not clear whether all the deaths were voluntary.

CRMD therefore falls at the darker end of the dark tourism spectrum (Stone, 2006), in that it is a site of death and suffering, rather than merely associated with these things, and its presentation for tourism is oriented towards education rather than entertainment. This is a place of deep spirituality and sober contemplation, with a highly authentic product and location. There is little tourism infrastructure at present and thus a lack of commodification, other than the presence of a local guide. In terms of Sharpley’s (2005) ‘continuum of purpose’, this site might also be categorised as a form of grey tourism supply, in that the site can be experienced in a variety of ways, both for its connection with death but also as a place of contemplation, which is replete with intangible heritage.

While a long period of time has elapsed since the occurrence of the event (the deaths occurred about 1600 AD; see Wilson, 2006), this has not diminished the sense of immediacy with respect to what happened. As Wilson (2006: 36) notes, ‘Many members of the local community are reluctant to visit Fels Cave, for fear of the power of Roi Mata and also the spirit beings that are currently said to inhabit the place’. Thus, Lennon and Foley’s (2000) view that dark tourism only relates to events that have occurred within the lifetime or living memory of visitors does not apply in this instance. Their conceptualisation of dark tourism as a postmodern phenomenon disregards the handing down of narratives in traditional cultures, which can avoid ‘chronological distance’ and keep the sense of darkness alive across successive generations.

In the context of CRMD, these legends resulted in the site being declared tabu, or forbidden. While the stories are told less frequently today, there are strident moves by the Malvatumaui to revive this history (Wilson, 2006). Those who visit CRMD (locals as well as tourists) are either aware or told of the background to and significance of the site. The sacred banyan tree at Mwalasayen is supposed to embody the ‘chieflly power’ of Roi Mata, and it is said that ‘those who venture near the tree speak softly, and many will not come within 15 metres of its base’. This supports Seaton’s (1996) contention that a ‘thanatoptic tradition’, exemplified by a fascination with places of death and suffering, can be traced back far beyond the current era. Stone and Sharpley (2008) note that this tradition may be a way of dealing with our own mortality and making sense of death, which contributes to our health and well-being. In this way, dark tourism might have more to do with ‘life and the living, rather than the dead and dying’ (Stone and Sharpley, 2008: 590).

Visits to sites such as CRMD are more than likely understood as a form of heritage tourism, albeit contested or dissonant in nature (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). In the case of CRMD, what is being developed for tourism appears to be a ‘profound heritage experience’ (Biran, Poria and Oren, 2011: 91).
822). Those who visit CRMD might not be interested in its connection with
death, but instead simply see it as an important historical site that represents
some of the complex cultural heritage of Vanuatu and is emblematic of similar
contexts in PICs. Interpretation must therefore tread a careful path
between the macabre elements of the story and a more nuanced approach,
where this heritage is framed in terms of ni-Vanuatu kastom (a term in
Bislama, the home-grown pidgin language of Vanuatu, analogous with Tok
Pisin in Papua New Guinea connoting the abiding framework of custom and
tradition) and identity, with visitors being educated and enriched by the
experience. The narrative of suffering provides one of the many layers of this
cultural landscape, but it is not the only one that needs to be or indeed can be
presented to tourists.

Archaeotourism: empowering and re-imagining people and place

The significance of archaeotourism in enabling what Giraudo and Porter
(2010: 7) regard as ‘authentic encounters with the past’ is a departure from
the ubiquity of the reproduction of culture seen in kastom villages (replicas of
traditional villages) so prevalent in Vanuatu. Giraudo and Porter argue that
archaeotourism sites can be linked to economic development as sites of cul-
tural consumption and indigenous enterprise in developing countries. The
notion of archaeological sites as a mechanism for archaeotourism-led devel-
opment is also argued by Babalola and Ajekigbe (2007) to have a duality of
purpose at a local level: economic and socio-cultural enrichment.

In 2006, the World Heritage Tourism Committee (WHTC), pertaining to
custodian groups of CRMD, drafted an inaugural strategy deliberately seek-
ing to leverage its livelihood’s potential. The Cultural Tourism Strategy for
Chief Roi Mata’s Domain, arguably an archaeotourism initiative, explicitly
includes ‘starting a successful and profitable local community business’ as a
key objective (Greig, 2006: 4). In recognition of the site’s intrinsic vulner-
ability, especially in light of its World Heritage listing and impending devel-
opment for tourism, a Plan of Management for Chief Roi Mata’s Domain was
finalised, ‘to provide management guidelines for the individuals responsible’
(Wilson, 2006: 6). Moves for the development of CRMD are a growing
response to the need for cash incomes at the grassroots (Wilson, Ballard and
Kalotiti, 2011), where subsistence living has always predominated.

Recent pioneering analysis of CRMD by Adam Trau (2012b) suggests that
enhancing the capacity for bottom-up local forces to preside over the pre-
sentation and operations of CRMD is critical if such heritage is to endure
and provide financial recompense and, by implication, socio-cultural
empowerment at a local level. By extension, Trau (2012a) draws a link
between tourism-centred development and poverty alleviation for the tradi-
tional custodians of CRMD. The terms ‘glocalisation’ and ‘grassroots global-
isation’ are conflated by Trau (2012b: 4) to draw attention to the tensions
inherent when ‘local kastom and global commerce’ are necessarily conjoined.
Trau (2012b: 13) makes the point that ‘financial and regulatory scaffolding for glocalised business models such as Roi Mata Cultural Tours must be engineered if the benefits of tourism are to be realised by rural ni-Vanuatu communities’.

The socio-cultural and political empowerment that Babalola and Ajekigbe (2007) maintain is a critical component of archaeotourism is also acknowledged by Garanger (1982) with regards to CRMD. Garanger (1982: 15) argues that in the case of Vanuatu, ‘the beginning of the historical period hardly more than a century and a half was often so painful that the wounds of the first traumas are not all healed despite the efforts of some men of calibre, missionaries, colonists or administrators, anxious to maintain a balance between the frequently opposed forces, while at the same time giving the people the economic and cultural benefits of our society’. In a sense, Garanger makes the case that the semiotics and masculinities that underpin the Roi Mata legend may well be critical in nation building and identity formation for ni-Vanuatus and, if this is so, CRMD can meet the dual purpose (Babalola and Ajekigbe, 2007) of providing for both economic and socio-cultural and political strengthening.

Conclusions

Like most, if not all, PICs, the utopian thematic predominates place making in Vanuatu. CRMD is a counter-discourse to this and is arguably an example of dark tourism (defined broadly as tourism predicated on dissonant heritage), which by its very nature represents a complex and problematic site to interpret and promote to tourists in comparison to the more traditional ‘sun, sea and sand’ holiday. At another level CRMD is a demonstration of layered and deep cultural heritage, symbolic of a rich past to which local tourism gives little attention. In concert with dark tourism, the potential for archaeotourism has been neglected hitherto in Vanuatu. A second counter-discourse to utopian imaginings is the mobilisation of archaeotourism: as Babalola and Ajekigbe (2007: 240) argue, ‘the development and improvement of tourism should look towards developing archaeological recourses to cater for the participation of local population in the tourism industry to curb the influx of youths to the urban centres’. Babalola and Ajekigbe also point to archaeotourism as a means of bolstering national pride, cultural heritage revival and self-sufficiency. Similarly, as Trau (2012a) argues, here lies the potential for CRMD to enhance economic, socio-cultural and political empowerment.

What is currently being offered to tourists is low-key and low-impact; there are no gift shops selling souvenir T-shirts (Strange and Kempa, 2003). Keeping tours of the site small-scale and respectful will maintain not only the perceived authenticity of the site, but also the ‘darker’ image. This provides atmosphere and a sense of place, but also a means by which to provide a more rounded and multifaceted picture of Vanuatu as a nation, including its history and likely future. As Bowman and Pezzullo (2009: 194) observe,
‘Death is not merely an event in our past’. While hyping up the narrative may make it more marketable (Strange and Kempa, 2003; Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996), it might also be the means of destroying the intrinsic value of the site.

Part of CRMD’s importance as a narrative lies in its ability to change the way the landscape is read by visitors. Rather than understanding the site simply as an undisturbed utopia with pristine and palm-fringed beaches, it takes on a more disturbing and disquieting image, as well as sacred or spiritual qualities. The interpretation of CRMD that tells the unsettling story of the site might lead into a more complex presentation of local history, with implications for shaping people’s place identity. According to Wilson (2006: 29), ‘Many ni-Vanuatu now identify the male figure in Vanuatu’s coat of arms as Roi Mata, in his new guise as a national culture hero’. Unlike American dark tourism sites such as Alcatraz Island or the site of the shooting of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, there are no blockbuster films or books that have placed the Roi Mata story on the ‘mental map’ of tourists (Strange and Kempa, 2003). As most international visitors will not have heard about the site, and may have no ‘personal attachment’ or connection to it (Biran, Poria and Oren, 2011), an opportunity is provided to present the narrative without overlays of over-simplification, prejudice, bias or hyperbole. Instead, unlike Evergreen Tours’ Mele Cascades attraction (a nature-based tourism product just outside the capital, Port Vila), visiting the inscribed section of Roi Mata’s site involves a loosely guided, technically oriented heritage experience that takes place against a backdrop of dramatic tropical maritime beauty. Such an approach abides by what Trau (2012a: 4) argues are ‘local reconfigurations of tourism that better represent and utilise kastom’.

Interpretation must therefore tread a careful path between the macabre elements of the story and a more nuanced approach where this heritage is framed in terms of ni-Vanuatu cultural heritage and identity, so that visitors become privy to a more sophisticated and enriching experience. Part of its importance as a narrative for people and place making lies in its ability to change the way the cultural landscape is read by visitors. Rather than understanding the site simply as an undisturbed piece of ‘paradise’, visitors can be encouraged to interpret it as a more nuanced, thought-provoking and disquieting image, which would include recognition of its sacred or spiritual qualities. Logan and Reeves’s (2008: 2) assertions that ‘an effective management plan for such places must be based on an analysis of the way in which such heritage sites are said to be significant and remembered’, is a salient reminder to ensure that optimum participation of custodian groups or traditional owners are central to initiatives focused on the protection, presentation and commercialisation of such sites.

The duality of reconceptualising people and place through dark tourism and archaeotourism using CRMD is rare in PIC contexts. Thus, the case to invoke cultural heritage such as CRMD holds a strong position. Va’ai (2005: 2) argues that debunking Pacific utopias is an overdue undertaking and the
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‘quest by Pacific islanders for new postcolonial cultural identities and liberalisation from the past’ ought to be sustained. In a sense, Va’ai is advocating that islander conceptualisations should be based on their cultural and historical terms, no longer couched in exogenous expressions developed in the colonial past and perpetuated in the present. Both dark tourism and archeotourism may potentially satisfy Va’ai’s calls and in so doing work towards what Trau (2012b) argues is the need for more nuanced and mutually beneficial ‘global-local interactions’. Trau (2012b: 9) promotes the notion of ‘supreme power and agency of locality’ advocating that ‘it is vital that such naturally non-constant, unpredictable, unceasing, even occasionally unstable, reconfigurations of glocality be recognised, supported and sustained’. If indeed the calls of both Va’ai and Trau are to be heeded, heritage such as CRMD must serve a multiplicity of purposes: strengthening the articulation of customary cultural heritage, aiding livelihood diversification and making way for a more empowering and reverential invocation of islander imaginings.

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