COUNTDOWN TO OUR FUTURE

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The Pacific’s cultural genocide
By Cresantia Koya-Vaka’uta

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Fiji’s fourth Constitution since independence 43 years ago has remade this country’s political landscape. Aiming to rebuild the foundations of Fiji, Prime Minister Commodore Voreq Bainimarama and his chief legal adviser Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum have fashioned a document they hope will end the coup culture. Key to this, they say, is a new electoral system based on the one-person, one-vote concept, along with the guarantee of socio-economic rights. We provide a critique of sections of the Constitution and what the new electoral system will look like.

All booked These Nasavusavu Secondary School students look delighted to meet the author of the 2013 Constitution, Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum.

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October 2013
The Pacific’s cultural genocide

Some Pacific islanders may not see the value of traditional knowledge in the coming globalised technological age, but the debate to protect and preserve indigenous ownership is far from over.

Dressing down: Narrative design, audiovisuals, print, TV etc make the story of Natasia Lepa’s new animated film, *Pilam*, tailored for a wide theatrical audience.

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ndigenous communities around the world are facing increasing victimisation and commodification of traditional knowledge in the competitive global economy. This is leading to the loss of cultural diversity, as well as cultural appropriation.

It is not surprising that there is a growing fear that cultural loss is accelerating, exacerbated by new business models which seek to exploit and commodify cultural symbols. Within the cultural context, these symbols represent the collective knowledge base that is meant to be accessed by all who have the right to use and understand these symbols.

Article 7 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples begins with the statement: “Indigenous peoples have the collective and individual right to be subjected to no discrimination and to protection of their cultural, economic and social development.”

These problems exist at the local level, where cultural symbols are not protected from being misused.

Unwashed questions

Concerns arose among those who were aware of the lack of protection mechanisms and legislation in place to protect traditional knowledge. In this specific case, the indigenous producers of Pilam (Bunin) who used these designs and their derivatives in their work, traded the name of ‘new’ designs, and their derivatives for all ‘new’ designs.

These changes would mean that Pacific island communities could not now use traditional designs to express their cultural heritage and protect their livelihoods and cultural practices of indigenous peoples.

The solution is not a stand-alone example. The well-known artist, Tessa Chelton (Kiwanuka), whose work is based on traditional designs, was recently accused by Fijian artists of using their designs without permission.

She attempted to trademark the phrase “D652 de los Muertos” (Day of the Dead) in anticipation of an upcoming animation originally named *The Untold Fijian Movie About Dia de los Muertos*. The movie giant attempted to protect the title of the film as well as all of its affiliated merchandise, but public outcry from the Mexican community prevented this move. The movie was also affected by the use of the name of a well-known Fijian community.

In conclusion, let us not forget that the use of traditional designs is an important aspect of cultural heritage, and that the protection of these symbols is a right that should be respected by all.

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Whose masks? In January, Fii Airius applied to be reissued the trademark owner of 15 mask materials used in its corporate branding. The move caused an uproar and Fii Airius was forced to suspend the application. Fii Airius has not announced yet if the application was successful.

Cultural motifs should never be seen as mere decorative designs but rather as culturally significant markers of knowledge and identity. We must never lose sight of the importance of cultural expression. They connect us to place and provide the foundation of cultural identity. They are a language that tells itself, filled with meaning and spirituality that tells us to each other within and between communities and so our natural heritage - the land to which we are connected.

Many of these designs are found in a range of cultural expression such as tattooing, weaving, woodcarving, carving and pottery. The earliest forms of these designs are actually found in Lapita culture across the Pacific. I particularly love the good fortune to see a wide range of these designs displayed at the Tangata National Cultural Centre last year.

Of course, commercialisation and misrepresentation of Pacific culture is not new. Postcards from the early 19th century are a testament to this, depicting warriors from the region in Western Renaissance style poses. Typically, these images depict these tribesmen warriors draped in bark cloth or fabrics with a flower behind the ear. For many outsiders, these images represented the lapack paradise of free love that challenged their conservative social standards at that time. I have yet to see postcards from the early 20th century that showed women or even women. This is the actual reality of Pacific life.

A realistic view of the Polynesian tattoo is far from dead. This year, Nicole Scherringer, a former Pussy Love, was photographed for a culture table book with the Mariri tattoos (tattooing) inked on her back and thighs. That image created an online debate in which some saw it as a cultural appropriation, while others found it even more recognisable than a specific tattooed traditional Mariri symbol is in this way. The legacy of protection. Why should we protect cultural expression? These ownership rights are held outside of the indigenous community, the new legal owner can demand the right to use or reproduce any aspect of this information that is now ‘their property’. This would mean that one indigenous community could use a tattoo from the other community without any prior permission and it could be used in their cultural heritage.

In the past two years, two critical policy guidelines have been endorsed by Pacific Island Forum (2010) and the Pacific Cultural Strategy (2010). These policy frameworks emphasise the importance of cultural rights to sustainable development in the islands and for the cultural well-being and livelihoods of Pacific peoples.

Today’s community, no matter how well written or good the intentions are, do not bring about change. To think that these guidelines cannot be utilised in our current social and economic standards. On 15 June this year, the UN General Assembly issued a new resolution, announcing its post-2015 development agenda as the follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals. This statement underscores the importance of our vulnerable islands communities. The success of this resolution is important as it lays the foundation for our future development.

The new resolution does not always follow through with the promise to reduce indigenous knowledge. This is a concern that is shared by indigenous communities and the need to protect their intangibles in a shrinking global market. They are a testament to the fact that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. The goal is not to simply acquire the knowledge of indigenous communities and the need to protect their intangibles in a shrinking global market. The goal is not to simply acquire the knowledge of indigenous communities and the need to protect their intangibles in a shrinking global market.

Cultural expression is the greatest form of mass appeal. It is an attraction and should not be violated. In 1996, Professor John Warkentin, a former Art Professor at the University of the South Pacific, said: “Celebrate culture. Don’t exploit it.”