

Vanuatu Sand-drawings

The paradigmatic shifts of representation

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Assignment Essay

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Statement

“This essay is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor Applied Arts – Visual Degree at the Northland Polytechnic Keri Keri, New Zealand. I declare that the work is my own”.

Signed

Date

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 ABSTRACT.
- 2 INTRODUCTION.
- 3 GEOGRAPHIC NATURE AND HISTORY OF VANUATU.
- 4 TRADITIONAL TRIBAL ART OF VANUATU.
- 5 TRADITIONAL VANUATU SAND-DRAWINGS.
- 6 HOW VANUATU ART HAS EVOLVED TODAY.
- 7 CONCLUSION.
- 8 BIBLIOGRAPHY
- 9 LIST OF FIGURES

1 Abstract

Vanuatu Sand –drawings

In this article I will endeavor to discuss and answer two questions.

Firstly, has the paradigmatic shift of the representation of sand-drawings of Vanuatu affected their meanings and secondly, have provisions been made to keep in place the traditional meanings, for future generations of Vanuatu?

In order to discuss and answer these questions, I will be exploring the history and geographical nature of Vanuatu, what the perception of traditional Vanuatu art is, and how Vanuatu sand–drawings were perceived in Vanuatu society.

In conclusion I will describe where this art form is today, and how it is been used, and recorded for future generations.

2 Introduction

Vanuatu, formerly recognized as the New Hebrides, is a cross-cultural environment engrained with traditional objects and icon graphs. The island nation has been described as a ‘primitive culture’. This a term used by western artists and critics, and meant art created by non-European cultures, which presumably were not as advanced as Western Civilization.

With the influence of the western world in the last thirty years, big changes have come to Vanuatu traditional art. In 1980 Vanuatu gained independence from the Colonial governments of England and France. Also around this period a contemporary art movement was formed by a group of Ni-Vanuatu artists trained in western techniques, the Nawita Association of Contemporary Artists in 1989, Nawita (Octopus). These events, including the introduction of new technology and tourism has had an impact on traditional Vanuatu art.

In this essay, my interest will concentrate on one of these traditional arts - *sand drawings*.

In 2002 and 2003 I recorded and researched the *sand drawings* in Vanuatu, and as an outsider I was surprised and concerned at the lack of recording of this traditional art.

It is the intention of this essay to endeavor to discuss and answer two questions.

Has the paradigmatic shift of the representation of *sand-drawings* of Vanuatu affected their meanings, and have provisions been made to keep in place the traditional meanings for future generations?

To do this I have set out the following chapters to explore these questions.

1. The geographic nature and history of Vanuatu.
2. The peoples of Vanuatu, and the context of traditional tribal art of Vanuatu.
3. The traditional concepts of Vanuatu *sand-drawings*.
4. How contemporary Vanuatu art is perceived today?
5. What provisions are being put in place to preserve Vanuatu *sand- drawing*?

3 The Geographical Nature and History of Vanuatu

To begin the discussion of Vanuatu *sand drawings*, some background and geographic description is in order. Vanuatu, formerly known as the New Hebrides, is a Melanesian culture in the southwest Pacific Ocean in one of the three geographic areas of Oceania, the others being Micronesia and Polynesia. The nation of Vanuatu, consisting of 70 inhabited islands, and is situated 1,000 miles East of Australia, and about the same distance, Northwest of New Zealand. This lush, Tropical group of Volcano Islands is part of the Pacific's active "ring of fire".

Most historians agree that 40,000 years ago Southeast Asian peoples began to migrate through Indonesia, to Papua New Guinea and Australia, and eventually to the island chains east of these landmasses.

The earliest records indicate the Melanesian peoples populated Vanuatu by 1400BC. All this has been updated with the recent discovery of the Teouma Lapita burial site in Port Vila 2005. Dr Stewart Bedford, the archaeologist on the Teouma site¹ indicates that the arrival in Vanuatu was 3,000 years ago by the Lapita people. They had come from distant shores, where there had been a population for 40,000-50,000 years. The Lapita people made finely decorated clay pottery. They brought with them pigs and chickens, setting up villages along the coasts.

The next people to visit but not to stay were fleets of ships from China that took back men and recordings of birds and curiosities from Vanuatu. The first European contact was not until the late sixteenth century when the Portuguese and the Spanish discovered the islands of the Pacific followed by the Dutch.

¹ Dr Stewart Bedford, *Teouma burial site*, www.vanuatuculturecentre.org/vchss/10060720_teouma2006.shtml p1, [May 8].

The author and researcher Philippe Peltier (1984), deputy director of Museographer, at The Muse du Quai, Branly, France made reference of how the first European interest came about in his chapter 'Oceania' of the book 'Primitivism in 20th Century',²

The publication of Renaissance voyages, the advancement of navigation, the enlightenment of sciences, and the theory of terra austral (described and introduced to France by Charles de Brosses as counter balancing the continents of the Northern and Southern Hemispheres) brought about an upsurge in sea voyages. These were mostly scientific exploration, and perhaps to find new resources.

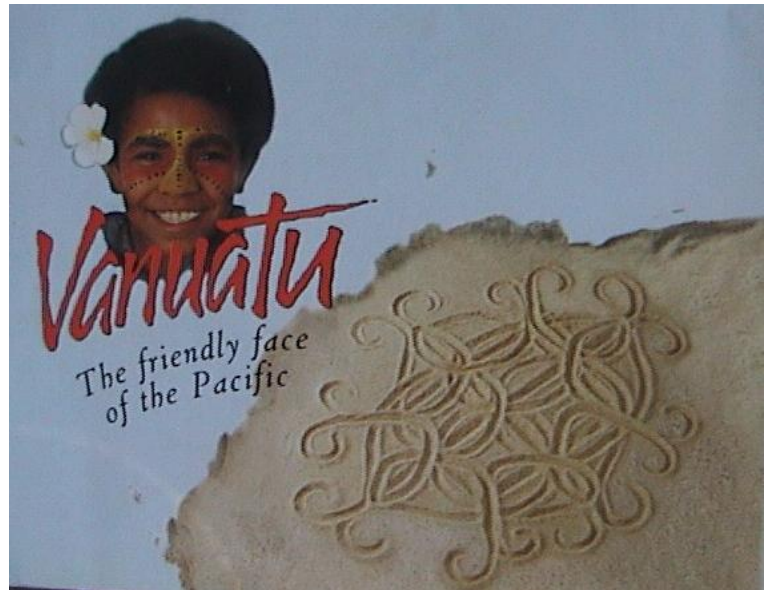
Today nearly 200,000 people live in Vanuatu, mostly Melanesians from many cultures speaking over one hundred languages. Most communication is through the regional pidgin English, 'Bislama', though English and French are the official languages of the country.

Vanuatu came under colonial rule of the combined governments of France and England in 1909, and did not gain independence until 1980. While the majority of islanders of the Pacific have adopted western ways, overall the Ni-Vanuatu have managed to retain a strong sense of their traditional cultural identities, and with the result of independence pushed the desire to retain their languages and cultures.

With the introduction of Christianity being wide spread throughout the islands, it did little to replace traditional beliefs in the spirit world. Some areas refused to convert to Christianity altogether, but with the introduction of modern technology, advertising and Tourism, times are changing, and in some cases, the traditional art.

² Philippe Peltier, *Primitivism in 20th Century*, the museum of modern Art New York, 1984, p.84.

1/ Digital figure Brochure
photo National Vanuatu
Tourism 2004.



4 Traditional Tribal art of Vanuatu.

A straight word for art can hardly be found amongst the 100 indigenous languages of Vanuatu. Much communication is through the regional pidgin, ` **Bislama**`, though English and French are also the official languages of the country. The European concept of art is much too simple for the countries' numerous, profound cultures, as is the European concept of an art piece unlinked to deep ritual experience and spiritual meaning.

What western people call art in Vanuatu is there essentially (but not always). The preserve of the *World of Men* and *The World of Women* the range of expression is vast and varies from culture to culture, thousands of different types of ritual objects can be made from materials such as tree fern, wood, spiders web, vegetable fibre paste feathers plant materials and stone. Each object will have its own special name, purpose and were used in a whole complex of song, music, ritual dance, drumming, body paints, masks, headdresses, and ritual decorations.

One word *kastom* covers not only these objects but also encompasses all aspects of traditional life which lives and has a life of its' own. Many are only made for a short time and then destroyed or go to sleep (etc stored to be to be used again). A variety of spirits were thought to influence every day life.

Spirits were culture heroes whose exploits influenced the way the world was formed. They developed spirits of the dead, of nature, and the supernatural phenomena. The village life was communal with family groups of fifty to two hundred people. Social achievements were open to talent; wealth and personal force to advance through the levels of grade societies these were (sometimes called secret societies) where they then could accumulate political and spiritual power.



2/ Digital figure 2
Pamma Festival 2003
by Michelle Page.

In *The world of Men*, wooden slit drums found on the central and south islands of Vanuatu, particularly on Malekula and Ambrym, were, and are, used by men of high rank. They are also used as another form of communication, beating out signals and dance rhythms. They were usually played by beating on the right of the slit with the trimmed stalk of a coconut leaf. The drums could be heard as far away as several kilometers. The drums sometimes measured 3 to 6 metres and were also used as show pieces of woodcarving. Other Vanuatu art includes masks and head dresses used in ritual dancing and ceremonies as well as pig killing clubs.

3/ Digital Figure 4 taken of a slit drum (Tam tam) Ambrym
2003 by Michelle Page



4/ Digital figure Rom dance Ambrym 2003
By Michelle Page



The Rom Dance performed on the island of Ambrym. Where the participants spend the whole day dancing in Banana leaf costumes with large painted masks. This is a grade taking ceremony in order to go up a rank in their village. At the end of the dance each must kill a pig with a club. Flutes were designed for entertainment or relaxation, or in conjunction telling a story or with the making of a particular sand –drawing.

5/ Digital figure flute players Ambrym
2003 By Michelle Page



The arts came in the form of, by *The World of Women*, weaving in the way of mats, baskets, and pottery. Jean Tarisesei, staff member at the Vanuatu Culture Centre,³ describes below growing up in the fifties in the *World of Women*.

“On my home island Ambae, in the north of Vanuatu, weaving is one of those activities that women grow up with. It’s part of their lives.

When I grew up I saw my mother weaving. I watched her get the pandanus leaves to weave mats. When she goes to get her leaves, because I am interested, I follow her around. There wasn’t any pre-school so that was my school.

That was the same for all girls my age during the 1950’s and 1960’s. We get the pandanus leaves from the tree, bend it slightly, break it into pieces and drown it in water for the night. We put it in the sun for several days. It is white after it has been in the sun we shred it to make it softer and to open the leaves properly. Once the pandanus is flexible you can use anytime. We weave the mats flat on the ground.”

³ Jean Tarisesei *Education guide to the exhibition* <http://www.arts.anu.edu.au/arcworld/vks/edguid.htm> [May15]

6/ Digital figure pandanus money
mat or gift from Amabae
2003 by Michelle Page



The mats were important in Vanuatu society, where they were used as items of exchange as there was no currency, so they traded the mats. Some mats were used as *kastom* ceremonies and dancing. These were tabu. This meant they were only to be used in secret ceremonies, which was called grade taking. Grade taking mats were different than money mats. They are small and the patterns are more important. In grade taking mats, you had to pay for the rights to use the patterns. When you wore one of them it indicated that you had done certain things in *kastom* ceremonies. The mats were also used as gifts for weddings. The mats are significant symbolic and ritual objects, and have been described as the `soul of the people` Today mats dominate exchanges, for example, as many as 1500 mats could be exchanged at weddings.

7/ Digital figure pandanus mats Ambae 2003 by Michelle Page



8/ Digital figure Wedding Lamén Island Epi 2003 By Michelle Page



9/ Digital figure pandanus mats displayed Lamén Bay Epi 2002 By Michelle Page



The *kastom* mats were stored in baskets. In different parts of Vanuatu, different fibres or leaves are used for weaving and the baskets all have different uses. Each woman had her own basket. The baskets made from coconut leaves and were used for carrying cooked or uncooked food to store in the house. Baskets were also made and used for catching fish.



10/ Digital figure Ambrym
kastom village women-
carrying basket 2002
By Michelle Page

Basket weaving was also an acquired skill and was learnt and passed down from mother to daughter. The style of basket varied from island to island and styles of weaving were kept a close secret. On the island of `Santo` Northern Vanuatu pottery was practiced this was in the form of what was called pinch pots, used for cooking.



11/ Digital figure pinch pot Santo 2002 own collection
by Michelle Page

Through out Vanuatu there was an ancient form of a copy-write system.

Individuals, lineages, clans and areas are recognized, as having rights over certain types of knowledge. One has to inherit them, or, purchased with a certain amount of respect. There are strict traditional guidelines, beliefs, and tribal laws regarding Vanuatu art. With this system already in place this may help to preserve the use of sand drawings longer so as not to be exploited by advertising and tourism and other commercial use. One of the traditional arts under threat is the Sand drawing of Vanuatu.

5 Traditional Vanuatu Sand -Drawings



12/ Digital figure sand drawing
Pentecost by Michelle Page 2002

From the northwestern part of the island of Epic, northwards through the central islands, and on through the Banks and the Torres, and then down to the south east of the Solomon Islands there existed, and still does to this day, the tradition of drawing on the ground.

There are only two other indigenous races that practice this form of art, the Navajo Indians in the southwest of United States, figures in Navajo sand painting generally proceed clockwise, their direction coming from the east, towards the sunrise (the dawn light). The main theme symbols of the sand painting are the mountain Gods, or the hero in their form. Father Sky and Mother Earth appear a lot in their paintings. The other indigenous race to use sand drawings was the Australian aboriginal women, who used them as dreamtime (aboriginal story telling of legends and songs) and a form of communication.

Vanuatu's most beautiful and complex artistic tradition, *sand drawings*, transmits a wealth of traditional knowledge about local history and indigenous rituals.

Sand drawings are not just a graphic artistic expression they are a multifunctional sign system that occurs in range of communication contexts. *Sand drawings* are made up of geometric patterns that are used in ritual and mythology, providing a wealth of knowledge of history, kinship systems, song cycles, and farming Techniques (for example the rotation of vegetable gardens), Architectural techniques, illustration for stories, signatures and/or simply messages.



13/ Digital figure one of the first sand drawings to learn demonstrated by Roslyn Garae Ambae 2002 by Michelle Page

14 / Digital figure sand drawing grid
Loltong Village in Pentecost Island
2002 by Michelle Page



Sand drawings are a unique means of communication amongst various languages. They were usually restricted to one language or cultural area, and these were usually different from island to island.

These types of *sand drawings* for communication are called **matammata**, in the Tinjivo language (dialect spoken today in Malo). This type of *sand drawing* in Vanuatu is the continuous geometric line drawing and the most highly developed form was in northwest Vanuatu. In west Ambrym they are known as **tuh netan**. In north Ambrym, they are called **uliuli** and on the island of Vao, in northeast Malakula, they are known as **aghir**.

The term *sand drawings* was adopted by the west through Bernard Deacon, who, by the time of his tragic death in 1927 of dingo fever at South West Bay in Maleuka, and had recorded 118 designs of sand drawings, from Maleuka, Ambrym and Ambae.

Bernard Deacon was an anthropologist from Cambridge, who revolutionized the theory about marriage-classes in kinship studies⁴, which was demonstrated to him through a sand drawing diagram on the island of Ambrym. Bernard Deacon visited the island for six weeks in 1926 and in 1927 had his paper published.

To draw sand drawings a flat area was needed for a canvas, on a beach, or, if in the bush a flat compact area of dark soil or volcano ash. A thin layer of white fire ash was also acceptable. The drawer with the index finger traces a continuous line marked out usually by a grid in order to limit their drawing within a frame, to produce symmetrical composition of geometric patterns. The drawer starts with vertical lines left to right and then horizontal lines top to bottom.

Some images can be left as a message, for instance, “I came here and you were not home”. The image called ‘garden’ can be drawn outside a doorstep to indicate that the drawer is away in the garden⁵ Sand drawings were also attached in many stories, drawn as illustrations being told as a story develops. The sand drawing creates many-layered field of lines crossing and burying each other over. The Ni Vanuatu has developed iconic images that have names and correct ways of execution.



15/ Digital figure sand drawing of a fish Ambae Island 2002 by Michelle Page

⁴ Knut Rio, *Discussions around a sand drawing*, Royal Anthropological Institute, London, p.3, Sept 2005

⁵ Knut, *Discussions around a Sand Drawing*, Royal Anthropological Institute, P.9, Sept 2005.

To further illustrate this an example was shown to me in of Ambae in 2002 by Roslyn Gabae. 1st a grid was drawn showing a stick with 2 squares drawn each end, representing 2 chickens.



16 Digital figure
2 chickens on a stick
grid Roslyn Garae
Ambae Island 2003.

The story started how husband and wife had an argument and would not talk to each other. So the husband went out caught two chickens and tied each on different ends of the stick. He went to his wife and said that he wanted her to cook the two chickens at the same time. The wife could not cook the two chickens at the same time so she went to her husband to tell him this. He said, “Now we are talking”!

17/ Digital figure completion of
2 chickens on a stick Roslyn
Garae Ambae Island 2003
by Michelle Page



18/ Digital figure children
climbing tree Rosa Gabae
by Michelle Page 2003



19/ Digital figure
Devil and children in
the tree
Roslyn Garae Ambae
2003



There was also another gentleman, John Lanyard, who had collected different designs in northeast Malakula in 1915, but was still considering publication. John Lanyard referred to them as ‘sand tracings’ In the years 1978 and 1983 Henri Tailhade, an art teacher at the Bougainville in Port Vila, collected 180 designs from his students and during his travels in northern Vanuatu.

It was assumed in Vanuatu and overseas that it was only the men that practiced this skill. This was not always the case. Women in southwest Santo were believed to have practiced this skill. There were stories of women of the Banks that is located in northern Vanuatu Island chain, also doing drawings. There is evidence that the *sand drawings* were high ranking rituals for women’s graded society.

In the southwest Ambrym they were an exclusive male activity with rights of designs being passed down from father to son or sold to neighbouring islands. Now that the drawings have today become a legal copy write issue, mild variations have been used in advertising and contemporary art.

6 How Vanuatu art has evolved today

The earliest artists to have exhibited Vanuatu art were perhaps Nicolai Michoutouchkine and Aloï Pilioko. Born in France of Russian origin, Nicolai Michoutouchkine arrived in Vanuatu in 1961 as an established artist and artifact collector. In his company was Aloï Pilioko a Wallisian, South Pacific Island of Wallis who had previously lived in Vanuatu.⁵ Their first exhibition of contemporary artwork took place in the Vila Cultural Centre⁶ 26th August until 6th of September 1961. These developments had gone largely unnoticed by the western world.

What was noticed at the time was the lack of indigenous artists. While carvings had always been a medium for Melanesian artists, materials for painting and drawing only became available through the school system. With education coming with modern society, the Ni-Vanuatu started to have equal opportunities, men and women in jobs or education. In *kastom* women were regarded as a lower grade.

Traditional Vanuatu art started to change in the late 1970s when a small group of young Ni-Vanuatu artists, trained in Modern western techniques, began to grow in numbers in the capital, Port Vila. Vanuatu's artists began to talk about forming an organization of contemporary artists to support and promote contemporary art in the country.

In 1987, Emmanuel Watt, Sero Kuautonga, Fidel Yoringmal, Juliette Pita and Patrice Cujo formed their own association. They called the association Nawita (the term used in bislama, the national language, for octopus). Juliet Pita had suggested this. The association was open to expatriates and Ni Vanuatu alike. The only condition that it be for contemporary artists and not for artists and artisans using traditional mediums and traditional principles, in a visual representation. They were careful not to copy traditional work, but were inspired by them. L`Atelier art gallery was established in 1985 by Suzanne Bastien and became the association's headquarters.

⁵ Ralph Regenvanu, 'Transforming Representations' A sketch of the contemporary art scene in Vanuatu, Vanuatu, 2000, p.25

⁶ Vanuatu culture museum <http://www.vanuatuculture.org>.

This was only the beginning to establish art in Vanuatu. An annual exhibition started in the 1990s and was just called 'Art'. With the strict laws of traditional art still in force there are always artists who will try to blur the lines. This could best be explained by Ralph Regenvanu who is a Ni-Vanuatu artist from southwest Malakula and now the acting director of the Vanuatu Culture Centre⁸. Below he explains in his statement his perception in the use of traditional art in contemporary art, in the education guide of a Vanuatu Cultural Centre touring exhibition supported by the Pacific Development & Conservation Trust and the under the Australian Government under the Australian-south Pacific 2000.

"I always use symbols when I work, I think maybe a lot of artists here do. Basically the symbols are to do the distinction between *Kastom* and non-*Kastom*. *Kastom* is taken to mean anything that has aspects of, or any aspect that represents the pre-European past, like the indigenous culture of Vanuatu. *Kastom* is obviously made to be distinct thing from anything from anything that is not *kastom*, which has aspects of the post European contact history of Vanuatu.

For me, I use a motif of a face from a drum, slit-gong, and also black power figure that they carve on my island. I'm very conscious about using things, that I have a right to us obviously made to be distinct thing.

E.g. I don't use symbols from other islands, which belong to other groups of people. There are other groups of contemporary artists that do. When they use them they use them in the terms of a national idea of *kastom*. when they use it for example, they use the image of a face from another island where they are not from, to represent *kastom* in a national context."

Art is being developed today with new, and old range of materials – art paper, paints, cottons and glazes as well as the traditional tapa, clay and wood. Another artist. Self-taught from Vanuatu is David Ambong who first had the chance of learning block print art under a Unesco program. Artists from the Pacific region attended as teachers bringing with them more methods and exposure of the cross cultures of the Pacific. David's tutor is a well-known Pacific artist, Michael Tuffery from New Zealand.

⁸ Ralph Regenvanu. *Education guide to the exhibition* <http://arts.anu.edu.au/arcworld/vks/edguid.htm> [June 10]

20 Digital figure by Michelle Page
Big Numbas dancing
Acrylic on canvas painted by David
Ambong 2001.



21 Digital figure by Michelle
Page block print 'kava' by
David Ambong 2006



7 Conclusion

Sand drawings however are in a total different area because they are more exposed to the wind and other natural elements; they do not remain intact for long periods of time. If this is left unchecked and with the tendency to appreciate *sand drawings* on a purely aesthetical level, they will lose their deep traditional meaning and original function.

Common designs are used in stamps, banknotes and promotion material. They are viewed as attractive symbols of Vanuatu identity and they are showcased as decorative symbols of folklore for the tourist industry and other commercial interests. Which raises the questions: Will the art of traditional sand drawings disappear? And will it be all right to use this art form as a national icon representation for promotion?

Upon researching this question on the Internet I found that the UNESCO had recognized Vanuatu sand drawings, and entered them in a project under the ‘Trust for the Preservation and Promotion of Intangible cultural Heritage’⁹. This was funded under UNESCO/Japan funds in 2003-. The project was to go for 2 years starting June 2005 to May 2007.

The action plan drafted was to view reconciling issues of national culture politics. This would encompass major activities, for example, exhibitions and festivals of sand drawings, establishment of regulations of a trust fund to protect the sand drawings. The idea to display this art form as a public competition was organized and the competitions are now held annually.

Sand drawings are also going to be introduced to the school curricula and integrated in visual performing art courses. The idea being to generate activities and develop incomes.

The *sand drawings* of Vanuatu will be recognized as part of the heritage of Vanuatu and with the trusts, action plans, and protection orders in place, the traditional sand *drawings* and it is my prediction they will have a healthy future.

⁹ *Traditional Sand-drawings*, <http://www.vanuatuculture.org>. [May 9]

To conclude this essay, I would like to make a comparison, for example to the Tiki of New Zealand. It is recognized as a part of New Zealand and is associated around the world with the indigenous people, the Maori. But it has NOT lost the mana (spirit) when used in a traditional sense.

If the sand drawings art form is left unchecked, there will be a tendency to appreciate sand drawing on a purely aesthetical level. They will lose their deep traditional meanings and original function, and will become an extinct art form.

I predict with careful I, thoughtful management sand drawings will have a healthy future, and future generations of Ni-Vanuatu will be proud of their unique form of art.

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9 LIST OF FIGURES

- 1 Brochure photo National Vanuatu Tourism Office 2004
- 2 Pamma Festival 2003.
- 3 Slit drum (Tam tam) Ambrym 2003.
- 4 Rom dance Ambrym 2003.
- 5 Flute players Ambrym 2003.
- 6 Pandanus money mat, or gift Ambae 2003.
- 7 Ambae villagers with pandanus mat 2003.
- 8 Wedding Lamén Island Epi 2002.
- 9 Pandanus mat Lamén Bay Epi 2002.
- 10 Ambrym *Kastom* villages 2002.
- 11 Pinch pot Santo 2002.
- 12 *Sand drawing* Pentecost 2002.
- 13 *Sand- drawing* 1st Roslyn Gara Ambae 2003.
- 14 *Sand- drawing* grid Pentecost 2002.
- 15 *Sand- drawing* fish Ambae 2002.
- 16 *Sand -drawing* grid 2 chickens on a stick Roslyn Gara Ambae 2003.
- 17 *Sand -drawing* completion of 2 chickens on a stick Roslyn Gara Ambae 2003.
- 18 *Sand -drawing* children climbing a tree Roslyn Gara Ambae 2003.
- 19 *Sand -drawing* children in the tree and devil Roslyn Gara Ambae 2003.
- 20 Painting ‘Big Numbas’ Acrylic on canvas artist David Ambong 2001.
- 21 Block print ‘Kava’ Hand made paper artist David Ambong 2006.