

OUTLIER STYLE:
THE FUTUNA SOUND AND VANUATU
STRINGBAND MUSIC

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Introduction

The present-day nation of Vanuatu has a population of around 205,000, the majority of which is indigenous (*ni-Vanuatu*). The small—but economically influential—Australian and French populations, mostly clustered around the national capital Port Vila (on Efate Island) are a remnant of the Anglo-French condominium that ruled the archipelago until 1980. There are also small Chinese and Vietnamese communities, similarly active in commerce. Linguistically, Vanuatu is highly diverse. Along with around 110 local indigenous languages, the national pidgin language, *Bislama*, is spoken alongside English and (to a diminishing extent) French. Although there are a number of continuing traditional (*kastom*¹) musical practices (such as log idiophone percussion in Ambrym and Malekula), these have not been developed into pan-regional syncretic music forms and the most prominent musical styles on the national scene are Christian music, Pacific pop-reggae and stringband music. The latter form, as its name suggests, is an acoustic style that predominantly uses strung instruments in ensembles that also feature lead and harmony vocal parts. Unlike Papua New Guinea, which has marked differences in musical style and guitar tunings in different regions, *ni-Vanuatu* stringband music is, with one main exception, relatively homogenous in style and instrumentation. Broadly speaking there are two styles of Vanuatu stringband music, a national pan-regional form and the style developed by a group of (interrelated) Futunese bands. This chapter gives an historical introduction to the popularisation of Futunese (instrumentally augmented) stringband music, discusses the principle styles represented in its recorded repertoire, and outlines the manner in which it has come to represent an important identity marker for Futunese communities across Vanuatu.

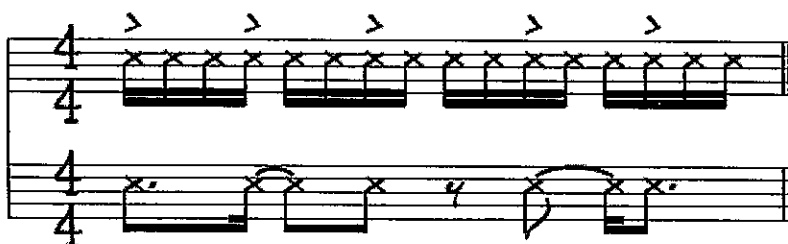
Origins and characteristics of Vanuatu Stringband music

The arrival of Allied troops in the southwestern Pacific region following the outbreak of conflict with Japan in 1941 was a major influence on the development of local music. The establishment of major military bases around Port Vila and on Espiritu Santo Island brought *ni-Vanuatu* in contact with Western musical styles and familiarised them with instruments such as guitars, ukuleles and mandolins. Some time during and immediately after the U.S. military visitation a number of *ni-Vanuatu* learnt to play these instruments and the former two became the instrumental base of the post-War Vanuatu style of stringband music.² The style slowly aggregated in the locations where most contact with U.S. military had taken place (primarily Efate, Espiritu Santo and Tanna) and became popularised around Port Vila in the 1970s, where it benefited from the developing tourist industry and the economic opportunities afforded to performers. Subsequent to this, the stringband style developed fairly consistently across the islands as one based around songs—initially versions of Western material—performed to a standard rhythmic pattern, usually played in (loose) unison by guitars³, ukuleles and a single string “bush bass” (similar to a 1950s’ European skiffle tea-chest bass, but with a moveable neck to adjust pitch) and sometimes additional percussion instruments. A common feature of stringbands up until the 1980s was the use of the ukulele to belt a double time rhythmic pattern (although this rhythmic complexity has diminished somewhat in more recent ensembles). String band compositions highlight individual and close harmony vocals and up-tempo ensemble grooves. (Typically) high-set voices provide a distinctive, vocal timbre that (deliberately) has a slightly “strained” quality by being pitched at the high end of the performers’ range, while multiple strummed guitar and ukulele parts (supported by fat-sounding string bass and percussion lines) create a dense string texture.

The most common rhythm (invariably introduced by a short, strummed ukulele motif) is a shuffled, up-tempo, two-beats-per-bar “cut common” feel, referred to in Vanuatu as “two step” in reference to the couple dance it frequently accompanies. This groove employs strummed guitars and ukuleles, together with string bass on beats one and three and percussion on the backbeats (two and four). For example, fifteen of twenty tracks on the popular compilation CD *Vanuatu String Band Volume 2* (featuring eight string bands recorded between 1996 and 2001) employ this groove. In addition, the groove is articulated within a very small bpm (beats per minute) range. Of the fifteen tracks, eight are in the range of 165-175 (quarter-note beats per minute), while the overall range is 148-184 bpm.

CD releases by individual string bands exhibit similar patterns. Another common groove is built around a repeated strum with a distinctive pattern of accents similar to the Cuban clave (see Example 9-1). The syncopated riff is sometimes articulated by ukuleles, sometimes by guitars and sometimes a combination of the two.⁴ Accents may be also expressed as part of a continuously strummed pattern or as individual “hits”. This groove is often complemented by guitars playing single-note melodic lines or passages of sixth intervals. Other recurring rhythmic grooves include 6/8 feels (further examples of two-beats-per-bar patterns) and 3/4 waltz-style rhythms.

EXAMPLE 1



Ex. 9-1. Common Groove similar to Cuban clave pattern

Vocals take a prominent place in the stringband repertoire, and harmony singing is a notable feature of the music. Although some songs are performed entirely by a solo singer, the typical arrangement sees a solo singer supported by group vocal harmonies in close-form triads. The most common and distinctive ensemble timbre is produced through a combination of high-range, vibrato-free lead male vocals together with high-range male harmony vocals. Bands that use this type of vocal sound include Magawiarua, Saratokowia and Talotakia. Stringbands also occasionally employ a number of other vocal combinations, such as low/mid-range lead female vocals with close female vocal harmonies, mellow lead female vocals with high-set male vocal harmonies.⁵ Vocal phrasing tends to be somewhat irregular, as a result of the pairing of melodies with irregular lyric phrase lengths. A characteristic phrasing element is the use of three-bars at the end of (and sometimes in the middle of) melodic phrases, rather than more predictable two and four-bar patterns.

Compositions are almost always in major keys, and major/major hexatonic melodies predominate. In many arrangements the strummed ukulele produces a distinctive major sixth sound on the tonic chord, by leaving all strings open to produce the following pattern of scale degrees 5, 1, 3, 6 (from low to high strings). Chord progressions mostly involve primary triads, but recurring I–IV progressions provide a characteristic accentuation of the move to the subdominant (often aided by the use of the b7 in the melody). The secondary dominant (V/V) is also used quite often, while minor chords are less frequent, and tend to be associated with more pop/folk-influenced compositions.⁶ A number of tracks that employ the clave-style groove (see Example 9-1) are unusual within the overall stringband output by emphasising minor keys and/or chords.⁷

Particularly given the similarity of grooves and instrumental line-ups in stringband music, the distinctiveness, reputation and/or popularity of individual bands in regional and/or national contexts is premised on other factors. These include nuances of vocal quality—a factor given particular local resonance when used in songs performed in specific local languages addressing local topics; nuances of instrumental feel (many of which are highly subtle); and/or the ensemble’s “personality” and local appeal as manifest in live performances and—most recently—on cassette/CD artwork and DVD material.

Futunese culture and Kastom music

Futuna is a small volcanic island located at the southeastern corner of the Vanuatu archipelago that forms part of Tafea province (along with Erromango, Tanna, Anatom and Aniwa). The Futunese speak a language shared with Aniwa that is variously referred to as “Futuna-Aniwa” (Capell 1984) or “West Futuna-Aniwa”⁸ (Dougherty 1983) and has been characterised by the latter as a “Polynesian Outlier Language” (Dougherty 1983) distinct from the 100+ other languages of present-day Vanuatu. The present population of the island is about 450, substantially less than in the immediate post-War period, and resides in four main villages connected by coastal walkways. The island has a school, several churches and a small airstrip presently served by twice weekly flights from Tanna.⁹ Islanders live a subsistence lifestyle, reliant on fishing and agriculture with some cash income derived from a small fish co-operative and (very) occasional tourist visits. Since national independence in 1980 a substantial number young of Futunese have left the island, usually in their teens, for secondary education and/or to seek greater employment (and socialisation) prospects. This has had led to an imbalance whereby more Futunese

currently reside off-island than on it. It is estimated that in addition to the resident population of 450 another 750-1000 live on nearby Tanna, on Anatom, in the area around the national capital, Port Vila, and on Espiritu Santo.¹⁰

This depopulation has had the predictable effect of inhibiting the transmission of traditional *kastom* activities as absent young people both lose contact with community elders and become exposed to new stimuli and life contexts that render traditional Futunese *kastom* increasingly anachronistic. Language is a substantial heritage issue both on and off the island. The combined effect of education in English and French languages in Futuna's schools (where Futunese speech has been repressed) and the necessary acquisition of *Bislama* (and, outside of Port Vila, other local languages), for those living off-island, is eroding the linguistic basis of Futunese identity.

The traditional music culture of Futuna (or, at least, that early-mid twentieth century form that were perpetuated and/or recalled by Futunese in the mid-late twentieth century) features a range of song types. These include compositions to commemorate and lay to rest the dead; fishing and farming songs; and songs accompanying dances. Up until the late twentieth century there was a tradition that new songs—such as those detailing the plight of those deceased who had been mistreated in life—were communicated from the spirit world to particular community members in their sleep. There is continuing folkloric memory on Futuna of people lying in proximity to sleeping individuals who were heard humming or murmuring tunes repeatedly, as if in apparent dialogue with a spiritual instructor. More recent additions to the *kastom* “canon” are songs accompanying festive, Polynesian-derived “Mari” dances performed around Christmas. As with many, if not all, Vanuatu islands, the Christian hymn tradition is now so deep-rooted that it also forms part of Futunese musical heritage. Indeed, the choral traditions of Futuna have attracted attention for their accomplishment. Belief in magic, particularly weather-related magic and rituals, is still common on Futuna and seduction songs are also perceived to be effective by some male islanders. Allan Thomas and Takaronga Kuaatonga made recordings of local music styles on Futuna in 1990 and a selection of their recordings was released as *The Music of West Futuna* on the UNESCO Auvdis series in 1998 (see Thomas 1992, 1998 and Thomas and Kuaatonga 1992 for further discussion). Along with song and dance, another distinct aspect of Futunese culture is its traditional clothing, made from woven pandanus leaves, which resembles Tahitian and Cook Islander costumes (underlining the Polynesian aspect of Futuna's heritage). While such clothing is seldom

worn in everyday life, it forms a key part of cultural performance and is subject to continuing modification and elaboration.

While there are no comprehensive studies of Futunese folklore and *kastom* culture,¹¹ Dixon Keller and Kuautonga's 2007 volume *Nokonofu Kitea* is significant for reproducing and analysing a group of traditional song and story texts in considerable depth. The authors illustrate the extent to which the Futunese language texts they analyse convey complex aspects of history, place and island cosmology. In the conclusion to their study, their focus on aspects of *kastom* culture leads them to assert that when the extended Futunese community in contemporary Vanuatu:

engage in nativizing the foreign and reshaping tradition, facets of cultural geography so richly implicated by [traditional Futunese] narrative are invoked. The communities of... Futuna once conceived of as neighborhoods surrounding their marae,¹² or as villages encircling an interior plateau are now conceived of as a larger perimeter surrounding the island... itself. Home sites established in Tanna, Port Vila and even Noumea or Fiji dot what was the regional horizon of the past and what is now the new circuit of indigenous communities (Dougherty 1983, 280-281).

This chapter differs from Dixon Keller and Kuautonga's study in two key respects. Firstly, it proposes a model of contemporary Futunese cultural identity—at least as manifested in one area of cultural practice—which is less referentially premised on the home island than the *kastom* forms Dixon Keller and Kuautonga address. Secondly, while Futunese stringbands include a significant proportion of Futunese language material in their repertoire, the analyses we offer concentrate on musical style.¹³ This different approach does not constitute a critique (let alone contradiction) of *Nokonofu Kitea's* project. Rather, we contend that the musical style we address—which has developed in the doubly displaced contexts of a modern diasporic Futunese community and the “technospace” of recorded musical form—represents an alternative pole of modern Futunese identity; one different to, but still premised on, the foundations developed on and cosmologically invested in the specific space of Futuna itself.

The origins of Futunese stringband music

As previously discussed, contact with U.S. service personnel during World War Two, acquaintance with U.S. popular music (of various genres) and/or access to the instruments that U.S. service personnel brought with

them are generally regarded as the principal impetus behind the development of stringband music in Vanuatu. In combination with other musical contacts and acquisitions from British, French colonists, travellers and boat crews; the influence of missionaries of varied racial backgrounds; and exposure to radio broadcasts and/or gramophone recordings; *ni-Vanuatu* began developing a knowledge of Western and other Pacific popular musics and performed elements of this at various points in the immediate post-War period. The processes and speed by which foreign-originated musical instruments, musical knowledge and local engagement proceeded in various regions varied, as did the immediacy and/or intensity of local engagements with the possibilities offered by them. Various factors, such as remoteness from Port Vila and/or the location of wartime American bases, were significant factors in the time of stringband music's emergence in different locations across the archipelago.

It is possible to posit a five-step model for local engagement with new musical styles and practices in general:

- 1) awareness of and/or exposure to new musical styles and instruments;
- 2) direct engagement with and/or experience of these;
- 3) acquisition of new instruments (through purchase or other means);
- 4) experimentation;
- 5) local adoption and development.

Based on oral history interviews conducted in Futuna and Port Vila in 2006-2008, the process by which stringband music appears to have developed in Futuna was as follows:

- Familiarisation with and/or communication concerning early *ni-Vanuatu* stringband music in other locations. (Futunese Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta curator Takaronga Kuautonga has, for instance, proposed that Futunese working on Anatom in the late 1940s may have communicated information about early stringband music back to their home island (2007, pers. comm., April).

- Direct experience of new instruments and music, the first relevant instance of which appears to have been the presence of a visiting Samoan (remembered only as "David"), who played during a short stay on Futuna sometime in the late 1950s or early 1960s.

- Purchase of guitars and ukuleles by Futunese working in Port Vila and their subsequent transportation to Futuna (in the early 1960s).
- The formation of the first local string-based ensembles (in the mid 1960s)

The first local stringband was formed on Futuna around 1965, and featured Nalau Seiragi on lead vocals and ukulele. In a videotaped interview with Philip Hayward in 2007,¹⁴ Seiragi recalled that the ensemble learnt their repertoire from recordings of Western pop songs and Polynesian material (but could not remember the titles of any of the songs concerned). The band performed at social functions and was popular with both youth and older community members. A number of local musicians, including Charlie Nimoho and Ronald Seekai, began writing songs in the late 1960s and early 1970s for guitar and vocal performance (suitable for stringband arrangement), primarily in Futunese, on local and/or general topics. Two of the regular song types required in the community were naming songs, composed for ceremonies in which children would be *formally named*, and memorial songs, commemorating those who had recently departed. Stringband songs of this type appear to have superseded earlier *kastom* songs that filled a similar function (but which have fallen into disuse). Other songwriters also became active in the 1970s, such as Isaac Seru, Yarawoi Rossel and Yama Natuka.

During the 1960s and 1970s a significant number of Futunese, primarily young males, relocated to Tanna to find work. The first offshore Futunese stringband was formed on Tanna in the mid-1960s. The ensemble *initially played socially within the Futunese community* but attracted broader attention for their competence as the decade progressed and were featured in festivities such as the (British) Queen's Birthday celebrations held in June 1969. The Futunese population of Tanna was something of a bridge between their home island and the national capital, assimilating and transmitting influences from both. During the late 1970s Futunese musicians on Tanna began to integrate two new instruments into stringband arrangements, arrays of bottles (around 8-10 in number), tuned to the tonic *sol fa* system by having *varying volumes of water poured into* them, and arrays of similarly tuned lengths of bamboo, the former struck with sticks and the latter with coconut husk strikers (before plastic "flip-flop" sandals became available).

In Vanuatu both these instruments have been hailed as Futunese *inventions* and on Futuna both are unequivocally attributed to Futunese musician and schoolteacher Charlie Nimoho. Nimoho was one of the first Futunese to receive a formal education, being sponsored by the

Presbyterian Church to study in Australia in the mid 1950s. Although the precise chronology remains unclear, the common perception amongst older Futunese is that he first became aware of the musical potential of bottles of water while listening to rain dropping into containers in the early 1950s, he did not develop this until after he learnt the tonic sol fa system in Australia. Soon after his return, he started tuning sequences of bottles and small assemblages of cut bamboo tubes, which he performed on by blowing into their necks. A number of his pupils in the late 1950s and early 1960s recall him demonstrating this technique to them and occasionally performing for family groups at special occasions such as Christmas. Students such as Yarawoi Rossel learnt to emulate his skill and also performed. Some time in the late 1960s Nimoho began playing both instruments with a wooden striker. There are various accounts of why he made this shift, one of the more notable ones being that it resulted from a technological intervention. Isaac Seru has identified that once when Nimoho was performing on Tanna, where he resided in the mid-1960s, someone (probably a Westerner) recorded him on a reel-to-reel tape recorder and then played back the recording (I. Seru 2007, pers. comm., April). This revealed a practical issue that Nimoho had been hitherto unaware of, namely that the blown notes were soft and often obscured by incidental noise as he moved during performance. He therefore decided to switch to tapping each bottle with a stick, which provided similar note patterns (although with markedly different timbres) and greater volume. After experimenting with this approach, he began deploying it in public in the late 1960s and early 1970s, attracting immediate attention, particularly from members of the Futunese community resident there.

The Futunese stringband on Tanna, which comprised a pool of around 15-20 musicians, performed (in various combinations) under the name 'Fatuana' - the original Futunese name for their home island, meaning 'rocky place'¹⁵). The musicians were keen to explore the possibilities of Nimoho's innovations and rapidly incorporated the two new instruments into their line-up. This innovation gave their stringband format additional melodic and timbral possibilities and, in the case of the struck bamboos, the facility for additional rhythmic bass patterns. These aspects were soon developed in new arrangements and the style achieved rapid recognition after being developed on Tanna in 1976-77.

Teacher and songwriter Tamalua ("Donald") Wotu was an important contributor to activity on Tanna in this period. He began writing songs while studying at Kawenu College in Port Vila in 1973-76 and when he was appointed to a teaching position back on Futuna in 1977 he made a conscious decision to learn about local *kastom* music from community

elders, aware that local traditions were in danger of disappearing through neglect (T. Wotu 2006, pers. comm., May). The last generation of regular performers of the ceremonial song repertoire described in Section II (above) died in the late 1970s-early 1980s and Wotu was regularly called on to write commemorative songs as a community duty. During the late 1970s there was a swell of musical activity on Futuna that took various forms, including Futunese translations of English language hymns, the writing of new songs by local performers and the formation of a new local stringband. Wotu was active in this scene until being relocated to Tanna, where he continued to work with Futunese youth, being an important figure in the development of the new augmented stringband line-ups. As he recalls, co-coordinating these were initially difficult “because the bottles and bamboos were tonic sol-fa tuned and the stringband was tuned differently so it took some working out” (T. Wotu 2006, pers. comm., May). Unlike Nimoho’s original usage, the musicians who learnt to play the tuned bottles used both hands (in a similar fashion to a vibraphone or xylophone player). A band assembled by Wotu featuring bottles and bamboo performed at the 1978 Tanna Agricultural Fair, attracted considerable attention and won the best band category.

National breakthrough

1980s

The style developed on Tanna achieved national profile in 1978 when a group of Futunese performers assembled by Yarawoi Rossel¹⁶ under the name Fatuana String Band (FSB) won the Group prize in the annual String Band contest in Port Vila, securing 467 points out of a possible 500 with their full, nine-member ensemble and also gaining runner-up prize in the Quartet section¹⁷). The contest was held in November 1978 and attracted twenty entrants. A significant element of FSB’s appeal to the judges was the novelty and impact of their use of (seven) tuned bottles, played by Johnson Seimo, prominently featured at stage front in a decorated wooden frame bearing the band’s logo and the instrumental description “Foivai piano.”¹⁸ Jean-Baptiste de Boissel described the band’s performance and impact as follows:

the winner of the competition, the group Fatuana, far outshone the others. This new group offered a new string band style. What a breath of fresh air! String band music, which can sometimes be a little dry and sad, found a warmth and ‘joie de vivre’ with Fatuana. The group’s stage presence was relaxed and happy. On the following day, the group was celebrated in the

town as it passed through, and received the blessing of the crowd in front of the BP store - where Fatuana sang for the pleasure of people passing by. Passersby shouted "bottle, bottle" and this is a memory that will stay with the group that invented various original instruments, notably the tuned bottle instrument called "Fovai" in the Futunese language (authors' translation) (1978, 3).

Shortly after the contest, the FSB recorded an album (in one day) with local producer Paul Gardissat that was released under the title *Bon Weekend*. The album provides a number of readily apparent contrasts to the pan-Vanuatu stringband sound discussed in Section I above. As would be expected, tuned bottle parts provide one notable new element. Seimo's bottle parts are prominent in many songs (e.g., "14 September", "Oh! Yes, Why", "Police Force" and "E moma emoto") and usually take the form of pervasive and rapid repeated note-style melodic passages. Other percussion tends to provide more backgrounded, supportive rhythmic figures. Many songs have lengthy instrumental introductions, and the album employs a much wider range of grooves and tempos than those by the non-Futuna bands. *Bon Weekend* uses a fairly even spread of 4/4, 3/4 and 6/8 tempos, and rarely employs the shuffled, two-in-the-bar, cut-common feel that is the staple rhythm of other Vanuatu groups. It also avoids the standard strummed ukulele introduction. Even when a two-in-the-bar, cut-common feel is used, it tends to take a different form. In "Jimsa," for example, the two-beat, cut-common feel occurs in a straight, rather than shuffled, rhythm. Overall, guitar parts dominate the grooves, while the ukulele plays a less-prominent, supportive role. The clave-style groove favoured by other Vanuatu stringbands is not used at all on the album, and the major sixth ukulele sound on the tonic chord (a prominent element in songs by the other Vanuatu groups) is less prominent on *Bon Weekend*. Vocals are generally set in a lower range, and are of a sweeter, mellower timbre than those on non-Futuna stringband albums. In addition, vocals mostly take the form of continuous close-form triads throughout entire arrangements, rather than an alternation between soloist and harmony singers.

A comparison between two contrasting tracks from *Bon Weekend* provides a sense of the diversity of the album. The opening track, "14 September", features a long instrumental introduction, where bottle percussion and guitars combine to create an on-beat, almost "military" feel in 3/4. Vocals enter in three-part harmony and continue in this manner throughout the arrangement, and the vocal tone is mellow and smooth. Harmony is based around primary triads, while "stop" sections (where the instruments cease playing for a short period and vocals continue acapella)

provide a recurring hook element within the arrangement. In “2/8 December” a lead steel guitar part introduces a moody vocal in a minor key. *The natural minor melody is enhanced by short, fast string ostinatos.* Vocal harmonies are added to the ends of phrases, and then on the song’s chorus the music shifts to the relative major and full choir before returning to *minor*.

The reasons for the variety of rhythmic approaches evident in the FSB’s late 1970s work and the timbral and textural difference from the mainstream of Vanuatu stringband music are subject to debate. Interviews with various Futunese musicians and parallel research have not suggested any direct connections between Futunese *kastom* culture practices and rhythmic variety nor any specific external influence that may account for this. In terms of vocal style, the Futunese stringband ensembles—unsurprisingly—retain elements of the Christian choral tradition on Futuna. Identifying that this tradition has undergone significant changes over the last forty years, Janet Dixon Keller has provided a significant account of the style of worship music in 1973, in the decade prior to the ascendancy of the string bands, which she identifies as significantly different to the worship music recorded by Thomas and Kuautonga in 1990:

on Futuna in 1973... the singing style was very different [to now] - rather strident and fully voiced almost as though each person were thrusting their sound into the air. I would characterize it as multi-tonal in that the singing was not in unison but each voice circled around a note. Over the years the choral groups have become *much more Western sounding and sonorous* in their performances (J. Dixon Keller 2008, pers. comm., March).

In addition to the shift on Futuna itself, the more conventional harmonic approach evident in early (and later) Futuna stringband recordings suggests substantial familiarisation with both more standard late 20th Century Christian choral styles and/or Western popular music by ensembles based away from the home island.

Vocal factors aside, one explanation for the originality of the Futuna sound suggested by a number of veteran musicians interviewed by Philip Hayward is that the addition of the bottles and bamboo offered performers a range of rhythmic potentials and that they developed arrangement styles and time signatures to complement and showcase the instruments (leading to the development of a distinctive Futuna stringband style).

The success of Futunese bands in the national stringband contest continued in 1979 when another Futunese band, hastily assembled by Tamalua Wotu to participate (under the title Navarepa), won second prize. A further innovation attributed to Futunese performers was the entry of the

first all-female stringband in the contest in 1981, under the title Fatuana Girls. The band was co-ordinated by Jenny Nangard (who learnt ukulele at school on Futuna, before relocating to Port Vila) and the ensemble performed around Port Vila for two years before folding when Nangard commenced a full-time career with Telecom. Capitalising on the FSB's national success, other ensembles with similar instrumental line-ups emerged from the Futunese community in Tanna, Port Vila and on Futuna itself. The membership of these overlapped and interchanged over the next two decades but there were three basic aggregations: an ensemble based in Port Vila that developed out of the FSB, lead by Edward Natape and often referred to as Fatuana or Fatuana Vila; an ensemble based on Tanna, led by Tamalua Wotu, initially referred to as Fatuana Tanna; and a Futuna-based ensemble, based on the Navarepa line-up, re-named as Fatuana Futuna.

With a number of line-up changes in the early 1980s, the Vila based ensemble, led by composer-performers Edward Natape, Yarawoi Rossel and Yama Natuka, continued to perform at public events and tourist venues around Port Vila and also featured in promotions for the Vanuatu tourism industry. In 1984 a nine-piece line-up (performing under the title of Fatuana) received support from the national tourism authority to perform at a major promotional event in Noumea. The success of this venture led them to further dates in Australia and they recorded an album entitled *In Australia* after their return to Port Vila. The line-up for the recording featured accomplished performers such as guitarists Isaac Seru and Siosi Taforma and the album featured English-language compositions, such as "We are the Ambassadors" and "Welcome to Vila Town," that reflected the promotional focus of the band's repertoire at this time. In contrast to the FSB's debut, two-in-the-bar feels are more prevalent (with six of eleven tracks in cut-common time, while the remaining songs are in 3/4 or 6/8). At times (e.g., "Welcome to Vila Town") a syncopated guitar strum imbues two-beat grooves with a Western pop quality, while pop influence is also evident in elements such as Chet Atkins-style guitar picking. As to be expected, bottles are prominent on many tracks, and are used for introductions, ostinatos and instrumental "solos."

Fatuana Matua

In 1983 Wotu reunited members of the late 1970s Tanna-based Fatuana ensemble under the name Fatuana Matua (the latter term being explained by Wotu as meaning the "first finger of the hand," to emphasise their claim to be the originators of what was—by then—perceived as a

distinctive Futuna sound. Fatuana Matua recorded four cassette albums in the period 1984-1986: *Delma* (1983), *Nina Rita* (1983), *Mi laekem yu...lo-longing fasin blong you* (1984) and *Kisim vois long telefon* (1986).¹⁹ One of the distinguishing aspects of Fatuana Matua's recorded output was the band's reliance on songs composed by Tamalua Wotu. Written principally in *Bislama* and Futunese, the former included songs commemorating national events and causes together with material about relationships while the latter frequently referred to Futunese customs and personal histories. The albums were recorded in Port Vila in week-long studio sessions with producer Paul Gardissat and, in combination with the FSB's 1978 debut, collectively constituted the audio template for the Futuna sound as it developed from the mid-1980s on; indeed Wotu's material was also covered by other Futunese ensembles on recordings and in live performances.

Like the FSB's debut, *Delma* (1983) features material in a variety of tempos. 3/4 and 6/8 tempos are especially pronounced, with six of the ten tracks on the album using one or the other of these. Similarly to Fatuana's *In Australia*, several tracks also have grooves with notable Western country or folk/pop music elements. For example, "Tafea sho" opens with a guitar-based riff that is a favourite of folk and pop musicians—where a D chord shape is used in the left hand, and the upper string note moves between the third, fourth and second scale degrees as the guitarist places and releases left-hand fingers. This song also uses a pop-style strummed rhythm that is very unusual within the general Vanuatu stringband output. "Naku lamu" is also notable for opening with a descending steel-string guitar scale run before establishing a "bass-chord-chord" 3/4 pattern that is reminiscent of an old country waltz feel. Vocals are sweet and mellow, and mostly take the form of continuous harmony singing, while phrasing is generally in regular two and four-bar patterns. Bottle ostinatos appear on the album in a number of songs (e.g., "Delma, bottle" and "Mademoiselle") but overall are less emphasised than in FSB's *Bon Weekend*. Most tracks are introduced by a strum, solo line or arpeggio on steel-string guitar, and guitar parts form the foundation of grooves with ukuleles typically playing a more background, supportive role. "A vau ta ni kaso" uses an interesting hybrid of strummed ukulele and arpeggiated steel guitar.

Nina Rita (1983) enhanced the band's sound with energetic and accurate rhythm parts, and the overall tightness and variety of the grooves is a notable feature of the album. There is a similar tempo preference to its predecessor and no examples of the traditional shuffled, cut-common groove. Bottle parts are particularly prominent, Namahu Tosso's technical

virtuosity on the instrument elevating its instrumental function and adding a distinctive colour to the ensemble through (typically) busy, repeated-note semiquaver flourishes such as his part in the opening track “Nina, Rita, Tina.” Tuned bamboo parts provide another distinctive sound. For example, on “Mi Sidaon Wan Afternoon”, bamboo percussion doubles the opening melodic/rhythmic riff, as well as offering some catchy, syncopated fills at the ends of phrases. On ‘Air Caledonie’ the tuned bamboo provides busy syncopated rhythms and sometimes doubles the prevailing strummed rhythm on guitar. The album has a similar vocal style to its predecessor but there are some distinctive aspects to the vocal parts on some tracks. For example, on “Naveraba”, a lower vocal part moves around under a sustained upper part. “Soa Kugatama” begins with a similar technique, this time with vocals singing wordless “oohs” and “aahs” rarely used in other stringbands. “Ta Tagi Kanieni”—which, appropriately, translates as “Cry of Joy”—includes some call-response vocal sections reminiscent of Western pop arrangements. As in *Delma*, guitar parts are favoured for introductions, and the sound of the guitar dominates within the instrumental texture.

Nina Rita represented the high point in Fatuana Matua’s early recording career in terms of both the quality of performances and production, and the variety of grooves and vocal arrangements. Subsequent recordings *Mi Laekem Yu...Long Fasin Blong You* (1984) and *Kissim vois long telefon* (1986) display lower-quality production standards, but continue to offer many of the elements identified in relation to *Delma* and *Nina Rita* above.

In 1988, the year of Australia’s bicentennial of European settlement, a major world fair was held in Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, under the title “Expo 88”. A Futunese performing ensemble was selected to represent Vanuatu at the six-month long event and a stringband and accompanying dancers were assembled in Futuna, under the leadership of Iowantupin Wotu to fulfill the engagement. The ensemble combined performances of stringband material with *kastom* dances and performances of *kastom* songs, such as “Nahjeji”, dating from the mid-1800s.²⁰ The ensemble recorded an album entitled *Expo 88* upon their return, featuring material from their set. In typical Futunese style the album highlights the sound of tuned bottle and bamboo parts. The latter mostly take the form of strongly syncopated repeated note and/or arpeggiated patterns, and provide a type of syncopated bass line by playing root notes on chord changes. As on *Bon Weekend*, bottle parts take the form of pervasive rapid-note patterns that provide a distinctive colour within the ensemble texture. But while bottle and bamboo parts provide melodic leads on *Expo 88*, the

recording quality undermines the broader band dynamics with the bamboo parts overwhelming other instruments in the final mix.

Several of the ensemble, including their leader, remained in Port Vila and performed cultural shows based on their Brisbane set in the 1990s and early 2000s.²¹

1990s

After a quiet period, Fatuana Matua re-formed in 1991 with a new line-up, including Isaac Seru (who had formerly performed with the Port Vila based FSB) in order to enter the annual stringband competition, which had added appeal for participants through the prize of its winners being the funded Vanuatu cultural participants in the 1992 Seville Expo in Spain. Presenting a cultural show segment, with *kastom* clothing and dancing, the band secured first place and performed for several months at Expo 1992 (also visiting Gibraltar where they played live on radio). On their return to the Pacific they subsequently performed in Australia and New Zealand, promoting Vanuatu at hotels and tourist promotions. On the latter tour the band were joined by veteran Futunese performer Nalau Seiragi, some thirty years after he established Futuna's first stringband.

In 2000 a new Fatuana Matua line-up including multi-instrumentalist Albea Nalisa completed their most recent album, *Pacific Paradise*, with producer Henry Toka for the Vanuata label. In something of a departure from their previous albums, the CD featured covers of Western standards in both instrumental and vocal versions—Bill Withers' 1972 hit "Lean on me" and The Troggs' 1967 song "Love is all around"²²—in an attempt to reach a new audience and to explore the potential of covering Western songs in the Futunese stringband style. Another innovation was instrumental, with the addition of electric keyboard parts on several tracks. Aside from the two English language covers the album comprises the standard mix of Futunese and *Bislama* language songs.

Pacific Paradise is a carefully arranged and carefully produced studio creation, and provides an example of (one approach to) integrating Futunese stringband songs with contemporary Western pop production. The main elements of the Futuna stringband style remain in place, including the thick ensemble texture (with guitars, bottles, bamboo and untuned percussion), prominent harmony vocals, a range of tempos and grooves, major keys and melodies and simple chord progressions. However, all "rough edges" of the music are removed in favour of a smooth and warm overall sound. Vocals are sweet and restrained, and bottle and bamboo parts comprise distinct sonic elements that are carefully

mixed in the studio to provide colour rather than dominate the sound. Sustained electronic synth pads further soften out the overall sound. Guitar sounds (and other instruments) are treated with considerable reverb and also carefully mixed to blend into the overall production.

The opening track, "Love is All Around," sets the template for what follows. In place of the thick, "saturated" texture of previous albums is a thinner and cleaner soundscape in which individual guitar sounds and bottle and bamboos parts are used to provide colour in the arrangement. Gone too are the thick harmony vocals and, instead, the smooth lead vocal is supported by a soft harmonies set well back in the mix. An electronic keyboard further smoothes out of the sound, while lead vocals employ an Americanised accent and pop inflexions such as pitch scoops. The album's other cover song "Lean on Me" is treated in a similar manner, with lead vocals highlighted, and individual guitars and acoustic piano used in a clean production, augmented by bamboo and bottle sounds plus backing vocals low in the mix. For the original songs that comprise the bulk of the album, the normal Futuna stringband ensemble is regularly augmented by electronic keyboard and electric lead guitar. As already noted, the sustained nature of the keyboard lines, together with the heavy reverb used on the guitar (and arrangement as a whole), serve to soften the sound of the ensemble. In addition, bottle and bamboo parts are now seamlessly embedded within the groove through the mixing process, and by having them play predictable and regular rhythmic patterns rather than distinctive (often syncopated) patterns designed to draw the listener's attention. While effective on its own terms, the recording differed from previous Futunese stringband recordings by including non-acoustic instruments and having a sound quality distinctively different from that of live ensemble performances.

After the *Pacific Paradise* album Wotu stepped down from Fatuana Matua with the band travelling to perform in Beijing under the leadership of his brother Albea Nalisa (also an active solo performer). Despite this withdrawal, Wotu continued writing songs and became involved with broader community projects for Futunese youth around Port Vila. This resulted in his planning and establishing the Namo Nana Tradi-Cultural village off the road between Port Vila and Erakor. Like the nearby Ekasuk Cultural Village, which also has an associated performance troupe (who also perform at other tourist venues) Namo Nani was established to generate income from presentations of Futunese culture that would encourage and, indeed require, young Futunese who wished to participate to learn about their culture and its performance traditions. Wotu rehearsed and appeared with a revamped Fatuana Matua line-up at the 2006 National

Stringband contest jointly organised by Vanuatu Tourism and TV Vanuatu, in an ensemble that included his sister Jenny Nangard.²³ While their performance secured them first place they did not exploit the resultant publicity through concert engagements or commercial recordings but—at time of writing—the band were scheduled to release a new album engineered by Australian producer Denis Crowdy in late 2009.

A new generation—The 2000s

Along with those Futunese string bands who secured their reputations by recording, a number of other Futunese ensembles operated around Port Vila in the 1980s-2000s, including Ekasuk, Yaroofoa and, most recently, the Fatumana Cultural Group (FCG), which recorded its debut album *Vanuatu—The Purple Paradise* in 2006. Taking their name from the Futunese word for volcanic pumice (which washes up on the island's shores from Tanna), the FCG was formed as a focus for (potentially) disaffected Futunese youth. As the CD cover note states:

The cultural group was established with the opinion of uniting and keeping youth of Futuna in Port Vila away from city hoons²⁴ and other exotic attractions that blend with city life. There was also the view of getting employment by entertainment that pays incentives to members of the group, and the opportunity to hear, learn and rediscover our past. Back to my roots and the feeling of true identity and a deep sense of spirituality.

The identification of the band's stringband plus tuned bottle and bamboo line-up as a deliberate engagement with a cultural "past" and "roots," informed by a sense of spiritual presence, indicates the manner in which a comparatively recent (i.e. post 1970s) musical style has been adopted as both traditional and evocative of the Futunese home island that is increasingly an inaccessible referent for Port Vila's Futunese community. Members of the band were initially trained and assisted by performers such as Yarawoi Rossel and Siosi Tabasa and thereby have direct links to a Futunese musical tradition that is now in its fourth generation.

Musically, the album shares a number of key elements with previous Futunese bands but also extends these via diversity of style. The 16 member band who recorded the CD play the standard Futunese range of guitars, ukuleles, bush bass, tuned bottles and tuned bamboo pipes (termed "bamboo piano" on the CD sleeve). However, arrangements and rhythmic feels depart from previous Futunese band practice in several ways and the album offers a varied and effective blend of the old and the new. Many

elements provide an intentional and overt link with stringband traditions. Bottle parts are often busy and virtuosic, while tuned bamboo provides bass lines, syncopated fills and rhythmic reinforcement. Although many of the arrangements are based around contemporary Western pop grooves, the band avoids the temptation to use the drum kit (which could easily take over the articulation of the grooves). The last three tracks ("Firake," "Poshorima," "Yu T S") use the standard shuffled, cut-common groove (the staple of non-Futuna bands) with versions of the traditional ukulele introduction, as well as high-set lead and harmony vocals. A number of songs (e.g., "Tatafu") morph between major and relative minor, and the sound of the ukulele open string major sixth chord is occasionally prominent (e.g., "Oh Futuna").

A number of other musical ingredients represent modernising or hybridising elements in the FCG arrangements. Like Fatuana Matua's *Pacific Paradise, Vanuatu—The Purple Paradise* is carefully produced in the studio, with the aim of creating clean and warm vocal and instrumental sounds and balancing the various elements in the overall mix. Reverb on vocals and instruments is used to smooth out the overall sound, while individual instrument lines are clearly articulated and strummed parts are not allowed to dominate the arrangements (apart from the last three traditional tracks).

Grooves (apart from the shuffled, cut-common groove of the final tracks) reflect Western popular music influences. For example 'Vanuatu Momo' uses a slow 4/4 soul groove with a heavy backbeat (with bottle parts playing lines that might be taken by the piano in a soul arrangement), while 'Back to my Roots' aligns the roots lyric theme with a reggae feel in which guitars play off-beats and tuned bamboo provides a syncopated, reggaesque bass line. A number of arrangements (e.g., "Urusuki," "Futumani & Nawafi") use combined ensemble accents or "hits." The album clearly favours 4/4 or cut-common tempos, and there are no examples of the 3/4 and 6/8 feels favoured by previous Futuna stringbands. Half of the (twelve) tracks on the album are in minor keys, but the minor orientation is even more obvious when one considers that the final three tracks are traditional shuffled, cut-common groove songs (which have a "default" major key setting). Popular music influence is also found in certain chord progressions that are not normally used in stringband music (such as the soul-style repeated A E D7 progression in "Vanuatu Momo"). Vocal accent, tone and expression also have links to Western popular music templates. For example "Vanuatu Momo" combines a soulful lead male voice with melismatic, gospel-style, female call-response backing vocals. Numerous arrangements (e.g., "Futumanu and Nawafi") use

harmony vocals to make short call-response statements or briefly reinforce the lead vocal, rather than including lengthy passages of continuous harmony singing. While the self-released album has achieved little prominence in the Vanuatu music scene it represents an effective attempt to modernise (what is now) a firmly rooted Futunese tradition.

Conclusion

The preamble to the Vanuatu constitution, adopted in 1980, acknowledges a central aspect of the new nation's cultural identity through its specification that the constitution has been designed "CHERISHING our ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity" and, at the same time, is "MINDFUL... of our common destiny" (emphases in original). The issues raised by its authors continue to be pertinent for both the nation state of Vanuatu, as it continues to develop cohesion across diverse cultural, linguistic and geographical communities, and for the individual communities themselves, which now operate within an established nation state.

The issue of preserving the "diversity" of local cultures in an increasingly internationalised world order is, of course, a universal one but it is one that impacts in disparate ways, dependent on the situation of local cultures in new national (and world) orders. For the contemporary Futunese community of Vanuatu, dispersed between its original island homeland and those areas of Efate, Tanna and Santo in which it is now established, language erosion (particularly amongst "expatriate" communities) represents a very real dilution of a core plank of local identity. Likewise, the gradual decay of folklore and traditional local knowledge is rapidly distancing contemporary Futunese from their original island heritage. But the traffic is not all one-way. Developed by Futunese groups in Efate and Tanna—and returned to Futuna as a modern innovation—Futunese augmented stringband music comprises a new aspect of cultural heritage, a marker of local difference and expressive vehicle for contemporary Futunese. Its success in gaining national recognition has reinforced its value for Futunese communities and, in this regard, has elevated the profile of the community in national cultural consciousness, making "culturality" (the manufacture of a cultural entity from a folkloric/vernacular practice) an effective agent in community promotion. In this context, Futunese identity develops—as any identity does—in a contextual manner, and *kastom* is incorporated and deployed in new contexts.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Takaronga Kumatoga and Ralph Regenvanu of the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta for research guidance; to Isaac Seru and Sampson S for assisting research activity on Futuna; to Donald Wotu, Yarawoi Rossel, Jenny Nangard, Siosi Tababa and Albea Nalisa for agreeing to be interviewed; to Anne Naupa and the staff of the Vanuatu National Library for their helpfulness and efficiency; and to Janet Dixon Keller, Raymond Amman and Denis Crowdy for their illuminating comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript. Research for this chapter was assisted by Australia Research Council Discovery Project Grant DP0666232.

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Notes

¹ *Kastom* is a term that roughly translates as “customary/traditional” in English but more accurately refers to a set of diverse indigenous practices that were recently reconceptualised as an aggregate “to incarnate indigenous cultural authenticity in opposition to colonialism” (Miles 1999, 59).

² Although use of the mandolin rapidly declined and it only appears occasionally in the later recorded repertoire of post-1960s stringbands.

³ Usually in standard Western (EADGBE) tuning.

⁴ Examples of these (in sequence) being: “I Like To Stay In Vanuatu” by Vanuatu Papa and Veteran Blong String Band (2005), “Det long M.V. Brisk” by the ARO Lokol Sting Band (2005) and “January 2005” by Vanuatu Papa and Veteran Blong String Band (2005)

⁵ Examples of these (in sequence) being Paradise Vanuatu—Saravanua (2005); several tracks on Dausake's *Lav Blong Mama* (2003)—featuring guest singer Alayna)

⁶ Occasional stringband songs display additional and unusual musical elements. For example, the ARO Lokol String Band's "Olae" (2005) begins with a minor key groove built over the repeated progression i VII, with Spanish-style guitar lines and a fast 12/8 tempo with syncopated guitar and ukulele accents. The arrangement also features a long guitar solo with slides and string bends. Tokotano Wia's "Profeta Mang" (2005) has an unusual 3/4 groove with syncopated accents, together with continuous pop-style fills on lead guitar that incorporate pentatonic passages and chromatic chord movements. "My Life" (Dausake with Alayna, 2003) shows the influence of pop vocals through elements such as a slightly breathy tone, vocal scoops and breaks, and the b3 blues inflection. Many string band albums include at least one track that stands out as significantly different from the surrounding material.

⁷ For example "Red Hair Lover" by the Vanuatu Papa and Veteran Blong String Band (2005) begins with an instrumental section in minor, before moving to the (relative) major key for the entry of the vocals.

⁸ The island is sometimes referred to as "West Futuna" to avoid confusion with the identically named location in nearby Wallis and Futuna.

⁹ Sometimes also via Anatom.

¹⁰ Estimates of the number of Futunese living off-island are complicated by their inter-marriage with non-Futunese.

¹¹ Although there is some reference to these in Capell (1958).

¹² *Marae*—a sacred/symbolic centre of the community.

¹³ This is not to imply that the lyrics of the *Bislama*, Futunese and English language songs the bands perform are insignificant but rather that the musical styles are significant in their own right, rather than as mere vehicles for lyrical presentation. Comparative analysis of song lyrics and their reflections of various facets of Futunese/*mi-Vanuatu* identity is a further project that will complement and, no doubt, *complicate* the present study.

¹⁴ Included in the *Music and Dance on Futuna (Vanuatu) 2006* DVD.

¹⁵ See Keller and Kumatonga (2007, 41-43) for discussion of the name and its origins.

¹⁶ Whose name is also stated as "R. Iarawoi" on cassette covers and press reviews

¹⁷ Garae (1978, 2).

¹⁸ At the time this was credited as the invention of Seimo (see, for instance, Garae 1978, 2), which appears to refer to the positioning of the bottles inside a wooden frame. The name of the instrument derives from the Futunese name for bottle (*fovai*) but, as linguist Janet Dixon Keller has observed (J. Dixon Keller 2008, pers. comm., March) "may also combine *foi* + *vai*—water." As she elaborates "*foi* is a particle that refers to something as special or unique. So the name might be derived from that indicating 'the special/unique water piano'" (J. Dixon Keller 2008, pers. comm., March). In our research we heard the term as "fouvai". While we had assumed that this either represented a pronunciation shift and/or our mishearing of

fovai, Dixon Keller offers a plausible alternative explanation—*fou* means new and *vai* again water so perhaps it was a combination implying new water (i.e., the contents of the first introduced bottles?)” (J. Dixon Keller 2008, pers. comm., March). Note that there is no necessity of one or other of these explanations being the (single) correct one, multiple associated usages are far from inconceivable.

¹⁹ The cassette packaging—reproduced in the CD reissue packaging—does not include production dates. The issue dates for these albums cited in the text are collated from press reports and performer memories but there is a slight uncertainty over the release years of the second and fourth albums (which might be a year earlier than stated).

²⁰ See Dixon Keller and Kuautonga (2007, 240-255) for a detailed discussion of the song.

²¹ See Dixon Keller and Kuautonga (2007, 87-91) for discussion of their repertoire and costume.

²² Written by the Troggs’ singer Reg Presley but erroneously credited to his US namesake Elvis Presley on the album sleeve.

²³ Nangard resigned from her Telecom position in 2005 to concentrate on the Namo Nana Tradi-Cultural village and related youth activities. One of the first outcomes of this was her organisation of a Futunese youth band and dancers to play at a 2005 Pacific youth event in Tahiti.

²⁴ An Australian-English term for (usually) young males indulging in unruly and antisocial behaviour