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The Potential of Vā Part 5: Research-Informed Design

Abstract

The article presented is part of a series of chapters that composed an exegesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The series is a narrative of discovery through practice-led research. Each article reveals its purpose and significance that leads into the next series, which then eventuate to that final design proposal.

The exegesis is presented in this format, to break down the components that assisted in practice-led research. Each article can be read and unpacked on its own as a learning tool. The purpose of this edited series is for the exegesis to be more accessible and adaptable creatively to those being introduced to practice-led research.

The Potential of Vā Part 5: Research-informed design, critically unpacks significant concepts. These include vā, materiality and processes, lalaga, lalava, lines of location, blended backgrounds, imagery and

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colour and experiments underpinning the research design.

The importance of archiving Pacific indigenous artefacts is based on the importance of archiving Pacific knowledge. Sāmoan people have adapted their fa'aSāmoa in the diaspora for the advancement of their culture and people. This provides the basis for which I argue that Pacific peoples should seek out new methods to preserve their artefacts. With reference to the Lala-VĀ model, the interrelationship of family, language, genealogies, chiefly systems, religion, ceremonies and other family obligations is illustrated by the link between artefacts and other aspects of Pacific culture and tradition. The comprehensive nature of the artefacts and the stories that accompany the visual image ensure that the digital archive is all-inclusive.

Design

As noted in the discussion in article Three (*The Potential of Vā Part 3 Location and Identity*), this article focuses on the digital archive. There is a discussion on the different features of the website design, with each part explained in detail. The article is divided into three parts. The first part presents the research-design. In this section, I discuss the digital archive itself. I also reflect on vā as a digital archive, materiality and processes,

traditions and development, lines of location, blended backgrounds, and imagery and colour.

The second section considers the details of the website and discusses a digital archive of Pacific art, its target audience, locating the archive on the web, name of the digital archive, and content that appears on the homepage. The final section discusses why I did not choose a traditional exhibition design to present the works but rather chose to present in this article. The final section also considers the article series, and its significance to the blended Pacific diaspora community.

The subjective designer/ researcher

In this article, I position myself as a subjective researcher. I do not claim independence from the research, but rather the ability to produce ideas and concepts from literature that transforms into designs from the potentials of written language. The article explores and interprets the nature of vā by searching through the traditional meaning and into what is not yet known. While the design is informed by the literature, methodology and stories from the blended Pacific diaspora participants, it also tells my subjective story because the research is filtered through my aesthetic and personal values as a designer. In this process, the filtration is interpreted as the potential of vā through the Lala-Vā of photography, archival research and interviews. The resulting design removes the limitations of

traditional ways of preserving knowledge, and brings them to the forefront of technology and preservation.

As such, the research presupposes knowledge is personal and cultural (Toluta'u, 2015a). In creative, practice-led research Griffiths (2010) states: the self is inescapable, because the person creating, responding to, working on, developing or evaluating performances, artefacts and practices is central to those activities (p.185).

Griffiths proposes that in all research, the researcher must acknowledge and take responsibility both for his or her subjectivity and that of the public because 'all facts and information are value laden [and]... knowledge of human beings gets its meaning from the value system of the knowers' (p. 46). Griffiths (2010) also emphasises that 'the political and social dimensions of individuals' values systems' are important and that '... knowledge gets its meaning from the political position of the knowers, as well as from other value systems'(p.46-48).

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Research informed design: Vā as a digital archive
As mentioned earlier in the article series, vā¯ is pertinent across many Pacific cultures. The concept of vā plays a significant role in the culture and the identity of Pacific peoples. The term vā emphasises for Pacific peoples the importance of relationships and space; it urges the individual to be aware of their relational space with others, and of the knowledge and teachings of ancestors.

I named the digital archive 'Vā' because it speaks and relates to Pacific peoples. It is a term that is significant to culture and identity. Vā also adheres to the concept that 'is a space that separates but also relates' (Wendt, 1996), and the Pacific Islands represented in the digital archive are portrayed visually as separate islands in their geographical location. They are not the same, but share commonalities of oral narratives, history, language, knowledge, identity, culture and many more. These Pacific Islands also share the ocean that separates them. Vā is the word I chose for this digital archive as it is not only understood in many Pacific languages, but also speaks to the Pacific community metaphorically and spiritually.

Ka'ili (2008) writes that vā refers to the art of creating and maintaining relations. This is normally

in reference to relational spaces among Pacific people, but in this article I suggest that it be transferred and expressed through all forms of cultural knowledge. Therefore, I believe the maintenance and preservation of indigenous artefacts builds upon the Pacific concept of vā in that it creates and maintains aspects associated with the concept.

As far back as 1862, Pratt defined vā as 'a space between' (p. 216), but by 1996, Wendt (1996) had translated it as the 'space between' and considers how this 'space between' relates to different identities (p. 1). Recently, Refiti (Refiti 2008, personal communication) discusses the term specifically in relation to the meeting of Sāmoan chiefs (fono), suggesting that vā can describe:

> When Sāmoan chiefs encounter each other in the fono council they don't think strategically about their vā as a between thing – no, they are already in it, they are seized by it and therefore a being-Sāmoan can be said to be already opened. There is no gap, when a matai sits in the fono council he/she is no longer what he/she is today, he/she becomes the ancestor. This is what I mean by a co-openness (Refiti, 2008).

In this research, I frame vā as a distinctive form of relational space that, in contrast to Wendt's (1996) views and in accord with those of Refiti's (personal communication, 2008), may be applied to a unique form of relational space associated with a co-

openness of Pacific peoples. While I admit that such a framing is debateable, the term va̅ allows me to articulate a conceptual form from the exchange of knowledge.

When encountering va̅ we participate in social gatherings by communication; we are therefore in a co-openness of experiencing in an effort to find the true meaning of the existing message. I do not see va̅ as abstract or as ordinary; its diverse meaning has artistic formality and spiritual connotations that are distinctly Pacific.

Vā is the name of the digital archive, it presents stories of a community through photos of indigenous artefacts. However, they are more than photographs; they are collections of narratives and histories that communicate origins of identity, location, diaspora, culture, art, tradition, and space. We, the audience, view these artefacts and narratives, and envisage their history as it is presented to us. Together with the text we begin to see the significance of the artefacts, and we get a sense of belonging, can feel the connection to ancestry, and the grace of the spoken word together with the humility of craftsmanship. These things could not exist in a traditional museum, as they are categorised in a formal Western way of displaying knowledge, and the information provided is formal and academic. When we understand these artefacts in relation to the families' personal narratives, then

we learn the value of artefacts in preserving Pacific knowledge.

Materiality and processes

The images used throughout the website design are photographic, and have been edited in Photoshop CC. The photos were collected between January 2011 and August 2014 from archival research I conducted, and each image was sourced with permission for use in this research. Although I initially intended to present the photographs taken from the interviews as a final conclusion, I chose to display the images in these article series, as well as design a separate component that was beneficial to the Pacific diaspora community. The selection of photos was based on the richness of the talanoa; the connection I felt towards the voice of the participant and the image meant that my handling of the visuals was more in harmony with their identities.

I photographed the spatial environments of Tasi, Lua, Tolu, Fa, Lima and Ono, because this was an insight into their identities. I also chose to interview the participants in their environment as they could speak to objects and spaces, while not disrupting their sense of comfort. I photographed each space using natural light as I did not want to bring excessive equipment that could have disrupted their environments. I did not want them to feel restricted and I knew that this would affect the flow of the conversation and what they shared. While studio

lighting can carry very 'dramatic effects, rich contrasts and heightened details', these are all alterations to the environment, which make it fabricated (Toluta'u, 2015a, p. 71). By photographing these spaces in their homes I may have lost some of these theatrical qualities, but I trust that I came closer to the natural essence of who the participants are and the identities portrayed within these spaces. Consequently, the work has unique characteristics that would have been missed had I photographed the spaces in artificial lighting.

I took approximately 200 shots of each space I visited so I would not need to request further sittings. Because these photographs were taken during and after the interviews, each talanoa was much more relaxed. After each shoot I returned to my studio and tested possible applications on Photoshop CC in order to determine the best way of presenting these images. Towards the end of this process I applied the Lala-Vā methodological process of editing and arrangement.

The final images presented in article three (*The Potential of Vā Part 3 Location and Identity*) represent a collection of objects that were significant in the spaces photographed. Each photo portrays images of artefacts that detail texture, technique, colour, and space. These images can also be seen as a Lala-Vā of family, language, genealogies, chiefly systems,

religion and ceremony. The images show elements of tradition, history, and culture that reflect identity. It was important for the research that the participants who contributed to this research were happy with the choices I made in selecting their talanoa in relation to the photos I had chosen. Therefore, before compiling the final files for submission, I sent them digital copies so that they could inform me of any concerns. This development also allowed them to offer feedback on my artistic approach to their identities. Only when the participants gave their consent did I proceed with my design.

Traditions and development

The lalaga and lalava were not physically made but were manifested through the literature and methodology of Lala-Vā. Visiting communities such as Mamas and Museums where lalaga and lalava were traditional physical practice made me appreciate these techniques and skills that much more.

I was grateful to be able to spend time with the Mamas and Museum community as they shared stories about their lives and how they grew up learning the skills of lalaga and lalava that was a part of their identity. This changed my view of both these skills considerably as I began to understand the materials a lot more, and it made me aware of the amount of effort and time spent on production.

I also gained a deeper understanding of the physical and social significance that lalaga and lalava have to culture. I understood how these techniques bring communities together, and in turn become part of the creation of art.

'The great works of Oceanic art are those that were created when the people made them for their own purposes, to help them understand their own world and their place in it' (Gunn, 2006, p. 16). The making of the digital archive may therefore be seen as both art and cultural construction. While I am responsible for the design and concepts underpinning the work, the archive exists because of the shared commitment to an idea. Rather than simply selecting and digitalising materials, the knowledge and appreciation gained for this research from my community and participants became part of the creation.

Photoshop CC

This project demanded hours of editing and test iterations to resolve design issues. I wanted a design that would represent the Pacific and capture an audience that would recognise the value of the archive and want to contribute to the project. The website design was created on Photoshop CC, and it allowed me the freedom to articulate my thoughts and processes as well as work with the archival images I had collected for this research.

Although traditionally a practice based research presented may have produced a fully-functioning website, this is not the case for this project. Instead of planning a specific design proposal to guide the research, I allowed the literature and the methodology to inform a design that would benefit the research and inform a design proposal. Due to costs and time restrictions placed upon this research project, the proposed digital archive is presented as finalised digitally rendered images as opposed to a live website. However, this website has all the necessary design templates and actions to be coded and go live pending funding approval and consent. Developments in digital archiving enabled me to consider the digital content from the Pacific community that is uploaded and stored to an online archive, andto the best of my knowledge, this has not been created before. An important advantage of working with an online digital archive is being able to filter the content for authenticity and categorisation. This allows for a more refined database of suitable artefacts that align with the aims and purpose of the digital archive.

Lines of Location

The significance of location for the Pacific diaspora is crucial to the development of this digital archive. Location determines the sense of belonging this community has, which is influenced by the location of buried ancestors and the location of Pacific

Islands/ villages in relation to the present locations of the diaspora. Within this method of mapping, lalava is used as the visible lines that locate and mark the territories of the Pacific; lalaga, on the other hand, is used as a metaphorical term of weaving and connecting the Pacific community to their vā relations through the visible lines of lalava. My strategy of mapping, as a design tool, is informed by precedents set by the work of Daniel Libeskind (2001), particularly the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Libeskind's design involved a process of connecting and mapping historic events and locations of Jewish culture in Berlin. The resulting lines determined the structure of the building. Libeskind also used the concepts of absence, emptiness, and the invisible signs of the disappearance of Jewish culture in the city. These notions have an affinity to my own project, particularly the concept of absence in relation to migration and diaspora, and lines of location in terms of locating your home and identity.

Blended backgrounds

This digital archive represents the diversity of Pacific cultures in relation to indigenous art forms. Its intention is to remind the blended Pacific diaspora community of the traditional origins of their identity. The islands shown on the Pacific map that contribute to their unique blends of identity signify the physical location of where they come from. The islands represent and reinforces the vā connections

to homeland, culture, language, genealogies, chiefly systems, church and ceremony. It provides a safe platform for individuals, who struggle with identity, to learn and experience their cultures through the medium of indigenous art.

Imagery and colour

The use of imagery in the digital archive design develops the theme of the ocean, which may be seen as the physical and metaphorical representation of the concept of vā because it both connects and separates the islands. Neutral and subtle colours of blue were used in the background to emphasize the artefacts in the forefront. The subtleness of the sea in the background mimics the physical forms of the artefacts so the two origins are perceived as an extension of each other. The sea represents the Pacific Ocean, which supported migration and also sustains the people of the Pacific.

Research informed design/ project

This section presents the practical design of the digital archive. There is a discussion of the different features of the website design, with each part explained in detail. This section includes images of the digital design.

A digital archive of Pacific art

As part of this research, and with the intention of submitting a practical component with the written

piece, I developed an online digital archive for the preservation of Pacific artefacts. The website will be free to access globally and will act as an archive to preserve the knowledge pertaining to Pacific artefacts that are held in the diaspora. Therefore, the website is an international resource. In her thesis, Ka'ai-Mahuta (2010) presents a digital repository for the preservation of *waiata* (poem, song, chant) and states:

> The repository will illustrate the interface between recovering traditional knowledge and storing this through innovated technology for the future. The importance of archiving Māori oral history and tradition has been established, and it is for this reason that the repository will include not only the lyrics of the *waiata* but also in-depth analysis of the meaning behind the lyrics (p.281).

Like Ka'ai-Mahuta's digital repository, the design of the digital archive demonstrates the connection between recovering traditional knowledge and storing this through innovative technology for the future. Ka'ai-Mahuta (2010) explains that her repository contains the lyrics of the *waiata* but also an in-depth analysis, and this means that the user of the repository is provided with more understanding of the content of the *waiata* and the composer. This resonated with me as it mirrored the concept of what I was trying to produce. The digital archive is designed for the Pacific diaspora to upload their content and provide their personal written

narrative (in their own language if appropriate) pertaining to the artefact. This provides for a more personal dialogue and collection; one that belongs to the community and adheres to the references provided by the community. The uploader will have the option of adding extra content, such as the history behind the artefact, information about the maker, supplementary video footage of the artefact being made or used, and supporting links about the artefact. The copyright also belongs to the person who uploads the content. Users of the website who wish to use the images must contact the website for permission, and the website administrator will follow up with the instructions and protocols provided by the uploader.

The website itself has been designed and organised with simplicity and ease in mind, and for the purpose of navigation and accessibility for most ages. The digital archive has been developed in English, however the uploader will have the option of uploading the content in their native language or in English.

Target audience

As mentioned earlier, this website is designed for the Pacific diaspora to upload photos and content on Pacific artefacts, however it is not limited to this community. It is for the use of anyone with authentic Pacific artefacts that they wish to preserve and archive digitally. Like the digital repository

created by Ka'ai-Mahuta, it is an archive conceived for academic use, 'but is not limited to, school teachers, university students and lecturers', artists, archivists, 'and people overseas researching things' Pacific (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2010, p. 282).

Locating the archive on the web

Search engines, such as Google would be the starting point for most users accessing artefacts through the internet. To ensure the archive is accessible and known to the user, it will need to appear via these searches. The table below is a list of words that will be provided to the website developers to use as keywords that will lead to the archive when users are searching on the internet.

Table 3: Key words for website developers

Keywords	
Pacific art	Indigenous art
Pacific artifacts	Indigenous artifacts
Pacific weaving	Indigenous weaving
Pacific lashing	Indigenous lashing
Pacific craft	Indigenous craft
Pacific wood	Indigenous wood
Pacific stone	Indigenous stone
Pacific bone	Indigenous bone
Pacific fibre art	Indigenous fibre art
Pacific shells	Indigenous shells
Pacific archive	Indigenous archive
Pacific library	Indigenous library
Pacific collection	Indigenous collection
Pacific files	Indigenous files
Pacific records	Indigenous records
Pacific history	Indigenous history
Pacific culture	Indigenous culture
Pacific traditions	Indigenous traditions
Pacific knowledge	Indigenous knowledge
Pacific Islands	

Name of the digital archive

The name 'Vā' was the obvious choice pointed out to me by my primary supervisor. Her recognition of the word includes everyone from the Pacific and denotes our vā relations between one another as people of

the Pacific. It is used metaphorically and spiritually, and it separates us but at the same time it connects us. The word vā is part of most Pacific languages, but its meaning is significant to all Pacific cultures. 'Ia teu le vā.' Cherish/nurse/care for the Vā, the relationships' (Wendt, 1996, p. 1) between the Pacific Islands, and this digital archive aims to achieve the same degree of nurture through its artefacts.

The website address is www.pacific.art.archive.com. It is straightforward and in a few words describes what the website is about.

Content that will appear on the website
When the web address is located, the user will be faced with the Vā homepage. The homepage provides the first impression for the archive. The headings that follow the homepage will be displayed in further detail.

Homepage
Welcome to 'Vā', the text appears in the bottom left-hand corner of the homepage. It provides a brief overview of 'Vā'.

About page
The 'About' page contains information about the archive, including the aim and purpose of the website.

Resource page
The 'Resource' page contains information about how the website is a use of resource for the public.

Pacific Art page
The 'Pacifc Art' page presents the user with a map of the Pacific Islands. It is an archive of artefacts that pertain to each island. The user selects their region of choice, and browses through the collection. Filters appear as an option to narrow down the search finding.

Material page
The 'Material' page provides the user with the archive of artefacts categorised by material. The user is to select their material of choice, and browse through the collection. Filters appear as an option to narrow down the search finding.
Once the user has selected the artefact of choice, they are presented with the written detail information available about the artefact on the right-hand side of the page. The visual photographed image appears on the top left-hand corner of the page, followed by featured media available below (which enlarge when selected).

Contribute page
The 'Contribute' page provides information for those who wish to contribute to the archival website.

Contact page

The 'Contact' page provides contact details for the contributors who wish to contact the webpage administrator. The 'Contact' page also provides a submission box for those who wish to upload and contribute to the archival website. The user is advised to familiarise themselves with the submission rules and guidelines before uploading their entry.

Search function

The 'Search' function provides the user to search by conducting a simple search. Filters will then appear as an option to narrow down the finding

Research-Informed Design

Conclusion

This article outlined the design of the digital archive. I have been interested in Pacific artefacts in relation to identity for many years and as a designer, always felt a close connection to the concept of vā. While testing the potential surrounding the uniqueness and value of vā, I concluded that vā is an essential part of Pacific culture, as it speaks of the knowledge that exists for its people. Pacific culture has layers of meaning that are hidden and revealed, like the lalaga and lalava that are reflected in Pacific artefacts. This is the primary focus of the archive, to reveal and protect Pacific artefacts and the knowledge pertaining to them.

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