CRITICAL ISSUES IN CULTURAL CONSERVATION: 
A PACIFIC ISLAND PERSPECTIVE

Konai Helu-Thaman

Introduction
For the indigenous, resource-based societies of the small islands of the Pacific Ocean, the dual issues of cultural values and conservation planning are inextricably linked ... they are not just another bandwagon to be jumped on to, but rather a matter of life (and perhaps death). It is thus very timely for ICOMOS to host a conference on the theme of Cultural Values and Conservation Planning, no simply because we are midway through the UN Decade for Cultural Development but because our cultural heritage, a heritage which is closely linked to conservation, is under threat. Moreover, conservation is not just a matter of preserving historic sites and monuments, but also a matter of preserving and maintaining cultural diversity (and associated environmental diversity) in a region where modern development is 'successfully' bringing about cultural standardisation and conformity.

A detailed treatment of our countries' concern about the sustainability of our cultures and associated environments is to be found in a publication entitled the The Pacific Way, the Pacific Islands Regional Report to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). In the report, Hon. Jeremia Tabai, Secretary General of the Forum Secretariat, former president of Kiribati and Pro Chancellor of The University of the South Pacific stressed that for the people of Kiribati, "the object of the exercise of sustainable development is to survive on the atolls forever." (SPREP, 1992:7). The same can be argued for most other Pacific island societies. Thus, for us, conservation of the island environment must be seen as the most important pre-requisite for cultural survival.

The current concern about culture and conservation is not new to us. It has however, become more serious because of the perceived impact of foreign influences on our island societies and cultures and increasing signs of social and environmental breakdown. Ironically, recent concerns about culture or the environment have been popularised by people from western industrial societies, whose wish to maintain the quality of THEIR "cultural" and lifestyles has given rise to the kinds of processes which contribute to the deterioration of OUR cultures and lifestyles as well as our environment!

What is Culture?
In keeping with a western scientific tradition, 'culture' (and its related concepts, cultural heritage and cultural property) needs to be defined. There are two ways in which the word culture is commonly used in English. The first is the popular one in which culture tends to be associated with "highbrow" western music, literature, art, sculpture, etc. The second is the social scientific one largely employed by sociologists and anthropologists, which generally refers to a way of life, learned and shared by people who belong to a particular group.

It is the second of these that comes closest to the way culture is perceived in our part of the world. For most people culture is associated with shared, unique aspects of a way of life of a people. The Tongan notion of mo'ui fakatonga (Tongan life) implies a way of life which characterises the Tongan people. It includes every aspect of Tongan life - material, intellectual and spiritual. It is used variously to mean both the process of living as well as the product of living. More recently, however, the expressive aspects of our cultures, such as music, dance, art and craft, have been emphasised largely because of their association with modern development initiatives such as tourism.

I shall come back to this point later but it is important at this stage to acknowledge the apparent conflicts between the cultural perspective (western/european/scientific) which informs our deliberations, and those of most Pacific island cultures. This is critical not only for discussions at the conceptual level, but also at the level of strategic planning for conservation purposes.
Basic Assumptions
As a touchstone for this presentation, I make five basic assumptions, some of which are derived from cognitive anthropology. These are:

1) that culture is a way of life which is shared by people who belong to it;
2) that understanding culture is central to understanding human beings;
3) that people who belong to a culture has a unique system for perceiving and organising the world around them;
4) that cultural knowledge is reflected in the language used by members, especially in the meanings that they share; and,
5) that it is useful to see parts of a culture from the point of view of members of that culture.

Cultural Heritage and Cultural Property
As you know, the notion of conservation of cultural heritage has its origin in western Europe. ICOMOS for example, was a post World War II organisation established to provide a channel for major activities in the conservation of architectural heritage and the concern for the historical environment. Although the main emphasis was initially the conservation of historic monuments, this was seen as too narrow and later expanded to encompass cultural property. However, this expanded interpretation of cultural heritage made decision-making more difficult, hence the need for a conceptual foundation as well as a methodology for the protection of cultural property (Erder, 86:17). In our contexts, an even wider interpretation of cultural heritage would be preferred, one that would include all aspects of a culture (both tangible and intangible) which have been selected to represent and place it in context, both in time and space. It can be tangible (movable or immovable, e.g. battlegrounds, gardens, caves, volcanoes, burial sites, forests, etc.) or intangible, (e.g. language, religion or customs). (See Table 1 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification of Cultural Property</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TANGIBLE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOVEABLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crafts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMMOVABLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battlegrounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTANGIBLE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LANGUAGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(See Table 1 below).
Critical Issues
In considering the notion of conservation of cultural heritage in the contexts of our island countries, I would like therefore to address two basic issues. These relate to

1) the question of definition and identification of cultural values and cultural heritage as these will have a bearing on the nature or types of "monuments" or sites that are considered important; and

2) the impact of cultural change and development on our perceived cultural heritage (and associated monuments and sites).

Meaning and Definition
As suggested earlier, there are fundamental differences in the values of the "cultures" (or worldviews) which inform and are responsible for the prevailing concept of conservation of cultural heritage and those of indigenous Pacific island societies (see table 2). Such differences are further complicated by the language (English and ideology (Western urban/industrial/capitalist) which we see to have adopted in discussing these issues. Some of the differences may not be readily discernable by those of us who have been socialised and/or schooled in a western scientific intellectual tradition. However, such issues need to be acknowledged.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLYNESIAN/PACIFIC</th>
<th>WESTERN/INDUSTRIAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>emphasis on spiritual/ supernatural</td>
<td>emphasis on the secular/scientific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasis on hierarchy (rank/authority)</td>
<td>emphasis on democracy (equality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasis on specific contexts</td>
<td>emphasis on universals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasis on confirmity (group)</td>
<td>emphasis on originality/individuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasis on interdependence</td>
<td>emphasis on independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasis on others' feelings</td>
<td>emphasis on individual rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasis on all blood ties</td>
<td>emphasis on nuclear family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasis on restraint (non-confrontational)</td>
<td>emphasis on inquiry/criticism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Let us, for example, consider the question of language and meaning. As many of you know, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis asserts that language determines people’s way of thinking: the way they classify and perceive things (Houston, 1972: 185-188). Although this view does not take into account the fact that different worldviews are held by people who speak the same language and similar worldviews are shared by people who speak different languages, the importance of language in considering cultural values must be strongly emphasised. In my view, language is important not so much in the sense that it determines the ways in which members of a culture perceive the world around them, but in the sense that it determines what members of a particular culture attend to - in other words, what they value. (Halliday, 78: 198). The implications of this for our conference theme is important. Cultural values affect what people consider to be their cultural heritage as well as the way in which they wish to preserve that heritage. As such, Pacific peoples need to decide for themselves which tangible and intangible aspects of their cultural heritage they wish to preserve, in line with their cultural values, as expressed in their vernacular languages. The important principle here is that the value underpinnings of any plans for the conservation of cultural heritage must be derived from and sensitive to the culture concerned, including a sensitivity to and understanding of local languages. A corollary of this is that if we lose the words or language used to refer to important aspects or “monuments” of our cultures, then these are devalued, their meaning lost and they are placed in danger of extinction conservation terms.

The Council of Europe in 1965 defined ‘cultural property’ as: areas to be preserved for their natural, scientific, aesthetic, historical and ethnological value”. Although “ethnological” would encompass spiritual or religious sites (and cathedrals are often a common target of cultural heritage conservation) in many parts of the Pacific, all areas may have spiritual value. The dichotomy between sanctified and non-sanctified areas is a relatively recent notion/concept associated with the introduction of Christianity. It is often difficult therefore to define, classify and rank (a requirement of western science) sites, particularly in terms of “conservation priority”. For example, in some areas, merely revealing the location of a particular site may in itself by a desecration of that site and may eventually lead to its destruction. (This has been reported to be true for some attempts in Australia at “conserving” traditional aboriginal initiation sites and paintings which actually led to their desecration by Aborigines themselves in order to avoid such sites being seen by outsiders).

In many parts of the Pacific Islands, public attention has been drawn to the need to preserve cultural heritage, as it is conceptualised by westerners, and mainly associated with recent developments in tourism. However, conservation activities have generally been piecemeal and lack co-ordination because activities are often located in different government departments or organisations (such as a national trust, town and country planning department, or tourism bureau). Furthermore the initiative to begin conservation work has usually come from ‘outside’, from people with different perspectives from those of the islanders, who may not share the values and meanings of conservationists.

Pre-capitalist Pacific islanders had a worldview that was vastly different from that of those Europeans who came to “civilise” them.

They did not classify “culture” in the same way as westerners do: they did not “see” their way of life as consisting of different pieces or properties. Their concept of fonua (whenua/vanua etc) was inclusive of what westerners would normally regard as nature, material culture and non-material culture. For example, the Tongan concept koloa tukufakaholo (“valued traditional possessions”), often used as a translation of cultural heritage, essentially refers to anything of value that is passed on from one generation to another and includes both tangible and intangible property in the senses used by westerners.

For our ancestors, nature was inherently sacred, an interplay of changing natural and cultural forces. Harmony among ALL things was paramount. People had a responsibility for maintaining harmony among everything that existed in nature because they shared a common heritage. The bounty that existed was precious NOT as a resource to be exploited but the way Nature provided. The ancients honoured their environment and
their feelings and thoughts were linked to processes and events within it, NOT apart from it. The languages they used to describe it was often gentle and accommodating, and their music, and expressive arts often served to unfold a vast, spiritually charged cosmic continuum in which people, their islands, biosphere and the universe were rolled into the one conception of: whenua/ fonua/ venua, venua, now commonly translated as “land”. The dichotomy between a spiritual and material world, therefore did not exist in pre-Christian Pacific societies.

This is in contrast to the perspective of most westerners who view nature as if it were an ‘object’ apart from the people who live in it and in order to understand it, it is necessary to reduce nature into finite sets of laws, using special tools, developed over the last few centuries of scientific thought. Reducing nature into bits and pieces would thus enable people to manipulate it, explain it and make predictions about it, while of course remaining aloof and outside of it.

The (traditional) worldview is still present among many Pacific Island peoples and therefore it is important to take it into consideration in addressing some of the issues of this conference. This may mean that for the Pacific Islands, we would need truly bilingual/bicultural persons who can understand different concepts and values and express these appropriately, cross culturally.

Such a bilingual/bicultural perspective is critical given the need for selection and prioritisation in the cultural conservation process, which up until very recently, had often involved methods of planning and management that were alien to the cultures in which these activities took place. In my view, there is a need to discover traditional processes and methods of conservation, in order to ensure that the process as well as the product of conservation are culturally appropriate in non-western contexts.

In relation to this issue therefore, I wish to suggest that in terms of cultural heritage, we do not speak about the conservation of cultural property; instead we speak about conservation of cultures as integrated, living entities, because conservation planning that disregards cultural context will be problematic, even meaningless to most of our peoples.

Cultural Change and the Threat of Standardisation

The second critical issue relates to the need to consider our theme in the contexts of Pacific history as well as modern development initiatives. Most of you are probably aware of the scope and intensity of the kinds of cultural transformation which have occurred. Beginning with so-called European ‘discoveries’ followed by the advent of Christianity and European colonialism and more recently with the post colonial commercial imperative that is seen as “development”, the process of cultural transformation rages in our islands, fuelled by the mass media, advances in transport and telecommunications and of course, modern education.

It is ironic that while scientists are now busy trying to plan for the conservation of our biodiversity, modern development is causing the standardisation of our cultures. This is because we often seem to be attacking the symptoms rather than the causes of (the disease of) cultural and environmental deterioration.

The diversity of cultural systems and languages, evolved over thousands of years, in response to the great diversity of island environments, is a most valuable global cultural heritage. There is therefore a need to identify:

1) the kinds of things which have led and are leading to the erosion of this diversity and

2) the impact that it will have on conservation and sustainable development of our island cultures. It is my view that the current most serious threat to the maintenance of cultural diversity, in the Pacific Islands, has been the introduction of and propaganda supporting, the needs of the free market economy.

The free market economy, to which most of the world and now all PICs are aspiring, was, and will continue to be exploitative of our islands’ cultures - the environment as well as the people. Whereas the impact of the market economy on islands’ ecosystems has been well documented, its effects on Pacific Islanders - their labour as well as their minds are not. This is probably because the people who are best placed to confront this issue are themselves too cocooned by the perceived
material benefits of the market economy, to be aware of what is really happening to themselves, their cultures and the Pacific island environment in general.

A few examples of modern development activities in the PICs would serve to illustrate the impact of the market economy on current and future attempts to protect the region’s cultural diversity. Forests are being logged by companies whose only interest is to make money. The forest which has served as the hardware store, drug store and supermarket for countless generations of Pacific islanders is being mistakenly treated as income instead of capital. Shipping off trees to Japan, Korea or Australia in many ways is like trying to build up a bank account by making withdrawals. Rivers are dammed and sacred sites eliminated from the face of the earth in order to promote industrial development, with little regard to the people who, for hundred of years, made a living from these areas. Land, previously used for growing yams, taro, breadfruit, coconuts and bananas has been taken over for the growing of export crops. Farmers who were previously well-off in subsistence terms are now heavily into debt either to the development bank or the local store or both, and, as a relative once described to me, “are often treated like rubbish” by creditors. It is like the debt crisis of most developing countries (who are all know are really bankrupt) replayed at the community or family level.

Concern has also been raised about the negative impact of tourism on island cultures. These include:

1) debasement and commercialisation of the culture (such as for example the conflict between the giving and sharing ethic of a kinship-based culture and profit maximisation of tourism development;)

2) impact on traditional practices and ancestral sites, (such as for example, destruction of or encroachment by developers on natural or ancestral sites);

3) loss of traditional access and use of resources, (such as, for example, loss of fishing, hunting and gathering areas for local people( and,

4) loss of scenic coastal resources and sites occupied by resort hotels which obstruct and alert views and forbid access to non-hotel guests (Minerbi, 1992:48-54).

In many parts of our region, it appears as if the livelihood of most of our people and their cultures are being undermined in the interests of the few, many of whom live outside of the region in the citadels of business and international aid and aspire towards higher and higher materials standards of living, possible only through the exploitation of our natural and human resources. Those of us who live in the islands are often blinds to the destructive forces of modern industrial society because of our (western) education as well as our acquired lifestyles. Many fail to see the widespread evidence of cultural and social breakdown and the direct result of a failure to seriously address the issue of cultural conservation and modern development practices.

Take the example of Tonga, where in 1986 a proposal by a joint venture company to import toxic wastes from California almost became a reality. It was obvious that a few people both in Tonga and in the United States, considered that most Tongans were too dumb, too poor and too respectful of authority (a high-ranking person was involved in the deal) to resist the dumping of waste, (too toxic to even be shipped from Californian ports) which would not be accepted in richer, better educated communities. Thank God for a few enlightened Tongans who acted quickly and helped stop the proposed venture.

If cultural conservation is accepted as a precondition for the conservation of valued "sites" then, for us we have to begin with the re-eduction of our people, especially young people, to value their cultural heritage. Such a task will be difficult in some areas because, over the years, our cultures have become commodified, our people, especially those with traditional knowledge and skills, disempowered, due mainly to forces such as: the replacement of informal, subsistence economies by market, monetised economies; the introduction of wage labour; the movement from communal ownership to privatisation; the creation of state bureaucracies replacing and undermining the authority of local communities; the adoption of centralised and resource-
intensive technology; and the introduction of the notion of economies of scale. To this we could add the recent umbrella of aid agencies which, in almost all their activities (economic, scientific or education) show their urban-technocratic bias and usually have as their bottom line the preservation of the global free-market economy and their cultural and scientific dominance over economic development and conservation.

All these forces of change have greatly affected our individual as well as our collective views of the world, our religious beliefs, our view of ourselves and our environment - in other words, our views of our cultures. Fortunately much of this) traditional) knowledge and understandings still exist mainly among our elders and those in rural areas.

Where I come from, there is a common saying that goes something like this: “toki mahu’inga e koloa ‘i he ‘ene mole” (the value of something only becomes evident when it is lost for ever). Many Pacific islanders are realising that they are losing some of the good things of their our cultures, and replacing these with inferior, often dangerous foreign things. Cultural knowledge, skills and values need to be conserved not so much because this is likely to generate economic benefits (although this is an important justification for some) but because our cultures have intrinsic value and destruction of them will be irreversible.

Need for Cultural Analysis
For cultural conservation to become a reality the first critical need is for Pacific islanders to seriously look at their cultures in order to identify those elements both tangible and intangible for which planning is needed. This is particularly so given the recent onslaught of modern development models and their underlying values, on our traditional cultures. The consequences of these have been serious and include the development of patterns of values and beliefs which often conflict with and are detrimental to the maintenance of our cultural heritage and identities. Furthermore, the increasing signs of environmental and social breakdown in western industrial countries themselves show that these models and ethics don’t even work in the long run in the countries where they evolved.

It is ironic that many of us have not realised that the diversity which has helped our peoples survive as distinct cultures for thousands of years is now being rapidly eroded and jeopardised. Too many mistakes are being made in the name of progress and ‘development’ - development which is leading to conformity and standardisation not only in our built and visual environment (there are hardly any traditional style houses in most Pacific towns) but also of cultural values and belief systems. The characteristics and emphases which give island cultures their uniqueness are now being seriously threatened by the advancing tide of conformity to Anglo-American, mass culture, now being aggressively extended to rural areas by the mass media and to a certain extent, modern development projects.

One of the more serious and visible consequences of modern influences on our cultures has been the weakening of the conservation ethic, once an integral part of our traditional indigenous cultures. Researchers (who are mainly foreign) today are trying to obtain and record knowledge of and skills in traditional conservation (methods) from our elders, because our young and educated people have lost these - knowledge, skills and values as well as the language associated with traditional conservation strategies, the very foundation of cultural adaptation and survival for over thousands of years.

A Synthesis
The task of reclaiming our cultural heritage is going to depend on a successful synthesis of western and indigenous perspectives, because, despite the gulf between them, each has a lot to learn from the other. Furthermore, both appreciate the interconnectedness of life and both see the danger of a deteriorating environment.

There are, however, positive signs that Pacific islanders are beginning to appreciate the need for cultural conservation. The Tourism Council of the South Pacific (TCSP), for example, is aware of the need to promote projects which are both environment and culture-friendly: projects which on the one hand bring maximum economic benefits to the region, while at the
same time minimise potential adverse social, cultural
and environmental effects.

The Council is well placed to appreciate the cultural
sensitivities associated with conservation planning.
According to the Council, very few protected areas have
been established. One of the reasons for this is the fact
that residents do not see a need for them. Others
include lack of coordination between interested parties
as well as lack of communication between site workers
and landowners.

It its work in Solomon Islands, TCSP is of the view that
an important aspect of management is that it be vested
in customary owners with advice from the appropriate
Ministry. Local ownership and participation is therefore
crucial in conservation planning and design (Kudu,

Education is also seen as a major vehicle for raising
people’s consciousness about cultural conservation. In
February this year, a UNESCO-sponsored Pacific sub­
regional seminar on Education and Cultural
Development was held in Rarotonga. There, senior
educators from around the Pacific met to share ideas
about the role of their own cultures in the education of
children and to consider ways of incorporating elements
of their indigenous cultures into the school curriculum.

I am happy to also note that yesterday saw the
establishment of the first ICOMOS chapter in our
region. This will also contribute towards raising
consciousness about the importance of planning for
cultural conservation. Whatever the outcome of this
and any other attempts made in the name of cultural
conservation might be, there is a need for systematic
planning and coordination of conservation activities. Of
course this is for each country to decide but my view is
that a Ministry, perhaps the Ministry of the
Environment, of the Ministry of Culture, be assigned the
task, as it is too important to be left to chance.
Eventually, because of the central importance of cultural
conservation to ALL development initiatives, it is
desirable to place such a task in Central Planning or in a
separate cross-sectoral body with high-level
representation from all relevant ministries and non­
governmental organisations.

A Possible Conceptual Framework for
Planning for Cultural Conservation

Finally, there is a need for a comprehensive plan for
Cultural Conservation to include general guiding
principles to protection each island country’s tangible
and intangible cultural properties. The following points
may provide a conceptual framework.

1. What are the major cultural values or emphases
which would serve as the major value underpinnings
of conservation/development goals? The process
needed for this task would depend on the country
concerned and the advice of truly bicultural/
linguistic persons who can express important
concepts and values appropriately and cross
culturally.

2. What identifiable tangible and/or intangible
properties or “monuments” are there for protection/
conservation and who should be responsible for their
development as well as management? (Possibilities:
vernacular language - curriculum section; traditional
arts and crafts - national training centre or museum;
built environment - national trust, etc.).

3. With respect to each main category in 2 there will be
a need for a structure upon which planning and
management may be based. For example, in the
case of “movable property”, information about:

   a) general description and origin;
   b) materials from which the item is made;
   c) processes of making the item;
   d) value;
   e) users;
   f) standards of judging quality; etc.

4. For each item identified in 3 above, we need to
consider ways in which the item has been influenced
by foreign cultures, when and how.

Conclusion

In considering cultural heritage and conservation, we
need to take an integrated, holistic view of a living
culture and not selected aspects of it. Such a move
would be in line with the 1987 World Commission on
the Environment which pleaded for the prompt
restoration of traditional land and resource rights of the world’s remaining indigenous peoples and called for a renewed respect for their ecological wisdom (WCED, 1987:114-115).

Such a view is also in line with that of our forefathers and foremothers and those of our elders who continue to live or are trying to live in harmony/in symbiosis with their vanua. Their voices which embody the source cultures of the Pacific, are now being drowned by the roar of culturally insensitive modernisers, reformers and their market-driven philosophies.

Organisations such as ICOMOS need to recognise, acknowledge and accommodate the culturally different perspectives of non-western peoples when implementing so-called “global” initiatives. In my view, the Eurocentric nature of much of the work of many international organisations is partly responsible for their failure to devise meaningful solutions for dealing with world problems and what appears to most of us to be a perpetuation of western capitalist imperialism. I believe that the indigenous cultures of the Pacific have a lot to offer the rest of the world in terms of the diversity of understandings and values which have helped them persist and survive in a world which continue to demand conformity to values which, in my view, will ultimately lead to our self-destruction. Pacific peoples must now join forces in order to share knowledge and ideas about cultural conservation, for

we cannot let our silences again keep us apart
mortgage our identities
or even sell our pride
we do not want to suffer pain
quietly at the end
for we know deep inside
we’ve only ourselves to blame

References


