

Comparative and international learning from Vanuatu research moratoria: A plurilevel, plurilocal researcher's auto-ethnography

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In this article, I offer a reflexive auto-ethnography to revisit questions about knowledge and research practices in international contexts, influenced differently by aspects of globalization. Specifically, I position my experience of the Vanuatu research moratorium on 'foreign' researchers of 2013/2014 as a lynchpin to analyse and contribute to long-standing, recently revived debates about ethics in research, the politics of international comparisons, and their relationships with traditional knowledge. I base analysis primarily on my plurilevel research and experiences in parts of Vanuatu, in Australia and in our shared South Pacific sub-region in global context between 2008 and 2016, and on my plurilocal personal and researcher identity. In these spaces, the salience of postcolonial identities—with those already allocated, perceived, or shared—has long been tied to different actors' research aims, application, conduct, and funding. Lenses of critical globalization and postcolonial theories and critical discourse analysis have informed my research to date and, in undertaking this auto-ethnography, I confront current limits and possibilities in these. One aim is to shed light on how we might extend understanding and enactment of inter-related practices of ownership, production, and uses of knowledge situated within decolonizing discourses and more rapidly changing, integrated education and research contexts. I explore how understanding these dimensions can contribute to strengthening our understandings of and resulting approaches to knowledge production and sharing, which I see as the core work of research, research relationships and, ultimately, education and teaching.

Keywords: research ethics and politics; auto-ethnography; moratorium

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, as a fledgling doctoral researcher on an Asia Pacific regional Australian government-affiliated grant project—and as a fledgling Australian—I had much to learn when I began comparative and international research in the area of multilevel education and development policies; and, certainly, I still do. I did, however, bring to the inquiries a significant range of 'international' personal and professional experience as well as heritage that defy the singular age-, citizenship-, class-, gender-based, ethnic, and

linguistic reductions (to which they are regularly subjected)¹ for a number of reasons that speak to the key themes I address in this article and my research. These themes include: knowledge ('contemporary' and that identified as 'traditional'), and personal and professional histories of colonization, globalization, migration and identity politics, intersecting most strongly, in my case, with class, citizenship, and gender aspects (Appiah, 2007; Crenshaw, 1991).

The particular combination of my own markers of personal and professional identity frames analysis further within dynamic global circumstances of heightened *plurilevel* and *plurilocal* interdependence (Nederveen-Pieterse, 2015; Waite & Cook, 2011). For both terms, I adopt the prefix of 'pluri-' over 'multi-' to capture a sense of simultaneity of location and identification with place, professional, and personal (Selasi, 2014). I see affinities with Aikman's (2014) writing on language in education where, in making a case for plurilingual education, she observes the need to acknowledge that some people have layered and 'complex repertoires' of language, which I extend to other markers of identity. The following point is useful for capturing the distinction with 'multi-':

In terms of multilingual societies, [researchers] note how particular languages are linked to particular identities or geographical locations, and particular languages are seen as bounded and distinct from one another. (p. 222)

Plurilevel here refers to activities occurring across subnational, national, regional, and global levels, limited constructions though these may be. *Plurilocal*, similarly, refers to a multiplicity of locations that may be experienced, or valued, differently and still simultaneously.

The steps I take in the article are to first position my plurilocal personal and researcher identity, to provide some contextual detail about Vanuatu, and then to discuss Vanuatu research policy and moratoria on 'foreign' researchers. Following this, I add layers about my plurilevel research and experiences in parts of Vanuatu, in Australia, and in our shared South Pacific sub-region between 2008 and 2016, together with the most recent research moratorium. I offer analysis of the moratorium as a lynchpin in proceeding with subsequent analysis about ethics of research, the politics of international comparisons and their relationships with traditional knowledge, especially in Melanesia and the Pacific islands.

I undertake this reflexive auto-ethnography to revisit questions about knowledge and research practices in international contexts that are differently influenced by aspects of globalization. Some details of the particular combination of identity markers that contribute to my standpoint should be outlined here, not only because I have chosen an auto-ethnographic genre but also because discussions about the ways that *who* we are individually relate to *how* we are as educators and/or researchers are increasingly common amongst colleagues and with students. Understanding researcher identity is important in the ways it can influence the chosen processes and outcomes of research (Harding, 1993, 2008). Making those elements visible is particularly relevant to the method and handling of knowledge and research in this article. In the level of detail that follows, I intend, in part, to anchor the complexity of those abstract concepts of

¹ These reductions relate as much to aspects of educational 'success as failure', escape and erasure (Reay 2006), which I discuss below, as to our subjective comparisons against local and national norms, and/or situated assumptions and experiences.

globalization, migration, and postcoloniality that relate to education. It is my own reckoning of Wright Mills' (1959) 'sociological imagination', which sees connection of our personal lived experiences with shared social phenomena. I also aim to demonstrate my deeply informed personal interest in, and insistence on, plurilevel analysis where such geographically and socially varied individual biographies are, while not new, pertinent and prevalent in our times of increased migration – forced and voluntary (Waite & Cook, 2011).

I have lived for three, five, seven, eight and fourteen years, respectively, in: Japan, the US, UK, Bermuda and Australia, not in that order. During that time, I attended a range of different types of schools in towns, nations, and on different islands, spanning large and small, public-private, sex-disaggregated, and religious and secular institutions. I accumulated an accent that most people cannot locate, and learned three languages, but now only use English. I have worked as an educator in different nations for two decades, in primary and high schools, privately, and in a higher education institution. My mother descends from one of the first seven families to inhabit Reunion Island (epitome of a cosmopolitan melting pot) and is of mixed, predominantly French, descent that traverses Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles but who, unlike my grandparents, was born and raised, English-speaking, in Kenya, where she lived until pregnant with me. My father is from a town then, and perhaps somewhat still, steeped in nationalistic and patriarchal practices and values in the North of England, of Irish, Scottish and Germanic descent. Both parents were originally working class, and both keenly understood and valued education—as, partly, do I—in the highly ambivalent senses of 'erasure' and 'escape' that Reay (2006) articulates, and as 'success as failure', in its occasional alienations and confusions about 'belonging' (Waite & Cook, 2011). Neither parent went to university.

Where many in our increasingly competitive and populous world see the provision or attainment of particular types of education as offering potential solutions to our most perplexing and ever-emerging questions, to acknowledge these influences in research into education is all the more pertinent. It is worth considering the ways that the content, policies and provision of education are influenced, not only by processes associated with globalisation, but also with how people's experiences of globalization inform those processes. Contemporary work in cosmopolitanism has gone some way towards considering these dimensions (Appiah, 2007).

That comparative and international education (CIE) research is practiced within spaces informed by contemporary and historical political change, and by individuals of varied personal and professional backgrounds, has been widely recognized. Researchers may concurrently work as activists, educators, policy makers, and/or politicians; we could identify ourselves or be identified by different actors or at different times as 'insiders', 'outsiders' or as occupying more complex, less easily defined, or essentialized, spaces (McNess, Arthur, & Crossley 2013).

After opening with a discussion of the approach to auto-ethnography that I take, I look more closely at the contexts for the Vanuatu moratorium on 'foreign' researchers, and my learning of them, and then proceed to situate these within contemporary politics of international comparisons and 'traditional' knowledge in South Pacific and plurilevel education and development contexts.

AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

My approach to auto-ethnography here represents two variations of the method. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, p. 19) identify the first as ‘layered accounts’ and, in this account, I layer abstract analysis, data, reflection, and relevant literature through lenses of personal and professional experiences, thereby highlighting the ‘procedural nature of research’ (p. 20). Ellis et al. note the implications of this approach for the purposes of research, identified as a ‘source of questions and comparisons’ rather than a ‘measure of truth’ (p. 117) and, after Rambo (2005, p. 583 as cited in Ellis et al. 2011, p. 20), identity is treated here as an ‘emergent process’. The approach I take, therefore, also resembles elements of ‘reflexive ethnographies’, or, ‘confessional tales’ (Van Mannen, 1988 as cited in Ellis et al., 2011) where the ethnographer’s backstage research endeavours become the focus of investigation (Ellis, 2004 as cited in Ellis et al. 2011, p. 20). The aim is to illuminate broader phenomena, in this case plurilocal researcher approaches and identities in shifting plurilevel (where ‘levels’ may include, for example, policy arenas, spatial, and temporal) contexts (Waite & Cook, 2011).

My prior (since 2007) and current comparative, international research, informs the analysis in this article. In conducting elements of critical discourse analysis (CDA) through different stages, my methodology has consisted of what Street (2009) calls an, ‘ethnographic epistemological approach’ to interviews and textual analysis that have prioritized cultural and historical contextual dimensions. Through the—also layered—methodological approach of CDA in prior research, I have sought to map and understand the construction of education and development policies by various education and development actors that work at multiple levels of activity and policy in Southeast Asian and the South Pacific contexts. I have specifically focused on the roles of language and power in those processes (Fairclough, 2003; McCormick, 2011, 2012). I investigate discursive processes through which actors and policies—civil society, donor and government employees—in aid-receiving, post-colonial contexts have been involved in the regional and global programs of Education for All (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), ‘post-2015 agenda-setting’ processes, and the sustainable development goals (SDGs) (McCormick 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016a, 2016b).

Since beginning that work, I have consistently noticed inattention to the place of the researcher and their standpoint in CDA (Harding, 2008). In my earlier doctoral research, I incorporated a ‘hermeneutic’ dimension (Neumann, 2012), where I self-identified; doing this almost apologetically as a (relatively) young, female educator and researcher of mixed class, ethnic, linguistic and national heritage (McCormick, 2012). Even this description insufficiently captures the particular combination of lenses touched on above. Many people are frequently essentialized still more reductively, both explicitly and implicitly, along these lines; all of which markers of experience and identities could be interpreted as being representative—yet not—from differing vantage points related to person, place and/or time.

It is not my aim, in this article, to canvas the literature on hybrid identities, or bounded and dynamic definitions of culture(s). These debates do underpin my aims of interrogating approaches to knowledge and research, and the particular opportunities that the Vanuatu moratorium offered for reflection on wider dynamics at play, particularly for navigating knowledge production and, especially, in postcolonial contexts (Appiah, 2007; Hall, 1997a, 1997b; Holliday, 2013; Nederveen Pietersen, 2015; Sen, 2006). In the field

of CIE, Tikly and Bond (2013) eloquently synthesize an impressive range of the related literature, as do McNess, et al. (2013).

LEARNING VANUATU, MORATORIA AND NATIONAL RESEARCH POLICIES

As a person currently teaching in an Australian institution and researching in and about plurilevel contexts, including Vanuatu, I have been prompted to (re-)view my approaches within the field of CIE through the lens of the most recent Vanuatu research moratorium in 2013. I undertook layers of contextual analysis related to the geographical, historical, political, and social contexts for education before I could begin to understand education in Vanuatu, the South Pacific, and the global/international development policies that have, in the main, been aimed at realizing formal, academic schooling world-wide (McCormick, 2011, 2012).

By way of a very brief introduction: for Vanuatu, this included understanding the linguistic diversity, with 115-plus local languages and three national languages (Bislama, English, and French) resulting from ‘contact’, missions, colonization, and trade. Likewise, it is vital to understand Vanuatu’s particular status in terms of nationhood and independence: over 80 islands were colonized and unified as the New Hebrides under British-French ‘Condominium’ in 1906, with independence, as Vanuatu, was won in 1980. The specific needs of small states, especially those of islands, have been documented elsewhere (Crossley & Sprague, 2012), and this article and Special Issue contribute to understanding dimensions of those, especially in terms of negotiating the range of cultural, linguistic, and political practices, and the associated particularities in aspects of education and governance. As in other neighbouring Melanesian islands, land is approximately 90 per cent communally owned and is central to most facets of life. Vanuatu has a population of 258,000 (UNICEF, 2015), and 85 per cent of people live rurally by the traditional economy (Regenvanu, 2010). I continued to deepen and update this and other dimensions of contextual learning as my research proceeded.

As discussions, interviews, literature searches, and observations have deepened since I began my inquiries in 2008, I have learned, although by no means exhaustively, about the importance of *ni-Vanuatu kastom* knowledge, practices and ownership (McCormick, 2011, 2014). These include relationships between people (genders, generations, relations, island groups), language, land, and spirituality, and dynamic ‘living culture’ and ‘intangible culture’, which is often oral and tied to organic materials (Abong, 2013; Regenvanu, 1999). There has been increased discursive and institutional attention to the traditional economy, which has recently been promoted by government (Regenvanu 2010), and recognized by the former Australian Agency for International Development, (now part of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade). Regional pilot research reported in the ‘Alternative Indicators of Well-being in Vanuatu’ (Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs, 2012) has sought to offer locally identified approaches to ‘development’, and knowledge. Conducted by the Malvatumauri Chiefs’ Council, and followed by subsequent reports nationally and regionally, these reports were supported by the sub-regional Melanesian Spearhead Group. These sketches do not do justice to the range across the islands, but serve here to introduce plurilevel influences on and the nature of knowledge, education, and research in contexts that were relatively new to me, and my ongoing layers of learning within it.

Before looking at the moratorium in detail, it is important to signal a key area of my cumulative learning that has been about the geographically and historically situated, and potentially unequal, nature of rules and systems that govern knowledge and research.

I received Australian institutional ethics approval for my doctoral studies in 2007. However, since the study was conducted within a research grant project with Australian and Vanuatu government approval, I was instructed not to apply for formal permission through the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC). As the most junior and youngest member of the team, I was in a precarious situation both in terms of the stage of my career and position in the institution. In addition, the specific nature of that research, in comparatively considering multilevel policy processes to national rather than sub-national level meant working only in Port Vila, which can be said to represent a very particular slice of life and work across the islands. In being affiliated with a development agency study and, so, government, I was not beholden to the same reporting expectations, which I have come to understand as a potentially problematic exception in relation to research. In addition to this geopolitical aspect, institutional ethics requirements have changed so significantly in the decade since that it would now not be possible for either a student or faculty member to not cite compliance with local policies; identification of local contacts is now an explicit and unambiguous requirement for approval to conduct international research.

My more recent research into ‘post-2015 development agenda’ processes in the South Pacific (McCormick, 2014, 2016a, 2016b) began before and continued beyond the moratorium, with the approval and participation of the VCC. It was directly affected by it, and has served to prompt the deeper analysis and reflection that are the focus of this article.

Histories of knowledge and research governance in Vanuatu

The Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC, established in 1957) initiated a collaborative research model in the 1970s, at the core of which were the local networks of fieldworkers (Taylor & Thiebinger, 2011). The first women’s fieldworker workshop was held in 1993, and a network of fieldworkers founded 1994 (Tryon, 1999). In subsequent years, the network was strengthened (see articles by Bolton, 1999; Regenvanu, 1999; Tryon, 1999 in the *Oceania* special issue dedicated to the topic). During that time, Australian researchers were involved in collaborating with and training fieldworkers in particular research methods (Tryon, 1999; VCC, 1995).

The Vanuatu Cultural Research Policy emerged from its post-independence nine-year moratorium in 1984, which had itself been a response to decolonizing political and social struggles, under the auspices of the Vanuatu National Cultural Council (VNCC). The VNCC was established in 1988 and designated as legally responsible for research [Chapter 186, 6(2)(e)]. The composition of VNCC made provision for one women’s representative. Even as recently as 2013, a complaint was registered in a national newspaper that the female representative had not been announced together with the announcement of the male representatives, which again raises questions about power and representation noted earlier in the article and elsewhere (McCormick, 2014). The VCC was designated the ‘executing arm’ for enacting the policy.

It is significant that the research policy emerged from museum(s) and curators (Witcomb, 2015). Museums are spaces for the construction and representation of identities, including—even especially—at a national level. They are also critical spaces of

knowledge generation, protection and education in its various forms, and here nurtured fieldworker collaborations in knowledge curation, production, protection within histories of genuine collaboration, respect and commitment to ongoing projects of ‘knowledge seeking’ (Taylor & Thieberger, 2011; Whitcomb, 2015). In a recent volume, combinations of *ni-Vanuatu* and non-*ni-Vanuatu* participants shared critically conscious collegial reflection of their relative positions and limitations, and also of the vast gains in terms of contributions to society and advancement of knowledge within decolonizing discourses that prioritize egalitarian, inclusive values and shared responsibilities for negotiating these (Taylor & Thieberger, 2011).

The national research policy of Vanuatu has been recognized as exemplary by UNESCO, and appears to be the most extensive of formally articulated policies applied to international researchers in a number of South Pacific island nations (all publically available through government websites). The policy requires non-*ni-Vanuatu* researcher application, approval and collaboration where possible with *ni-Vanuatu* fieldworkers. There is a formal research application process, requiring institutional references and a fee. Non-*ni-Vanuatu* researchers are encouraged to learn Bislama and there is a requirement to share products of the research with the VCC depending on the nature of which some may be held in the *tabu* room and communities, with recognition of traditional copyright. Some non-*ni-Vanuatu* researchers with long-standing research relationships were permitted to continue work through the first moratorium (Lisette Bolton, Kirk Huffman (who was the first VCC director from 1977-89) and Daniel Tryon). Other exceptions included those from government-affiliated research. In 2006, a moratorium on commercial filming of the Nagol ceremony in Pentecost was instigated.

Research in Vanuatu

The most recent moratorium, for one year, on foreign researchers working in Vanuatu was announced in July 2013, but ended early in March 2014. Its stated aims were: to rethink and redevelop the ‘National Collaborative Research policy and other policies relating to culture and custom’; to ‘take stock’ of research done in and on Vanuatu, including ‘research on land, traditional knowledge and all research that relate to social science, traditional ecological and environmental system and politics’; to identify non-compliance with research policy; and to ensure that researchers’ self-interest and exploitation were not being prioritized over *ni-Vanuatu* interests (Abong, 2013). Approved researchers could continue, pending submission of a 10-page summary of current work or face visa cancellation, and deportment (Abong, 2013). Speaking on Radio New Zealand in 2013, the then Director of the VCC, Abong, asserted that, ‘In the Pacific and in Vanuatu we live on the cultural and traditional knowledge and it’s very important for us’ (Abong, 2013). In announcing the end of the Moratorium, Abong stated that the:

VNCC imposed the moratorium on June 26 2013 covering researches on social science, cultures and land . . . The task has been achieved with a total of 63 reported researches received by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre Director. The stock-take outcome is set to assist VNCC consider its collaborative research policy. Mr Abong acknowledges the cooperation of all researchers and advises that the new research fee is Vt 45,000. (@ Aus\$515/ UK pounds 300).

Reflecting on the moratorium

As soon as I learned of it, the 2013/2014 Vanuatu moratorium resonated with many of the themes that had arisen in my prior research, relating to decolonization, individual,

national, and regional (plurilevel) identities tied to education, knowledge, and power relations in turn tied to development, and questions of governance and sovereignty. As a plurilevel researcher who had been working from a historical and postcolonial perspective that values context, I could, to some extent, appreciate the motivations and significance. As a plurilocal person who has sought to consider changes across levels of activity, and who does not have one national or local affiliation, yet has not experienced (neo-)colonial subjugation (although with distant mixed lineage, yet more easily—visibly—identifiable with England, France and Australia, the major colonizers in modern history), or lived in a place of aid dependency, it was more challenging to reconcile that category of ‘foreign’. The action of this Moratorium is positioned as representing proactive leadership in knowledge protection (Abong, 2013). There may have been additional internal, for example financial and/or political, factors, that led to the latest moratorium, to which I, as a researcher or foreigner or other unknown reason(s), may not be privy.

I understood that it would be important to consider the moratorium contextually and historically, in relation to prior moratoria on research and specific cultural practices. In order to do that, I undertook inter-textual and thematic analysis of primary documents relating to the moratoria and national research policy, and these were supplemented by my observations over three fieldwork visits to Vanuatu. As I summarize in Table 1, documents included the national research policy, the VCC Director’s announcement and text of the Moratorium, and a number of media sources, including releases, responses, and the statement of conclusion of the 2013/2014 Moratorium.

Table 1: Key primary documents related to Vanuatu research and moratoria

Year	Document or statement
1984	Moratorium on International Researchers
1995	Vanuatu Cultural Research Policy
2006	Moratorium on commercial filming of Nagol ceremony
2013	VCC Statement announcing the Moratorium
2013-2014	Moratorium on International Researchers; associated media responses and statements
2014	VCC Statement ending the Moratorium

The human ethics research committee at my Australian institution approved my proposed research in May 2013. In August, after a busy Semester of teaching, I booked a flight for January 2014 to conduct interviews with participants, pending my application to the VCC for approval. When I went to update myself on recent political and social context and happenings in Vanuatu, and on education or development policy work being done, I learned that the Moratorium had been posted on the VCC website in July 2013. It was to run indefinitely, but at least until the following August; given that the prior one had lasted for nine years, it did not bode well (Bolton, 1999).

I decided, since I had work related to our regional CIE society, that I would still go. I could use part of the time on that work, and also develop my emergent Bislama (the Vanuatu version of the South Pacific pidgin English, and a national language), and to continue learning more about other parts of a place with which I had relatively recently, if fairly intensively, become familiar. I chose to go to the Southern island of Tanna, and stayed at the base of Mt Yasur, featured in the globally successful eponymous film last year, and the subject of a documentary in which the Yakel tribe articulate their resistance to ‘Westernized’ modernity, discursively and in practice. While that visit has become

another personal story, it no doubt has enriched my understandings of aspects of those places at village, island, and national levels. In Tanna, I visited the local museum, which is a VCC branch, and had a conversation about what ‘development’ is with its former director. I looked at the displays, and planned to return when (or if) research regulations, funding, and time allowed. I felt conscious that such experience would be contributing to my understandings and, surely, indirectly, then, to shaping aspects of my research; these are queries that still occupy not only me (McNess et al., 2013). How blurry are the lines of my personal and researcher ‘selves’, and what could mean crossing from honouring the letter and spirit of the moratorium or, in what may have been a moment of over-dramatized concern, being deported as per its rules and those of the policy? I later went back to conduct the research, with the permission of the VCC.

PLURILEVEL IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH ETHICS AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

During the course of my research, I have learned that Vanuatu receives substantial international aid to education as an aid dependent, decolonizing nation, and that external agencies have had a (dis-)proportionately significant influence on both education and research into education and national development in Vanuatu (Regenvanu, 1999, 2010). The nature and substance of education are intimately tied to knowledge and its production through research and, subsequently, through its legitimation and reproduction. These processes take place within a combination of informal community-based processes and in institutions of education, including schools and museums (Whitcomb, 2015). National government, and a range of internal and external agencies have created and shaped curricula and policies prior to and since independence; although, in recent years, changes in the nature of development relationships are increasingly apparent. Particular approaches to and types of education and development are legitimated and propagated intertextually in international and national development documentation, interaction, and reporting (McCormick, 2012, 2016a).

I extended my initial literature reviews to consider recent work on research ethics and ‘traditional’ knowledge, and consulted five additional South Pacific nations’ requirements for non-citizen researchers, and included these only in a contextual layer of CDA analysis (Blommaert, 2009; McCormick 2016a; 2016b), although there is potential for them to be more systematically and comparatively analysed in future. Such nationally applied approaches are embedded within plurilevel debates and frameworks surrounding the increasing body of regional inquiry into ethical research practices by networks and scholars in the Pacific (Du Plessis & Fairborn-Dunlop, 2009; Fairborn-Dunlop, 2007; Sanga 2013; Smith, 1999), and globally by researchers and multilateral institutions including UNESCO (2007). As Tikly and Bond (2013) identify, UN approaches tend to sit within human rights and research governance approaches, while research and activist approaches have a significantly contrasting, often explicitly decolonizing, approach to the ethically complex aspects of the relationship between research and traditional knowledge. The importance of ethical and political concerns in conducting research internationally—or, more precisely, in contexts in which we may not be considered to belong—endures. So, too, do these sometimes conflicting positions on how we create, interpret, and share knowledge. These concerns inform recent revivals in the field of comparative and international education (CIE) in which essentialist ‘insider-outsider’ binaries have been contested to make way for more contingent and complex cultural and identity positioning(s) (McNess, Arthur, & Crossley, 2013).

There is enduring importance in interrogating the significance of the nation as the unit of analysis in relation to Vanuatu and most South Pacific postcolonial contexts, especially in light of regional and increasing plurilevel emphases in governance and policy processes. As some researchers move away from or contest the state as the predominant unit of analysis, the project of building or claiming allegiance to, and services from, a nation-state may still be a component of decolonizing projects (McNess et al., 2013; Mohanty, 2009; Tuhiwai-Smith 1999); this is especially salient where a large amount of, although not all, development assistance is conceived and transferred between national units. This question of unit of analysis or level of activity resonates with contemporary change in aid and development dynamics, including in terms of: who donors are—traditional or ‘new’, ‘South-South’ exchanges, and peer arrangements, including with Papua New Guinea regionally; and in what represents aid, for example, the role of China. These changing geo-politics for aid and the ‘partners’ involved have significant implications for research collaborations. Amidst this is the increasing acknowledgement and protection of traditional indigenous knowledge that will be discussed in more detail below.

Regionally significant changes with implications for knowledge and research in the past decade have included the emergence of national education advocacy coalitions tied to Asia South Pacific Association for Adult and Basic Education (ASPBAE), Vanuatu Education Policy Advocacy Coalition (VEPAC), Coalition on Education Solomon Islands and the PNG Education Action Network in Papua New Guinea and the peer information sharing, learning and collaboration involved in these (McCormick, 2014). Pacific education plans and the Pacific Framework for regionalism are other examples. In terms of advanced level participation in formal education, the University of the South Pacific (USP) Emalus Campus, Port Vila has, in recent years, graduated the first local *ni-Vanuatu* doctorates.

Relationships: Development, education, knowledge and research

In this section, I return to the issues of process tied to different aspects of power that struck me in reflecting on the moratorium. In Vanuatu, the land and ocean and people living by them are inextricably tied to education and ways of knowing (Abong, 2013; Regenvanu, 2009). Recognition of and work on what is variously called ‘traditional’ or indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing has extended in recent years. In relation to sustainable development, Kothari (2007) has captured some of these relationships:

Humanity’s troubled relationship with the earth has raised a series of questions on how to change our behaviour. How can we live more sustainably? . . . Do we have with us the necessary wisdom and knowledge to make this happen? Increasingly, it is being realized that answers to these questions will have to come from a variety of sources. While *earlier it was thought that modern science and technology will provide the answers, it is now more than ever clear that traditional knowledge also has critical insights and practices to offer.* (p. 6, italics inserted).

The importance of the nature of knowledge, its location and historicity is underscored there, and Kothari goes on to discuss the vital relationship between education and language:

A language (oral or written) is not only a means of communication between members of a people or community, it also contains within it the essence of considerable information and knowledge and wisdom of the people or community. Its loss is therefore a loss of TK. The threat is greatest in the case of TK that has passed down

and evolved orally, since it disappears with every generation that has not been able to hand it down to the next one . . . Across the world, as one model of modern education and means of mass communication spread, newer generations of traditional peoples are simply not imbibing TK in the way that their parents or ancestors did. (p. 8)

The critical role of the VCC and its fieldworkers’ language work, the role of non-*ni-Vanuatu* partners, and the importance of measures such as the moratoria identified here, can be considered in this light. Likewise, research approaches—how we conceive of, conduct and share it—are integral to the ways that the forms and values of communication and education captured in this quotation spread. Existing plurilevel initiatives for recognition and protection of traditional knowledge range through national ones such as these identified in Vanuatu and other Pacific island nations, to Pacific regional ones and globally, pertaining to individual and teams of researchers.

Within these initiatives, dynamics around seniority and other distinctions based on aspects of personal identity, like age, gender and locality, are addressed and negotiated. While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in more detail, Table 2 offers examples of these activities and statements in relation to Pacific plurilevel contexts.

Table 2: Examples of plurilevel recognition and protection of traditional knowledge

Level of activity	Initiative
Global	UNESCO’s Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Ethical Guidelines/Code of Conduct for International Comparative Social Science Research UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (but see Fairbairn-Dunlop, below, on tensions between <i>individual</i> rights conceptions and communal, relational ones)
Regional/ sub-regional	<i>Tofamamao Statement</i> ; Guidelines on Pacific Health Research (Health Research Council, 2005, in Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2007); UNESCO Regional Pacific Ethics of Knowledge Production Kakala Research Framework (Fua, 2014) and other Pacific metaphors (Sanga, 2013) In ‘Pacific Ethics and Universal Norms’, Fairbairn-Dunlop (2007) argues that ‘the Pacific challenge is to develop a post-colonial ethics discourse that is “Pacific in philosophy and locally grounded in context”’ (p. 9; see also, Du Plessis & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2009)
National	National research policies (Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji); other protection of TK—Uganda, Philippines, India (Kothari, 2007)
Local	Institutional Research Ethics Requirements and Procedures; Fieldworkers in Vanuatu liaising/seeking permission from local communities

The emergence of these activities and discourses demonstrate increased attention to, and assertion of, context and identity and, again, underscore the culturally, historically and politically situated nature of education, knowledge and research that I discussed above.

CONCLUSIONS

Complex and particular cultural, demographic, geographical, historical, linguistic, political, and (post-)colonial features have shaped the relatively ‘young’ nation we know

as Vanuatu, and its engagement with contemporary international ‘development’ discourses. Education, research, and the knowledge that we co-/create and share through them are central to these features, in terms of process and substance. Such dimensions, likewise, shape the relationships between the actors who variously fund, promote, and research dynamics between development, education, knowledge, and research. As one of those actors, articulating this slice of my story has been a way to navigate these phenomena in a way that engages with rather than dismisses that complexity and my particular place within and contributing to it. A number of questions and themes remain. One is the concern that, as nation-centric activities (including some civil society activities), how policies and acts, like moratoria, can address plurilevel, globalizing change while protecting national and local interests, and knowledge, which are themselves also dynamic (for example, considering council membership composition). It follows to ask how they are interpreted and applied, and to whom—aid agency research, funders? There is the large and small question, set at the start of this article, about identities, but also institutional and professional requirements of researchers—as individuals and institutional members—and within neo-liberal climates carrying associated demands of ‘knowledge economies’. How, then, to navigate varying academic conventions: written, oral, and audio-visual documenting? With this, we return to questions about the understandings and limitations of insider/outsider (foreigner?) conceptions, ideas of standpoint, related methodologies, and wider ways of negotiating contemporary complexities through collaborative investigations.

In this auto-ethnography, I have offered a layered, reflexive account of my experiences of the 2013/2014 Vanuatu research moratorium as a plurilocal educator-researcher, in an era characterized by aspects of globalization and plurilevel education and research interactions. In doing so, I have considered the personal and plurilevel ethics and politics of research. From this position and through these lenses, I have understood Vanuatu’s research moratoria as being tied to recognition and protection of *kastom* and knowledge, knowledge ownership within wider plurilevel decolonizing discourses of self-determination/sovereignty, and aid dependency. I have, in turn, shared my reconsideration of how we think about existing, including my own, research approaches within globally dominant conceptualizations of knowledge and development.

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