

# Exploring the Character Strengths of an Oral Tradition: Vanuatu through analysis of its archived oral legends

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## The Question:

*Would a culture of oral tradition display different core values and character strengths than those identified within literate cultures?*

■ The point of departure for this study was Peterson & Seligman's VIA Classification of 24 universal human strengths (2004).

■ As the VIA was based on extensive study of literate cultures, this study sought to explore whether an oral tradition would:

- Manifest the same 24 strengths?
- Display additional culturally-specific virtues?
- Demonstrate a different configuration in ranking of the 24 VIA strengths compared to other samples?

■ Content and Narrative Analyses were used to study transcribed oral legends from the South Pacific Island country of Vanuatu, where the introduction of literacy and technology is quite recent.

## Rationale

### Why does this matter?

Awareness of culturally-specific strengths and values permits us to respect and preserve those values, especially in developing nations over which we may have (sometimes unintended) influence.

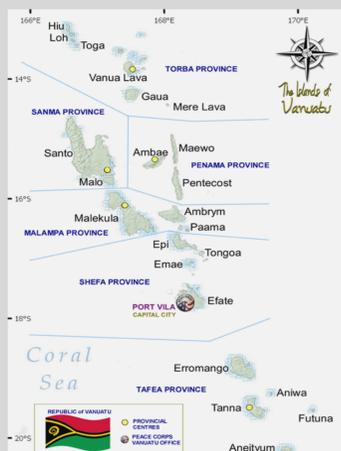
### Why this method?

■ Oral legends reflect the "consensual paragons" of virtue of a society (Hoyle et al, 2002).

■ In discussion of methodological issues in positive psychology, Park & Peterson noted that historical archives and cultural products should be considered, and that "constructs of concern should be exported from elsewhere to western cultures" (2006, p.294)

■ Content and Narrative Analysis are proven techniques of study that permit economical access to archived materials or distant subjects who may lack the capability to complete an online questionnaire.

## Where is Vanuatu???



Vanuatu is an archipelago of 83 islands located 1,750 km east of Australia.

## Methodology:

- The **Sample** consisted of 57 Vanuatu legends translated into English, having an average length of 1,315 words.
- The stories were each coded by two coders for the presence or absence of the **24 VIA strengths**.
  - Strengths were coded both if explicitly stated or implied by action or statement of its opposite as evil.
- Coders also identified the **story themes** and the strengths associated with the theme.
- Coders nominated **potentially relevant non-VIA character strengths** that were present in the legends.
  - Inter-coder agreement averaged .91 using McClelland's Index (Smith, 2000).
- **Data** was collected on:
  - Prevalence rankings of VIA and non-VIA strengths overall
  - Prevalence within themes
  - Prevalence by region of missionary influence
  - Prevalence within the country's six geographic provinces
- **Peace Corps workers** in Vanuatu commented on the actual display of strengths identified by the coders within the country's present-day society.

## Results: How did the strengths rank?

Rank	Strength	No. Occurrences	% Prevalence
1.	Teamwork	39.5	69%
2.	Love	34	60%
	Ancestors/Kastom	29	51%
	Listening/Mindfulness	28	49%
3.	Spirituality	27.5	48%
4.	Kindness	27.5	48%
5.	Perspective	25	44%
6.	Self-Regulation	23.5	41%
7.	Appreciation of Beauty	23	40%
	Contentment	22	39%
8.	Authenticity	21.5	38%
9.	Curiosity	20.5	36%
	Duty	20	35%
10.	Persistence	20	35%
11.	Bravery	19.5	34%
	Physical Strength	18	32%
12.	Leadership	15.5	27%
	Cleverness	15	26%
13.	Creativity	14.5	25%
14.	Prudence	13.5	24%
15.	Social Intelligence	12	21%
16.	Fairness	12	21%
	Serenity	12	21%
17.	Humor	7.5	13%
18.	Zest	7.5	13%
19.	Love of Learning	6.5	11%
20.	Gratitude	6.5	11%
21.	Hope	5.5	10%
22.	Modesty	4	7%
23.	Forgiveness	4	7%
24.	Open-Mindedness	3.5	6%

## Comparison with US Internet Data?

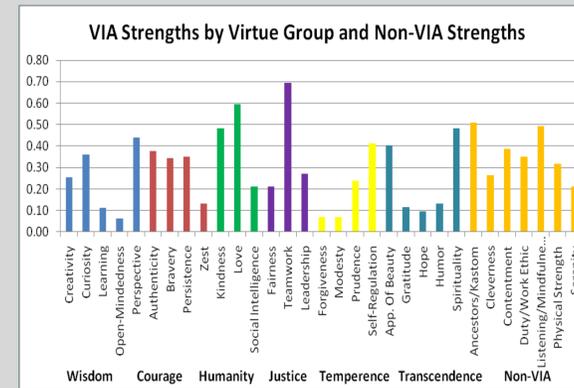
### Most Prevalent Strengths

In the Vanuatu oral legends: (n=83,576, 2006)	In Park et al's US Internet Survey: (n=83,576, 2006)
1. Teamwork	1. Kindness
2. Love	2. Fairness
3. Honoring Ancestors/Kastom	3. Honesty
4. Listening/Mindfulness	4. Gratitude
5. Spirituality	5. Open-mindedness
6. Kindness	6. Love
7. Perspective	7. Humor

### Least Prevalent Strengths

Oral legends:	Internet Study:
19. Learning	19. industry
20. Gratitude	20. religiousness
21. Hope	21. zest
22. Modesty	22. prudence
23. Forgiveness	23. modesty
24. Open-mindedness	24. self-regulation

## Prevalence(%) Ranking within Core Virtue Groups:



## Key Findings:

### Top VIA Strengths Identified in the Legends: Culturally-defined Versions

- **Teamwork** (ranked #1 in prevalence)
  - Most frequently noted as *loyalty* in the Vanuatu legends
  - Perhaps definitive of a collective culture
  - Exemplified by National Anthem's subtitle: *Yumi, Yumi, Yumi (We, We, We)*
- **Love** (ranked #2)
  - Most frequently noted as *friendship* in the legends
  - "Friends" implies sibling-like or romantic connotation in modern Vanuatu
  - Male friends frequently hold hands
  - No word exists in Bislama for "love" or being "in love" (PC Interviews, 2008)
- **Spirituality and Ancestors/Kastom**
  - When combined with duplicates accounted for, spirituality and honoring of ancestors are identified in 82% of the legends and rise to #1 in ranking
  - Ironically during missionary times the two were seen as contradictory (Jolly, 1996)
  - Temporal frame of reference tends toward past over future, shaping the form of Vanuatu's spirituality (Miles, 1998) – and perhaps accounts for the low prevalence of hope in the legends (discussed next column of poster)
- **Creativity and Cleverness**
  - Many coders noted cleverness as a distinct strength in the legends
  - Peterson & Seligman's "little c form of creativity" – ingenuity (2004)
  - Perhaps essential in a culture without duct tape...

## Most Prevalent Non-VIA Strengths nominated by coders:

- **Listening/Mindfulness**
  - Often demonstrated through obedience & good fortune to good listeners
  - Would be essential in oral tradition, where there is no "put it in writing" and paying attention is essential in absence of video, audio recording or written notes
- **Duty/Work Ethic**
  - Role-related, taught in present-day schools
  - Work ethic is different from the western version:
    - Time is not important
    - Occupation is not important
- **Contentment/Satisfaction** – Could this be a morally-valued choice – A character strength rather than a resultant condition?
  - In one legend, "Muehu Katekale, the unsatisfied" meets his sad demise in futile search beyond what he already has (Gardissat, 2004).
  - Happy Planet Index, 2006, ranked Vanuatu "happiest place on earth"...
  - Fits Barry Schwartz's notion of happy "satisficers" (2005)

## Surmising on the strengths at the bottom...

### What strengths were least prevalent in the legends?

- **Hope** (10% of legends)
  - Temporal framework of culture tends toward present and past – Bislama language has few markers for future tense (Crowley, 2004).
  - Could **contentment/satisfaction** as a character strength displace hope?
  - Given Vanuatu's **Happy Planet ranking**, does satisfaction with the past and present outweigh the future in the happiness equation? (Seligman, 2002)
  - Are **remembered and experienced pleasure** -more associated with happiness than anticipated pleasure? (Rozin, 1999)
- **Gratitude** (11%)
  - Is the Vanuatu legends' strength of *contentment* a less overt form of gratitude – a "little g" version of the VIA strength of gratitude?
  - However, present-day Vanuatu residents frequently express gratitude...
- **Love of Learning** (11%)
  - PC workers note "not much of a learning curve in Vanuatu"
  - May reflect contentment with current status
  - May reflect teamwork acknowledgement of differing strengths
- **Forgiveness** (7%)
  - Less prevalent in a collective society where transgressions are weighted against the whole?
  - Observed in present-day Vanuatu "village justice" (personal observation, 2008)
- **Open-mindedness** (6%)
  - May simply not fit the teamwork philosophy
- **Modesty & Humor** (7% & 13%)
  - Observed these in abundance in present-day Vanuatu residents – perhaps just not the stuff of legends?

## Conclusions:

- **Ubiquity Exists:** All 24 VIA strengths were identified in the archived collection of oral legends!
- **There is a case for culturally-specific strengths.** The concerns are real for residents of developing countries who may find their morally-valued, chosen character strengths to be diminished under the powerful influence of individualism, money and technology.

### Values Table from Vanuatu Social Studies Text Book

Traditional	Western
Dependence on extended family, obligations	Personal independence
Communal ownership of property	Individual ownership
Time is not so important	Punctuality is important
Wealth consists of traditional items-money is not so important.	Money economy is of great importance.
Respect and success are based on human relationships.	Success is based on material gains, e.g. education, wealth.

Source: *Our Changing Society, Social Studies Unit, 1985, p. 50.*

## Future Explorations...

- Effects of temporal framework on contentment, hope and happiness?
- What can we learn or borrow from other cultures' unique character strengths?

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