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?

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 Analyses 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.

www.HappyPlanetIndex.org
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.
- 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?

Comparison with US Internet Data?

Most Prevalent Strengths in the Vanuatu oral legends:

- Teamwork
- Love
- Honoring Ancestors/Kastom
- Learning/Mindfulness
- Spirituality
- Kindness
- Perspective
- Success is based on present and past outweigh the future in the happiness equation (Seligman, 1996)

Most Prevalent Non-VIA Strengths nominated by coders:

- Listening/Mindfulness
- Open-Mindedness
- Physical Strength

Prevalence(%) Ranking within Core Virtue Groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIA Strengths by Virtue Group and Non-VIA Strengths</th>
<th>Prevalence</th>
<th>% Prevalence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honoring Ancestors/Kastom</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning/Mindfulness</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where is Vanuatu???

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What strengths were least prevalent in the legends?
- Hope (20% 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 displaces hope?
- Given Vanuatu’s Happy Planet ranking, does satisfaction with the past and present outweigh the future in the happiness equation? (Seligman, 2002).

Conclusions:
- 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.
- Future Explorations...
  - Effects of temporal framework on contentment, hope and happiness?
  - What can we learn or borrow from other cultures’ unique character strengths?