

Visible Evidence 21 at JMIU was attended by around 300 delegates all over the world!



**Jamia Millia Islamia University** successfully conducted the 21 edition of Visible Evidence, the most prestigious international documentary studies conference on **December 11-14, 2014**.

The Conference was held for the first time in Asia which was co-hosted by the **AJK-Mass Communication Research Centre (MCRC)**, **Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI)** and the **School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU)**.

Conference at a glance:

The South Pacific has a long history of colonisers and outsiders imposing their own projections and viewpoints upon the different island nations, rather than seeking a perspective that is authentically engaged with the culture, philosophies, and experiences of the inhabitants. Whether it be Paul Gauguin's projection of desire upon the Tahitian landscape and its women, painting an erotic imaginary for the French bourgeoisie and its Parisian salons, or an Australian tourist snapping a photo of the staff at the hotel where she's been staying and loudly requesting "a real Samoan smile", representations run the risk of being misinformed outsider perceptions, rather than a valid internal voice.

This was one of the quandaries facing a team of lecturers from Unitec New Zealand - a polytechnic in Auckland - in creating a short documentary that chronicles the rebuilding efforts of Poutasi village, Samoa, in the wake of the 2009 tsunami and the 2013 cyclone. A range of people, both Samoan and Palagi (European), have contributed to the rebuild, and it was important that their contributions be acknowledged, while at the same time incorporating a filmmaking procedure that is respectful of Samoan ethics and philosophies. Such a respect would hopefully express a dynamic and experience that emanates from within the village and its residents, rather than just communicate observations from an objective distance.

The team of Unitec lecturers possessed some excellent human resources to facilitate a closer understanding of Samoan culture and philosophies. Aanoalii Rowena Fuluifaga, the documentary's producer, is a New Zealand-born Samoan, bilingual in English and Samoan, and her post-graduate research (an impending deadline being one of the reasons why she couldn't be at the presentation here in New Delhi) explores art and design from a spatial perspective, through the Samoan concept of "va", the space in-between, which does not separate but rather holds different entities together in a state of inter-connectedness. Aanoalii is a lecturer in the Unitec Department of Design, and also works for the Pacific Centre. Venusi Taumoepeau, the film's director and cinematographer, is a New Zealand-born Tongan, employed by the Pacific Centre as an adviser on Pacific perspectives, who teaches moving image courses in the Design Department. Stephen Matai'a, the sound operator for the film, is employed by the Pacific Centre, is of both Samoan and Palagi parentage, and spent several formative years attending a primary school in Apia; his Samoan is particularly fluent and his interpretative skills have been invaluable in interviews. Marion Muliaumaseali'i, formerly employed by the Unitec Pacific Centre, is working on a PhD that explores the impact of mobile technology upon the Pacific, and has lived for extended periods in Poutasi village. Miriam Harris is a New Zealander of English and Polish-Jewish ethnicity, and therefore her learning curve in understanding Samoan perspectives has been particularly steep, but strongly abetted by her colleagues. She is a lecturer in the Design Department in Graphic Design and Animation.

The theme of collaboration constitutes a fundamental foundation for the film. Collaborative efforts in Poutasi village, such as an arts centre established by artist Fatu Feu'u, together with craft, educational, and horticultural initiatives, have become essential elements in reviving the social and economic wellbeing of the village. Poutasi village chief Joe Annandale has collaborated with the New Zealand

Tindall foundation in the financing of these initiatives, and a Poutasi Development Trust has been erected. Aanoalii Fuluifaga collaborated with Joe Annandale, forging a memorandum of understanding between Unitec and Poutasi village, and a group of Unitec Graphic Design and Animation students lived in Poutasi village for a week, designing wayfaring signage, packaging for the sale of horticultural produce, and branding identities for the crafts centre and the Poutasi Development Trust. Such collaborations have been made in the spirit of the Samoan concept of “teu le va”, cherishing and nursing relationships between people and the village centre or “fale”, even when participants are separated by stretches of ocean.

It was essential to construct an environment in which non-Samoan, and non-Pacific students and staff would have access to information about Pacific culture and perspectives, in order that such an appreciation be integrated into the design process. The students were guided in their research by Aanoalii Fuluifaga and Venusi Taumoepeau in the weeks prior to their stay in Poutasi, and throughout their stay in the village, had discussions with chief Joe Annandale and other members of the village, in order to obtain advice and make sure that they were on track. The students, and the team of staff working on the documentary, all lived in the village and attended local events, such as church on Sunday, a multi-media dance presentation put on by the university, and the graduation ceremony for the pre-schoolers.

Such an approach, in which an effort is made to understand a culture from within, through strategies such as research, listening, participation, and continuous dialogue, rather than the hoisting of a set of pre-conceptions upon the observed locale, reflects an attempt to take on board criticisms from a variety of Pacific voices. Several academics have questioned the ways in which Pacific communities have been depicted through different media presentations in the past, and have also challenged the western academic canon for its unwillingness to integrate different cultural world-views. For instance Professor Konai Helu Thaman, in her 2003 paper “Decolonizing Pacific Studies: Indigenous Perspectives, Knowledge and Wisdom in Higher Education” writes:

“As a Tongan woman schooled in the traditions of New Zealand and American universities, now working at the University of the South Pacific, I have created for myself a philosophy of teaching and learning that is sourced from different cultures and traditions but rooted in Tongan culture...As a teacher who is still a learner, I think decolonizing Pacific studies is about reclaiming indigenous Oceanic perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom that have been devalued or suppressed because they were not considered important or worthwhile.” (2)

Albert Wendt, a Samoan-born professor in English Literature at the University of Auckland for many years, asks in his paper “Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body”, just what the post-colonial body actually is. He writes:

“I’m saying it is a body coming out of the Pacific, not a body being imposed on the Pacific. It is a blend, a new development, which I consider to be in heart, spirit and

muscle, Pacific: a blend in which influences from outside (even the English Language) have been indigenized, absorbed in the image of the local and national, and in turn have altered the national and local.”

Taking on board these insights, our documentary endeavours to intertwine more traditional modes of “observational” footage with sequences that represent new forms of communication. What might appear to be more traditional in terms of western documentary structures, is nevertheless underlined by an appreciation of Pacific perspectives. For instance, lengthy interviews have been recorded through both visual and sound-based means, with only a portion appearing in the documentary. The use of video and audio allows for the capture of a diversity of voices and experiences, as well as a rich collection of narratives reflecting varying emotional responses, as observed by academic Thomas in her 2012 paper. The use of video works well with the concept of “talanoa”, or “critical dialogue”, as well as life stories, as it is not only recording what is being said, but also what is being “felt” by the person being interviewed. More importantly, it allows the participants to be involved in a participatory action research process (PAR), which places emphasis on a cycle of “reflection”, and is centred on community engagement.

It was also key that the team conducting the interviews have the Samoan language, and a strong understanding of the “va”, or inter-connections underlining the village.

\* Reciprocity (Hart, 2010) and respect (fa'aaloalo: Samoan term for) was also embedded into the design and framework of the film. The film's key developments (including first drafts) were viewed firstly by the participants in Samoa, before any public viewing including in the use of teaching materials. Also, at the beginning of the interviews, each participant interviewed was filmed and explained to them the purpose of the film and its effects on the village.

The 2009 tsunami and 2013 cyclone have physically altered the boundaries and therefore the tuaoi (land boundaries) and structure of the villages. However, the new tuaoi suggest a new va fealoaloa'i (conceptual space between relationships). For Poutasi, relational space is key to structure and order in the village (both personally and in terms of spatial awareness). With the relocation of most Poutasi families inland, a strong necessity has arisen for a central place where villagers can collaborate, create and engage in talanoa or “critical dialogue”. This documentary has already met with a positive reaction from Joe Annandale and other village members, and it will be screened in the village, hopefully constituting a contribution to that central place of collaboration, creativity, and critical dialogue.

Since submitting the abstract for this conference, a change has occurred with regards to our original intention to intertwine live footage and animation in the documentary, with sequences that are interactive and generated by Poutasi village residents, as well as animated sequences that involve the collaboration of our design students back in Auckland. We still intend to include these different sequences, but the framework in which such multi-media narratives will sit will be that of an interactive documentary website. We are drawn to the potentialities for immersion,

participation, reflection and collaboration that can occur within such a format, and believe that such a medium affords an excellent vehicle that aligns with our intentions: the provision of a view that stems more from the inside of Poutasi village, than pre-conceptions based on tourist postcards.

Accordingly, in 2015, in the new academic year, we will be working with a group of students in the creation and design of this interactive website. The website will incorporate the documentary that we are about to show you, animations by our students, lengthier versions of the interviews with subtitles in both English and Samoan, and interactive narratives. We have been influenced by the power and intimacy of interactive documentary websites such as “The Block” from the SBS in Australia, and “Welcome to PinePoint”, “High Rise”, and “Bear 21”, which have all emerged from the documentary powerhouse of the National Film Board of Canada. Hopefully, our endeavours will yield a documentary experience that is similarly immersive, which serves as a documentation of Poutasi village at a particular time and place, and which connects people in different locations, even when separated by stretches of ocean.