

# BOXES, INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE MATERIALITY OF MORAL RELATIONS: AID AND RESPECT AFTER CYCLONE PAM

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**Box variant:** aid boxes. **Specific variant:** after Cyclone Pam, Vanuatu. March 2015. **Size and shape:** highly variable. Size often requires military plane or navy ship and significant knowledge and technical infrastructure. **Material:** cardboard, plastic, wood. **Colour:** variable. Often accompanied by white stickers indicating provenance, e.g. 'Australian Aid'. Stickers also indicate that contents should not be sold but distributed as aid. **Behaviour:** move through procedures that are seen as universal, but if local distribution networks are overrun, they are associated with feelings of disrespect. Also, movement makes those in control of networks into experts. **Habitat:** humanitarian crises. **Distribution and costs:** free (in short term) to recipient. In the case of Cyclone Pam, amounts promised: Australia, AUD 5 million; New Zealand, NZD 2.5 million, United Kingdom, GBP 2 million (Hayward-Jones 2015); China, CNY 30 million (Sim 2015). Local infrastructure maintained by local government. **Migration:** follows in wake of disasters caused by hurricanes, tsunamis. **Status:** urgent. This can justify disrespect of local authorities and forms of knowledge. **Contents:** 'The Necessities of life'. Tarpaulins, water, medicine, tents, rice, clothing. **Deliver:** consumables (see contents). **Perform:** expertise, aid, order. **Transport:** goods from one national economy to another. Also often transport goods between cultural frameworks that shape the meanings of objects, personhood, and exchange. **Provoke:** conflicts. **Reveal and/or heighten:** new or pre-existing struggles and unequal distribution. **Need:** local infrastructure, networks, and knowledge.

*Keywords: transporting, disrespecting, dis/ordering, expert making*

## HURRICANES AND AID BOXES

THE SOUND ALONE OF THE WINDS FROM A CATEGORY-FIVE CYCLONE IS enough to terrorise the most steady of hearts. Sheltering with your family and your community on the floor of the strongest building in your village is an adventure at the beginning, when you're five, but the fun quickly turns to fear when the adults grow silent. Corrugated iron roofs are tossed around the village as easily as boats on seawater. Iron sheets, pitched around in 350-kilometre gusts, will damage anything that they hit. When palm trees are blown over, they do not go quietly. This one is different from the hurricanes people talk about, like Uma in 1987, or Ivy in 2004. You start to worry that this one may even be different than the one in 1950, when a wave swept over the island, and your village moved to the bigger island nearby. The one that older people still talk about.

In March 2015, the category-five cyclone Pam roared through Vanuatu, a nation of over eighty inhabited islands in the southwestern Pacific. The cyclone crippled Vanuatu's infrastructure: an estimated ninety percent of the nation's buildings were impacted by the storm's effects; crops and livestock were damaged; telecommunications were paralysed, and water shortages became acute. An emotional President Baldwin Lonsdale, speaking from a conference on disaster preparedness he was attending in Japan, conveyed the urgency and scale of the damage to the international community, saying 'The humanitarian need is immediate, we need it right now' (BBC 2015).

Aid boxes began arriving shortly afterwards on New Zealand Hercules aircraft, Australian RAAF C-17s and Globemaster Australian C-17s, to the Bauerfield airport in Port Vila (**FIGURES 16.1, 16.2**). The airport and its runway, built to accommodate US military needs in World War Two, is large enough to accommodate such military planes, and was partially open by Sunday (Fox 2015), roughly forty-eight hours after the cyclone passed. A New Zealand navy ship anchored in the deep harbour, to be witnessed by all who ventured back to the seawall.

These boxes and their contents, once on the Australian military planes, on the runway, on the harbour wall, become 'aid' or 'aid and relief supplies'. In images of the aftermath of the cyclone, the boxes on planes or being loaded off planes appear solid and orderly amid the destruction of homes, crops, and



**FIG. 16.2** 'Plane arrives in Port Vila with aid packages' (photo credit: Evan Schuurman/ Save the Children from Barber 2015, used with permission)

infrastructure. They appear separate from the resilience and ingenuity of ni-Vanuatu (citizens of Vanuatu) cleaning up.

The boxes, generally referred to as 'aid', were accompanied by medical experts, search and rescue teams, and logistics experts from Australia and New Zealand. A UN team arrived from Europe. The boxes displayed 'Australian Aid' stickers that prominently labelled the provenance of the objects as well as the intended relationship between those receiving and those delivering.

The boxes, alongside the technical infrastructure, needed a knowledge network for experts to best distribute the contents. By early May, less than two months after the cyclone, a 'Post Disaster Needs Assessment [...] which will help in mobilizing additional resources for recovery and reconstruction' (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme 2015) was conducted by NGOs.

## PAST BOXES

Boxes transporting manufactured objects have arrived from Australia, England, France, and China since Europeans took up long-term residence on the islands.

Virtually all manufactured goods in Vanuatu arrive there in boxes, as there is very limited factory manufacturing. At the end of World War II, military boxes with similar contents to that supplied after the cyclone – food, medicine, military equipment – were dumped into the sea by departing American troops, so that one of the remaining colonial powers (Britain) could not use them. This also meant that Islanders who had worked for Americans during the war could not consume the contents, which now form enormous reefs of cans, bottles, and scrap metal that are of interest to snorkelers and divers. This was aid precluded, the dumped boxes performing an attempt at severing relationship between the departing Americans and the British who remained, along with the French, as colonial powers until 1980.

Ships and planes have left Vanuatu with cargo as well. In the context of trade beyond the Pacific islands, sandalwood was harvested and shipped (1830s–1860s) to China, and copra (processed coconut) had some value on European markets. Beginning in the 1840s, people left, sometimes having been kidnapped, to work on plantations on other Pacific islands and in Australia. Now seasonal labourers, men and women, get short term contracts in Australia and New Zealand's agricultural industries.

#### THE ARRIVAL OF BOXES FORETOLD

Boxes of manufactured goods arriving on aircraft were prophesied and sought through the ritual efforts of groups of devotees in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Vanuatu from the 1930s. Such people – not the entire population of any of these countries – wondered about cargo boxes that arrived and contained objects that did not appear to require labour to be produced, or payment to be distributed. When Europeans arrived with such objects, their success, some members of these groups theorised, was a result of the success of their – the Europeans' – ancestors. It was then thought that boxes of desirable manufactured goods arriving in planes might also have been foretold by their own ancestors. These beliefs 'serve to reframe colonial experience into an intimately personal context. The desire to acquire cargo becomes a foil for re-establishing good relations with deceased relatives. Behind all of this, though, is a broader effort to reimagine a basic sense of self in relation to the local community' (Leavitt

2004: 183). Anthropologists have long observed that this cargo, as objects of desire (e.g. Lindstrom 1993), mediated relationships and power.

Too easily assigned the name ‘cargo cult’ in the past by colonial authorities and Western popular media, in Vanuatu such clusters of beliefs and ritual have been taken up by certain people anticipating the arrival of John Frum on the island of Tanna in the south of the country. The messianic figure first appeared in the late 1930s, saying that if people left the Presbyterian Church, and stopped following the colonial authorities and using currency, he would then return with wealth. During World War Two, the wealth that the American military displayed bolstered the belief that John Frum was American. Since then, John Frum has often been identified as a white American soldier who, if the rituals are performed correctly, will come to Tanna by plane to distribute goods. At one point, followers of John Frum even constructed a runway to facilitate his arrival (Fortune 2000).

The desires of those who await John Frum, and their fascination with objects, selfhood, and exchange, while not the most common instantiation – indeed, their numbers fell from 1000 in the 1960s to 300–400 in the 1980s (Fortune 2000) – do reflect the broad importance of objects for exchange and the production of personhood in the Pacific. This was first brought to the attention of anthropologists by Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), and other renowned researchers like Marcel Mauss (1985, 1970), Marilyn Strathern (1988, 1999) and Annette Weiner (1992). Through this scholarship, Pacific Islanders have taught generations of anthropology students that participating in forms of exchange – this means giving *and* receiving in the right ways – can contribute to our moral personhood. Indeed, apprehending the centrality of exchange in human activity can show that personhood might not only be located in individual bodies, but also has the possibility of being socially and relationally constituted. It is culturally incumbent on all parties to make sure exchange, over time, is fair.

#### HURRICANES AND BOXES: ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

Distributing the contents of the boxes after cyclone Pam was not easy. Vanuatu is a nation of over eighty inhabited islands, with terrain and waterways that have always posed complex and expensive logistical challenges for large scale (read colonial, capitalist, modern) transportation infrastructures. Furthermore,

the infrastructure had been severely damaged in the cyclone. Answering the president's call, international NGOs arrived and implemented their standard procedures, but these did not go down well with ni-Vanuatu or international staff who were already working longer term in the country. Rebecca Barber, of Save the Children Australia, interviewed international NGO workers in Vanuatu about the first response. She writes:

A number of staff interviewed during the course of this research said that failure on the part of newcomers to understand the Melanesian culture underlay much of the disharmony in the first weeks of the response. There were two parts to this issue: the first being a failure to show deference to figures of authority; the second being a pushing aside of national staff and international pre-cyclone staff, who between them had so much to bring to the response. (Barber 2015: 19)

She further quotes from email correspondence with an international humanitarian worker in May 2015:

...I walked into a room that was overflowing with white faces, the only Pacific person in the room apart from [the NDMO Director] was the Fijian SPC [Secretariat of the Pacific Community] representative ... the tension in the room was tangible and everything about it just felt "wrong" ... The NDMO Ni-Van staff (the people who should really have been in the EOC!) were all sitting in the office across the corridor. There is no way I wanted to sit and be based in that room. (Barber 2015: 19)

Many people working in Vanuatu reported similar experiences to Barber. Repeatedly, the goal of distributing boxes led those who had brought the boxes from abroad to sideline the knowledge and experiences of those living in the country as they attempted to implement standard protocols. Barber argues that in humanitarian disasters,

the international community must show much greater readiness to move away from 'one-size-fits-all' systems and procedures, and understand its core

role as providing surge capacity, technical advice and expertise to national actors to enable *them* to lead and coordinate disaster response in their own countries. (Barber 2015: 3)

This was published in her report to the Pacific Regional Consultation for the World Humanitarian Summit, submitted on behalf of the NGOs Save the Children Australia, World Vision Australia, Oxfam Australia, and CARE Australia.

The fact that Barber felt it necessary to make the point to international humanitarian groups that ‘one size does not fit all’, highlights that using infrastructure to transport boxes is not a neutral agenda. Boxes require networks and expertise, which are made of political relationships. Giving and receiving boxes brings people into new relationships and makes pre-existing political relationships visible.

#### FUTURES OF AID BOXES

Ni-Vanuatu, and the small numbers of people from Europe, other Pacific islands, and Asia, in residence since the 1800s, have worked together to cope with cyclones for centuries, without boxes. There were strategies for burying water and food, or storing necessities in caves. Yet, as Chris Ballard pointed out in an op-ed piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the fact that there have always been cyclones does not mean that Cyclone Pam is just another expected disaster to manage. That Port Vila is ranked the ‘Disaster Capital of the World’ by Natural Hazards Risk Atlas in their global risk analysis study also has to do with changes in the population and changes in land use, as well as global and regional climate change. Ballard writes,

a real estate boom has seen vast swathes of the best agricultural land on islands such as Efate and Espiritu Santo converted from customary tenure into residential subdivisions, most of them acquired on long leases by Australian investors [...] There are sound reasons why so few traditional settlements were found along the coast of Efate in the 1840s [before the arrival of Europeans]. A healthy respect for cyclones and storm surges was foremost among them. (2015)

What is different this time is a concern on the donor's side that aid boxes do not come cheap. Ballard writes that the Australian government has already indicated that it will shift its efforts from disaster relief to more cost-effective disaster risk reduction. This will mean more planning for cyclones and other natural disasters (e.g. volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis) in the hope of forestalling widespread loss of life and damage to housing and infrastructure. This strategy will call upon webs of expertise that are accompanied by surveillance over land and coastlines.

What is also different this time, is that new international institutions and social movements are expanding the narratives about aid, islands, and climate change. Aid in the form of boxes of relief supplies is coming under critical scrutiny by those advocating climate justice and climate compensation (e.g. Friedman 2015). For example, an official from Dominica, a small island nation in the Caribbean, which was badly hit by torrential rains from Tropical Storm Erika, has argued that 'Rich countries' emergency relief was of no use to countries with economies flattened by weather disasters'. And, more trenchantly, 'They allow climate change to destroy you and then they provide you with tents and blankets' (Clark 2015). In June, three months after the cyclone, citizens in Vanuatu and neighbouring island nations drafted the 'People's Declaration for Climate Justice' (2015), demanding compensation from fossil fuel companies for destruction linked to climate change.

As very little factory manufacturing is undertaken in Vanuatu, engagements with boxes that arrive by ship and plane, and how their contents are distributed, has been a key dimension of the Islanders' experience of modernity. Longing and desire for manufactured goods, as well as processed foods, have been the affective cargo of boxes from ships and aircraft. The boxes are also accompanied by questions about who is best suited to distribute them, and who actually distributes them. Aid boxes are a material instantiation of a politics of distribution. What will it take for the boxes to perform and produce networks and relationships of compensation and equitable distribution? What knowledge, technology, and forms of affect will we need to transform relations of aid into relations of compensation and climate justice?



## CODA

The hurricane winds die down. After you have spoken with your family on other islands, and heard how they fared (which you can do once cell phone towers are back up), and after you have seen your house and garden, what is different this time is that with Cyclone Pam you wonder about climate change. You think about your garden land – if your family has managed to keep some from developers – up on the hill, and consider rebuilding your house there. You wonder how you will manage to get some of the water and food from the boxes at the airport. You know you and your children need these items now. You wonder about new and old kinds of reconciliations and relationships necessary to recover from the damage to the land, the climate, and humans.

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