Chapter 1

Ipare

We might like to think that we live in a most hectic age, buffeted by epic global flows of people, of things, of ideas. But our times are not extraordinary. We might like to think we inhabit the world’s hub, the global core. But our place is not special. We might like to think we set the human standard, that everyone else desires naturally to emulate our ways. But we are not exemplary. Gaze out into the world and we can find global networks established millennia before the Old World met the New World (or first remembered so doing) in 1492. These intensifying grids and channels have continued to proliferate. Globalization reaches us all. But within our interconnected world, despite this worldwide intercourse, we also find myriad forms of local exceptionalism, going strong and underway.

Global Island

Come to Tanna, an island in the southern reaches of Vanuatu, a Y-shaped archipelago in the southwestern Pacific, 750 miles west of Fiji and 1,200 miles east of Australia (map). Strangers from abroad found their way to Tanna in 1774 following the glow of its volcano, Iasur, which reddened the horizon. British explorer James Cook and his crew, on the sailing ship Resolution, were atypical visitors but not exceptional in that Islanders themselves sailed about Vanuatu’s southern islands and beyond to the Loyalties and New Caledonia. Their oceangoing ancestors had canoed in from the north about three thousand years previously.

Cook needed to replenish his ship’s supplies of water and firewood and he also wanted to explore. Johann Forster, the expedition’s natural scientist, with his son Georg ventured forth into island hamlets located around a bay that Cook named Port Resolution, after his ship. The Forsters reconnoitered and chatted with the locals whom they called Indians, a residue label from even earlier global encounters. They reported back to Cook that Resolution had landed on Tanna. This word, though, means ground or soil. An anthropologist in the 1920s would
Tanna map. Created by author.
joke that Cook, searching for the island’s name, pointed downward: “What do you call this?” he asked. “Why, we call it dirt.”

This may be just an amusing yarn as the Forsters provided few details of that linguistic encounter. Tanna might already have been the island’s established name, as it has since become. Some suggest that the island’s true name is Tanauta, which means something like “land of wealth,” and people on neighboring Futuna Island call Tanna Hgauta. Nomenclatural claims are muddled although Tanna is most recognized. The long archipelago has also shifted identity. Captain Pedro Fernandes de Queirós, in 1606, landed on its largest island that he dubbed Australia del Espíritu Santo. A century and a half later, in 1767, French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville sailed through northern Vanuatu, pausing to rename the islands the Grand Cyclades, having in mind a smaller archipelago in the Aegean Sea. Cook, who was likewise inclined to bestow new place names, renamed these islands the New Hebrides after some mostly treeless islands off Scotland’s west coast. Leaving behind his newly identified Tanna and the New Hebrides, he sailed south next to find a facsimile of Scotland, a long narrow island that he christened New Caledonia. When Vanuatu in 1980 achieved its independence from France and Great Britain, the nation’s new leaders sloughed away a number of these colonial appellatives and discarded New Hebrides for Vanuatu, an invented toponym built on vanua that means “land” in many island languages.

Back on Tanna, if Cook and crew had probed further they would have discerned that their new island acquaintances also called their home Ipare. This is both a name and a direction. Ipare means “inland, toward the land.” It pairs with iperaha (seaward) and it parallels pesu (clockwise along the shore) and prahi (counterclockwise along the shore). These names, and directions, encode mobility. They chart peoples’ comings and goings, heading inland or keeping seaward. Islanders in motion evoke these directions to account for their journeys. “Where are you going?” they like to ask. “I’m off to sea.” Or, “I’m climbing toward Ipare, going home.”

Travelers move around Tanna in these four directions and they also have left island shores for parts and places abroad, increasingly so after 1774. Although surrounded by tropical seas and ocean trenches, Tanna with its red volcanic radiance was never isolated since Austronesian-speaking settlers first came ashore three millennia ago. After Cook marked Tanna on the map, overseas arrivals and departures briskly escalated. Some Islanders traveled far. Williamu, from Aneityum Island to Tanna’s south, was in London in 1860 assisting missionary John Inglis’ Bible translation efforts. Many others, beginning in the 1860s,
left Tanna for plantation work in Australia, Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia. Others joined ships’ crews. In turn, whaling vessels, ocean traders seeking sandalwood, dried sea slugs, pearl shell, and coconut oil or meat, sundry explorers, European naval vessels, missionaries, and even some early tourists found their way to Port Resolution. So did more singular global wanderers including Rangi, a nineteenth-century sandalwood trader from Malaysia, and at least one African American refugee from the US Civil War.

More formidable arrivistes included British and French colonial administrators. After neither power could agree which would occupy the archipelago, they together proclaimed a peculiar jointly governed Condominium of the New Hebrides in 1906. Although the British positioned an administrator on Tanna in 1912, he soon left to fight the First World War. Administration of the colony, which was never notably effective, was significantly delayed until after the armistice of 1918. Two decades later, from 1942 to 1946, several hundred thousand American servicemen steamed into the colony, some to staff Pacific War military bases there and others passing through on their way to battle the Japanese.

This brief American occupation left powerful memories and souvenirs that continue to reverberate, particularly on Tanna. Wartime experience shaped the liturgy and rituals of an island social movement that ignited in the late 1930s. John Frum, a shadowy figure, materialized with the message that Islanders should revive their abandoned traditions and return to home grounds. In 1941, John Frum’s preaching spread rapidly and island churches and chapels emptied out for a number of years. John Frum continues to visit Tanna, spectrally or in people’s dreams. I come and go, too, always staying in Samaria village that lies up the mountain from Port Resolution, and south of Iasur Volcano (figure 1).

Tanna Island is high and volcanic, its southern mountains rising to over three thousand feet. Just west of Port Resolution, the stratovolcano Iasur continues every few minutes to erupt with lava bomb explosions and dark plumes of volcanic ash. Although surrounded by warm seas, most Islanders, including my Samaria friends, are farmers. Volcanic ash annoys, as it contributes to acid rain that can harm or even destroy crops, but volcanic ash also rains down potassium, magnesium, and other chemicals that contribute to soil fertility. Every year, Tanna’s diligent farmers plant abundant gardens of yam, taro, banana, breadfruit, sugarcane, island cabbage (edible hibiscus leaves), kava, and other cultigens that arrived on ancient canoes along with more recently introduced crops including manioc, sweet potato, mango, papaya, watermelon, corn, carrots and other vegetables, and tobacco. People tend pigs and chickens that arrived with early canoe voyagers, and also the cattle, horses, dogs, and cats that followed Captain Cook to the island.
When I first came to Tanna in 1978, people then earned a little money by selling copra to passing trading ships. They produced this by chopping open coconuts, scooping out and smoke drying the meat. Most since have given this up as too labor intensive. Instead, many follow money by leaving Tanna to work in Port Vila, Vanuatu’s capital town. Around thirty thousand Islanders call Tanna home, but several thousand more have moved up to Port Vila’s urban settlements on Efate Island, or live elsewhere in the country. Many seek new opportunities to profit from Tanna’s budding tourist flows, catering to overseas visitors who come mostly to sightsee the volcano.

Iasur attracts visitors, but so do Tanna’s regular festive exchanges and dances. People use the Bislama word *kastom* (custom) to label these festivals, along with any traditional or local practice, style, or belief. Bislama, a onetime Pidgin language that has evolved into a creole among children born in Port Vila, is Vanuatu’s lingua franca. A lingua franca is essential in that linguists keep finding more and more distinct languages in these islands. The count is up to more than 130 different languages, and these are kept current by a national population of fewer than 300,000 ni-Vanuatu, the local term for citizen. On Tanna, Islanders speak five or six languages depending on how one draws dialect versus language boundaries. In Samaria and other mountain and valley villages south of the volcano, the language is Nafe (What). Missionaries called it Kwamera.
Nafe’s language area stretches east to Port Resolution, and then down the coast to Kwamera near Tanna’s southern tip, and then round to Green Point in the southwest. (Nafe has six vowels [a, e, i, o, u, and mid-central i]. For ease of reading, I use other vowel symbols for this latter. To represent the nasal velar (as in singer) I use [g]. Nasals [m, n, and g] and liquid [ɾ] are sometimes devoiced, represented orthographically as mh, nh, gh, or rh.)

Many have come to Tanna, or left the island, since 1774 when Cook cast an anchor in Port Resolution’s rocky bottom. In years since, many have gone abroad looking for work, while others from across the seas have come to Tanna, entranced by its volcanic nature and culture. These voyagers who came to Tanna, or who left their island home behind, followed the world’s coiled routes and networks that have deepened and multiplied during the past two centuries and a half. I follow the stories of a dozen mobile heroes and heroines whose lives exemplify the travels of many others, blown away to near or distant parts by strengthening global winds. Their stories reveal essential aspects of Tanna’s culture, society, and history that the following chapters explore.

Beyond this ethnographic and historical detail, these twelve island lives demonstrate that people everywhere, even those living on seemingly out-of-the-way Pacific Islands, for many years have been firmly linked into the world’s networks. Concurrently, as an attendant effect of their travel and experience abroad, Islanders continue to maintain resilient bonds with Tanna, their island home, and they fiercely protect their island identity. These twelve lives, through the years, also track changes in patterns of island leadership, personhood, and gender. Women, in particular, through travel, education, and other opportunities have found ways to have a greater say over their life choices. Their ability to do so recently has strengthened with the advent of mobile telephones and social media, by which women can create digital spaces and connections that partly escape the oversight of men. Although each of these twelve lives is distinctive and remarkable, each also tells broader human stories of cultural continuities and change.

Memory
Literate explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists recorded bits and pieces of island biographies, and I rummage through this archive to share some of the hills and valleys of these lives. I also draw on anthropological fieldwork on Tanna, which included recording village friends’ life histories. Tanna’s cultural and biographical memories perpetuate themselves orally. Until nineteenth-century
missionaries arrived to school new converts, orality rather than literacy was the main medium of knowledge transmission, and it remains fundamental today.

Oral cultures cultivate and encourage expert and tenacious memory, much longer than that which typically pertains in the literate world where writing and books allow people to forget. Socrates, from another discursively focused society, was no fan of letters. He produced no writing so far as we know, although Plato transcribed his dialogues. In one exchange with Phaedrus, Socrates disdained literacy. Writing, he said,

will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves . . . they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.\(^2\)

On the other hand, cultural memory in oral systems can be supple and pliant insofar as stories, and kastom, are neither written nor codified. People may amend memory to fit the present. This flexibility keeps kastom current and functional, whatever circumstance may come to pass.

On Tanna, I was a hearer of many things and, as anthropologists should, I wrote everything down, or at least everything that then seemed a thing. This included beguiling stories of island lives and times. Peoples’ excellent memories keep alive the past. Their transcribed stories, I hope, offer more than Socrates’ tiresome company or wisdom without reality.

There is ample presentism within Tanna’s culture. This works to sustain its essentials. Although Islanders eagerly follow roads leading away to novel experience, they also firmly cultivate island home ground, keeping kastom going across the years. Tanna time fixes on a persistent center. Island temporal categories presume an unmoving island that is centered within a circling sea of time. Moving from today or from now into the future, one passes through tomorrow. Moving back a day into the past comes yesterday. But, then, the day-after-tomorrow is the same word as for the day-before-yesterday, and the word for indefinite future is the same for the indefinite past. Kurira, which means “behind,” is also “next” situating the present as the center point with past/future as its horizon. Nari kurira is either something located behind one or is something following or next-in-line, that is, nuk kurira being the following (future) yam harvest/year. Facing inward toward the present, people keep their backs to the future and also to the past.
Western progressive, developmental time concepts overlap the island’s centered cyclicity. Many Islanders, unless attentively schooled, don’t care to structure their life stories chronologically or progressively, organized as some developmental line that runs from infancy, through adulthood, to seniority. Larger island history, too, isn’t progressively organized and conceived. Today is yesterday and also tomorrow. Island personal names repeat, generation to generation, so that the personages of the past are likely animated today as they will again be tomorrow. The ancestors, *ris* (a word also used for seed yams), established Tanna’s fixed nomenclatural infrastructure. We might say that they did so “long ago,” but ancestral spirits remain always present. As do yams every year, island personages persistently return.

I present a dozen of these personages in chronological chapters, beginning with Pavegen and James Cook in 1774 and ending with my young friend Reuben who teaches on Tanna today. Echoing island cyclical time sensibility, however, in these chapters I turn from past to present and back to capture both the swirling and the steady essentials of island history. Despite Socratic and island appreciations of literacy, orality, memory, and time, I offer these dozen Tanna stories attending to our own written ways of sharing knowledge, and perhaps wisdom. Emulating Tanna time sensibilities, I revive these island travelers, inviting them back into our own times, so that their lives, past and present, continue to resonate and inform. Let’s begin with a pair of sharks.

Notes


Further Readings

*Vanuatu Prehistory Including Voyaging*


Vanuatu History


Island Agriculture


Tanna Culture and History


Nafe (Kwamera) Language