Chapter 2

Sharks

The old man watched the strange and large canoe sail closer and closer to Ipare. It moved steadily toward the land, his island. It is early August 1774. To follow the vessel’s movements, the watcher stood on the eastern headland of a snug bay. Island ancestors had named this triangular peninsula the “tail of the fish.” Looking down at the harbor and peninsula from the interior mountain uplands, the fishtail looks ready to thrash. The land is a fish, and the old man is a shark—Pavegen. He carries one of the island’s fixed personal names that fathers, or other name-givers, must bestow upon their sons. Some, like Pavegen the shark, also are animal, fish, or tree names.

That extraordinary canoe is HMS Resolution, a 110-foot-long sloop, a one-time coal transport refitted by the British Navy for oceanic exploration; her captain the explorer James Cook on his second circumnavigation and survey of southern Pacific islands. Cook sailed with more than one hundred crew members onboard, including roving scientists Johann Forster and his twenty-year old son Georg (or George), Swedish naturalist Anders Sparrman who embarked at Cape Town, and expeditionary artist William Hodges. Cook was looking for a harbor to fill his water tanks and his larder with fresh food. The previous day, he had moored Resolution in a bay on the eastern side of Erromango, the island due north of Tanna, where dealings with people quickly soured. Cook himself, with a boat’s crew, beat a rapid retreat back out to Resolution when hostile Islanders hurled spears, arrows, and slingshot. In his haste, Cook left behind a pair of oars and a few new place names, as was his habit. Naming celebrated discovery, and Cook liked to rebrand many of his ports of call. On Erromango, this allowed him to grumble: “the promontory, or peninsula, which disjoins these two bays, I named Traitor’s Head, from the treacherous behaviour of its inhabitants.” And the bay, where he anchored and then fled, is now Cook’s Bay.

Resolution cut southeast to have a quick look at Aniwa, a low, small coralline atoll, and then headed down toward Tanna. A red, volcanic glow marked the horizon. This was Iasur volcano, soon to become famous as the “lighthouse of
the Pacific.” Wary of another hostile welcome like that from Erromango’s “traitors,” Cook hove to outside a beautiful bay that cuts into the island, just east of the smoking volcano. He sent two boats, well armed, into the harbor to sound both its bottom and the temperament of its people who, in increasing numbers, gathered on shore, or set out in their own canoes, shadowing Resolution’s two boats. Satisfied of safer harbor, Cook warped Resolution into the bay.

Cook and party anchored here for two weeks, taking on water, wood, and a little food, and reconnoitering island resources and people. Pavegen, standing at the fishtail’s tip, would have been among many who watched Resolution close in, looming larger and larger as it approached from the north. He, too, hurried down to the bayshore to commence dealings with the alien visitors, be they human or spirit. That first day, two or three owls flew over Cook’s ship. Tannese gathered on shore shouted and some threw stones at them. One landed in the water and men in a canoe grabbed her and delivered her to the British. Owls, who hunt at night, are a sign that spirits are stirring.

Cook, better secured than on Erromango, resumed his promiscuous renaming practice. Although he had collected the harbor’s Nafe language name, Iuea, he rechristened it Port Resolution in honor of his ship. Ironically, Cook and others onboard, including astronomer William Wales and young draughtsman and scientist Georg Forster, all described the Tannese themselves as they gathered nervously around the bay, to be “irresolute.” This island irresolution might better be understood as part watchfulness, part friendliness. Local mildness encouraged Cook to secure his anchors for two weeks of refreshment, refitting, exploration, and cross-cultural encounter. The first irresolute Islanders who were brave enough to canoe close by the ship tossed coconuts his way. Cook complained that others, though, when they came onboard “were for carrying off every thing they could lay their hands upon” including the rudder’s rings, anchor buoys, and the ship’s flag. Acting tough, demonstrating British muscle, he ordered his crew to fire (over their heads, so he said) increasingly larger bore weaponry at retreating shiplifters, aiming to clear the bay of island canoes: first muskets, then a four-pounder cannon, and then musketoons. Afterward, Cook retired to his quarters to dine in peace.

And here, on 6 August 1774, is when Pavegen enters Pacific history, or perhaps he first appeared an hour or two earlier in the midst of Cook’s shock-and-awe fusillade: “During these transactions a friendly old man in a small Canoe made several trips between us and the shore, bringing with him 2 or 3 Cocoa nutts or a yam each time and took in exchange whatever we gave him.” Pavegen continued to exchange presents with Cook and his crew during their visit, beginning again the
following day when Cook ordered a watering party to fill casks from a freshwater pond near the bay’s southern shore. A thousand Islanders gathered to watch the brash strangers, split into two groups, but blocking access to the watering hole. On one side of the beach, Cook presumed, stood people from the eastern fishtail and parts inland to the south. Those gathered on the other side had come down from an uplifted ridge on the western edge of the bay, a range of hills (Iankahi) that spreads west to Iasur volcano. Nineteenth-century disease later entirely depopulated these heights, and ridge land rights remain in contention today.

Pavegen represented the eastern party and Cook judged “from his conduct that his disposition was Pacific.” The old man again canoed out to Resolution and Cook gave him another piece of cloth. This could have been a yard of the tapa, or barkcloth, that Cook had stockpiled in Tahiti. Cook made signs to the crowd surrounding the watering place, demanding that the boisterous throng set aside their thrusting clubs and waving spears so that his party could approach the pond. He acted out his demand by seizing Pavegen’s weapons and chucking these into the bay. The astonished old man, it seems, took this calmly. The crowd on shore, however, was unmoved. Cook again displayed his firepower. Marines blasted away with small shot from muskets and musketoons at the occupants of a nearby canoe who had paddled off with a string of beads and some other trifles without surrendering their clubs in exchange.

Cook called more marines and sailors in three boats to the beach. These pulled up where Islanders had set down additional, if small, gifts of plantain, yam, and taro. Pavegen, too, had returned to shore and with two other elders, their weapons pointedly set aside, he stood alongside these offerings laid out in between the two opposed beach parties. Cook still was nervous. He ordered his men to fire again over the heads of the Islanders in the westerly crowd. This caused only momentary confusion and sparked a rude response. One man turned his naked ass to Cook and beat this “like a monkey.” Ill-pleased, Cook called for Resolution’s booming cannon to fire four-pound shot over the crowd. After this ruckus, the crowd deemed it prudent to pull back from the beach; the Resolution’s boats landed safely and sailors roped off a sixty-yard stretch between pond and bay. Only old Pavegen stood his ground through all this, although “deserted by his two companions.” Eventually, people drifted back down to the beach and offered the landing party some freshly plucked coconuts. While filling water casks, Cook also ordered his men to cut and stack firewood after, so he said, “obtaining leave” from Pavegen, his new island acquaintance.

Cook, the expedition’s scientists, officers, crew, and Pavegen continued to hobnob during the following weeks. The day after the watering party landed,
Pavegen came again to the bay and gave Cook one small pig. The British were hungry for more, but Pavegen’s pig would be the single porcine addition to Resolution’s larders. On 8 August, Pavegen returned an ax that a sailor woodcutter had left on shore. On 9 August, Cook renamed the entire island Tanna after Johann and Georg Forster shared results of their linguistic inquiries with bay inhabitants. The Forsters, earlier in the voyage, had picked up smatterings of several Polynesian languages, and many of the sightseers then massing at the newly named Port Resolution had sailed over from neighboring Futuna and perhaps Aniwa—two small islands where a Polynesian language is spoken today. Cook was pleased to mark another island name on his expanding charts.

On 10 August, Pavegen’s family brought Cook even more bananas, a few yams, and some taro. On 12 August, Forster and a shore party wandered into Pavegen’s village where they found most of the gifts that Cook had given the old man, including a hat with laces, hanging up on bushes. On 13 August, Cook invited Pavegen to dine onboard. Pavegen pretended disinterest as he reviewed the ship’s alien marvels on display, although he did play with a box of sand (that Cook used to dry his inky journal entries) that somehow caught his eye. Cook, in turn, visited Pavegen’s village on 15 August. Afterward, Pavegen walked Cook back to the harbor with more gifts of coconuts and a yam. The next day, Cook gave Pavegen additional tapa cloth and a dog. The Tannese, seeing canines for the first time, called them pigs. Cook particularly wanted Pavegen’s permission to cut down a casuarina (she oak) tree that stood near the shore to replace Resolution’s sprung tiller and rudder head. The Tannese tended such trees (ironwood is another name) for club-making. Pavegen joined Cook onboard for dinner, a second time.

On 17 August, Cook again found Pavegen ashore, together with another old “chief” and his son; the two probably canoed over from neighboring Futuna Island to study the pale strangers. Voyage journalists variously named these visitors Geogy (Keoki), Yeoki, or Yogai (Iokai), his son Yatta (Iata), and a grandson Narep. Cook invited them onboard, too, for a meal. They made quick work of a banana pie, greens, and boiled yam but were not much impressed by British salt beef and pork.

On 19 August, things fell apart. The new tiller was carved and ready to install but Cook also wanted what remained of the felled casuarina tree, left onshore. He sent a landing party to fetch the remaining wood. William Wedgeborough, a marine sentry who guarded the landing party, suddenly shot and killed a man who was standing next to another who might have been putting arrow to bow. Cook was incensed and he cast Wedgeborough in irons, later writing that such
display of bow and arrow had been constant among Tannese men who closely watched the intruders. After the musket blast, everyone up and scattered including the wounded man who didn’t make it far. Cook called out for his ship’s surgeon on Resolution who landed in time to watch the unlucky bystander expire, a bullet through his torso. That afternoon, only Pavegen and a few other men dared show themselves on the beach. Kindly Pavegen promised to bring Cook more food the following morning, but—the wind now in the southeast—Cook that evening seized the opportunity to make off. Resolution sailed out to sea from Port Resolution, clockwise south around Tanna, and then beat off to the north to round the island before turning south again. Cook was headed, eventually, home to London, to an escalating celebrity, and to his spectacular murder five years later on the Big Island of Hawai‘i. Pavegen, rooted in his fishtail village, might have watched Resolution sail away from the newly renamed harbor and island. Cook vanished over the horizon, but he continues to haunt Tanna. As does Pavegen.

Chiefs

Cook appreciated hierarchy. British social inequalities thoroughly infused naval order. In Resolution’s small, floating domain, Cook was lord and captain. Making landfalls, he best preferred to consort with dignified island peers, but he had first to identify any such insular chiefs or kings. During his first venture on Tanna’s shore, Cook attentively handed out cloth, dogs, souvenir medals, and other gewgaws to sundry older men, but he was disappointed that he could “distinguish no Chief.” Summing up his island account, he concluded that Tanna chiefs “seemed to have very little authority over the rest of the people.” He was unimpressed by old Geogy/Iokai, unsure whether his stature rested on noble rank or mere old age. He recorded that people called Iokai, who probably sailed over from Futuna, Arekkee, and ariki is Futunese for chief. If so, Cook was right to observe that Pavegen and other elders living around the harbor took little notice of him, a mere foreign dignitary.

When Cook invited Iokai to dine on board, others stepped forward also to assert their similar chiefly status hoping, perhaps, to be invited to dinner, too. Cook complained, “They all called themselves Kings or chiefs, but I did not believe any one of them had any pretentions to that title over the whole island.” Nonetheless, he kept an eye cocked for signs of proper hierarchy on the island. He was unimpressed when one putative chief had to climb a coconut palm himself after others asked refused to do so. Even “our friend Pavegen,” who Cook
judged to be “much respected in our neighborhood,” proved not to be truly aristocratic. Cook “had many reasons to believe” that Pavegen had no more right to authority than any other.8 Pavegen’s political influence, such as it was, sprung mostly from his gray hair.

The British liked to find stratified social orders, though Tanna offered only a paltry one. Ship’s artist William Hodges’ etching The Landing at Tanna one of the New Hebrides offered a conventional hierarchical tableau (figure 2). Pavegen stands in the prestigious center of the scene with two fellow elders, arms raised to greet a king-size Cook who boats ashore, shaking a palm frond. Pavegen’s two arms and his posture mirror Cook’s. Weapons dropped on the ground, these three older men separate the two unruly mobs from the harbor’s east and west sides. A few spare offerings of banana, yam, and taro lie at Pavegen’s feet. The three venerable elders entreat spiritual protection, standing behind a line of four stalks of wild cane embedded in the sand. Everyone else on the beach shouts and twists and flourishes clubs. Cook orders his marines to fire muskets and then the ship’s cannon. The roaring blasts will scatter the crowd. Only Pavegen stands his ground.

Cook was right to conclude that power on Tanna comes largely from age, not rank. There are, however, two sorts of leadership titles on the island, a version of Polynesian chiefly dualism. The Tannese position these titular chiefs within “canoes”—the canoe, and the house, their metaphors for local groups. Like Cook’s Resolution, island social organization is one of boats and vessels. Some chiefs are iani neteta (spokesmen of the canoe); others are ierumanu (lords and rulers). Pavegen may well have laid claim to one of these titles but, as Cook noted, he would not have been the only one. Most every local group boasts at least one or another of these titles, if not both. Some of the interpersonal irresoluteness and lack of order that Cook and his crew remarked at Port Resolution stemmed from this dualism. On this island of many chiefs, people come and go largely as they like. No one need kowtow to a superior. No one need follow orders. No one climbs a coconut palm unless he chooses to do so himself.

Gray beards and hair, though, do afford some measure of authority. Old age brings wisdom. It also brings one closer to death. Family and neighbors must keep in mind that the elderly will transmute, one day soon, into ancestral spirits. And these spirits most hope never to have offended. Pavegen and his two fellow elders, as soon-to-be spirits, were culturally predetermined to step forward, between bay and watering hole, to deal with the untoward demands made by the possibly also spiritual Cook, his alien crew, and Resolution—that spooky oversized canoe.
Names

Pavegen welcomed Cook ashore in 1774. Pavegen still inhabits his fishtail today. Tanna local groups—those canoes—each possesses sets of men’s personal names that they reuse from one generation to the next. Names are bestowed and re-bestowed on a group’s children and grandchildren so that the island is full of namesakes, often grandsons named after grandfathers. Groups with few children of their own can name any likely candidate, and thus reconstitute and sustain themselves from century to century by giving names to the sons of others. Local groups possess names for women, too, and for pigs. Only male names, however, give titles to land, beach and reef, power stones, ritual prerogatives, and other personal resources. Johann Forster, as he had elsewhere during the voyage, thought to exchange his name with a new Tanna friend. No island man, though, would give away his name that roots him to family and place. An outsider name like “Johann,” on Tanna, is not worth much.

Island place names, too, endure through time. Some of the bayside villages that Cook and his crew toured around Port Resolution, and also those up on Iankahi Ridge, are today overgrown with coconut plantation or bush, but people know where these places remain, in spirit. They clear these sites, repopulating once ghostly locales whenever needed again. Just as a personal name may be
empty, unused for a generation or two until a new child comes along to bear it, places, too, may seem to vanish yet they survive in memory just beneath the surface of the landscape. Today’s Pavegen, moreover, is also yesterday’s. Not a reincarnation, rather each Pavegen is a replacement, an avatar of all previous persons who have carried that name and warmed that particular seat in the local canoe. The Pavegen who lives today, 250 years after Cook arrived, talks about when he met the intrepid explorer back in 1774, and he may use the first-person pronoun “I” to do so.

Tanna’s landscape and its personages are changed, yet much unchanged, in the years since Cook visited. Local stocks of names, both personal and topographic, do occasionally expand. Just as Cook renamed Port Resolution, the Tannese took his name, Captain Cook, for a pointed fin of land that juts off the fishtail’s eastern coast. This has eroded away, leaving behind a cluster of triangular rocky islets that rise from the sea. And Shark Bay cuts inland, just down the coast from the rocky Captain Cook. Increasing flows of tourists, nowadays, have replaced eighteenth-century explorers coming to Tanna. A scatter of entrepreneurial tourist “bungalows” pox the island, some built on land, and others up in the trees. Venturesome overseas tourists now find their way to Port Resolution. Some travel farther down the coast to Shark Bay to sleep a night or two under thatch, sometimes swimming with friendly ocean sharks that their island hosts know how to tempt toward shore. Keen tourist sharks from overseas meet and greet hungry island business sharks.

In August of 1774, Pavegen and Cook, too, were one shark receiving another. As Cook sailed from Pacific island to island, he appeared recurrently as a spirit or as a stranger-chief. Either way, Cook was a murderer, a spiritual man-eater—a shark that walks on land. He was dangerously unpredictable. He could be a killer. His marine sentry ganged down a man at Port Resolution’s watering hole while Cook supervised the encounter. Other Islanders, adults and children, also must have felt the sting of musket pellets, although Cook would publish an excuse for the pounding gunfire: “I never learnt that any one of them was hurt by our Shott.” Still, the Tannese, hurt or not, have long known how to deal with sharks, and they are familiar with tricky and fickle spirits. Cook’s apparition was remarkable but not extraordinary. Islanders knew how to deal with his uncanny, sharky kind.
Notes


Further Readings

Cook and Pavegen


Cook as Shark


Tanna Chiefs

Tannese Personal and Place Names