Soarum

Soarum asori was indeed a kaba eraha, a great and forbidding ancestor. His home, Iankwanemwi, is up the eastern flanks of Mount Meren, down the coast between Port Resolution and the Matheson’s abandoned house at Imoa. After John and Mary fled in 1862, more dogged and persistent missionaries continued to come ashore. Thomas and Lucy (another Geddie daughter) Neilson revived the Presbyterian enterprise at Port Resolution in 1868. A few months later, in 1869, Agnes and William Watt moved into the Mathesons’ old station, near Kwamera.

Entrenched up at Iankwanemwi, Soarum stood firm against creeping Christian incursion. Ancestors dishonored, power stones destroyed, kava drinking disrupted, polygyny disallowed, the missionaries aimed ambitiously to remake island kastom and the Tannese themselves. Soarum’s descendants say that he was the Soarum Naias who chopped down John Paton’s Port Resolution banana trees in 1862, although this may have been a previous namesake. Events, though, undercut Soarum’s resistance. He held the line for tradition but he was in a tight spot. Christian teaching continued to make headway. The Neilsons and Watts wanted a safe road linking their two stations, saving them from sailing or rowing back and forth. They focused conversion efforts on intervening villages along the way, and Iakwanemwi sits smack on the road that links Port Resolution and Kwamera. Laid low by killer plagues, people blamed missionaries yet they also sought their cures, following the precept that those who cause an illness can also cure this. And increasing numbers of men and women were abandoning the disease-infested island. They jumped onto overseas labor-recruiting ships. The first of these arrived in 1863 to embark indentured Islanders for newly established plantations and other enterprises in colonial Queensland, New Caledonia, Fiji, Samoa, and elsewhere in the New Hebrides. More than four thousand men and women left for Queensland alone between 1863 and 1904. Many others left for work elsewhere abroad, and this from an island population base already much depleted.
Queensland labor contracts ran three years and when these expired, indentured workers could either reenlist or return to Tanna with a developed craving for store-bought goods. They lugged home trade boxes crammed with muskets, ammunition, axes, cloth, tobacco, and the like, although usually they gave much of this away to family and friends. While abroad, most men became tobacco fiends. Where to find more back home on Tanna? Sandalwood and whales, by the 1860s, were mostly wiped out and sandalwood and whaling ships had thus moved along. Missionaries, along with a few penurious traders dealing in coconuts, for some years would control the importation of tobacco to Tanna along with European manufactures. To acquire foreign goods, one could recruit to work in Queensland’s sugarcane plantations; one could plant coconut palms for the copra trade; or one could convert.

Soarum, like most important men, had commandeered a musket. Many guns imported to Tanna were Snider-Enfield rifles that escaped from British Army sources. Workers returned home from employment overseas with cherished muskets and ammunition. Queensland authorities banned the export of weapons into the Pacific in 1884, but trade in firearms nonetheless continued. Many Islanders shifted to working in New Caledonia where they could still buy guns. Local disputes once pursued with clubs, spears, bows and arrows, and throwing stones became deadlier. For safety, Soarum slept in a cavity in one of the huge banyan trees shading the Iankwanemwi kava-drinking ground, his musket at hand. His brother Nousi wasn’t as lucky. A kinsman Kwaniamuk shot and killed him one day as he walked down the mountain, heading to Port Resolution desperate to scrounge some tobacco. Soarum, in turn, gunned down Kwaniamuk.

Missionaries and their converts could call up even bigger guns to protect their backs. British and French naval frigates patrolled the archipelago with increased frequency to show the flag, demonstrate sporadic authority, and randomly punish. Three men-of-war bombarded Tannese villages in 1858, 1865, and 1894. HMS Curacao’s assault on Port Resolution in August 1865 was the most infamous of these attacks. Missionary John Paton, driven off Tanna along with the Mathesons in 1862, nursed a grudge. Paton helped convince Naval Captain William Wiseman to “inflict punishment on the Natives for murder and robbery of Traders and others.” With fellow Presbyterian missionary George Gordon, he sailed on the Presbyterians’ new mission ship Dayspring, shadowing the man-of-war. They joined the expedition, so the missionaries said, merely to interpret and mediate. Onboard Curacao, British traveler Julius Brenchley figured instead that “Both these gentlemen were bent on dangerous enterprises, in which they hoped to succeed by favour of her Majesty’s guns, that were soon
to be employed in punishing and terrifying the natives of Tanna and Eramanga for their misdeeds.”

Curapoa blasted Port Resolution’s villages with her artillery. Her cutter, alongside, fired rockets. Brenchley effused that “very soon our big guns loaded with shell began to carry very unpleasant messages to the culprits, while our cutter further enlightened them by discharging rockets among a great crowd of natives that clustered about the harbour.” After several hours of bombardment, Commander Dent led a landing party of 170 men ashore. These invaders busied themselves burning down houses, wasting food gardens, and chopping and holing canoes.

The Tannese managed to kill one of the landing party, a Mister Holland who had previously “served unhurt in the Indian Mutiny, the Crimean War, and in New Zealand.” The British carried his body back onboard, fearful that the Tannese would eat him. For their part, the invaders shot dead Kwatangan who they took to be a chief. Brenchley and other observers reported only this one death although, later, a dud shell exploded and killed three more island men who poked at it. Paton, the next day, met with as many friendlies as could be rounded up. These, so Brenchley reported, counted higher casualties: “Many more are hurt, and we know not how many are shot and dead.”

Violent retribution didn’t much help Christian efforts. Two years later, John Geddie tried to land his new son-in-law John Neilson and his daughter Lucy at Port Resolution to revive the mission. The first thing that met his eye was a large conical shell from the Curapoa’s guns, standing in an upright position in the sand. When the Presbyterians offloaded timber for the Neilsons’ house, local folk chucked this back into the sea. Geddie confessed that one old man spoke to him “in a very angry strain, saying that we had come to settle a new missionary already who had brought a man-of-war to kill them and destroy their property, and they would receive no more missionaries.” Dayspring retreated to Aneityum with the Neilsons still onboard, but they would slink back to Port Resolution the following year, in 1868.

Soarum as a young boy may have witnessed Curapoa’s bombardment, dodging rockets and shells. Brenchley, who quizzed Paton for his knowledge of the enemy, recorded two “tribal names,” the Naraimene of the bay’s eastern peninsula and the Nasebine (i.e., Nasipmene), Soarum’s own territorial group located upland from the harbor. If not Soarum, someone from Iankwanemwi was there because he carried away another unexploded artillery shell. This survived for the next 140 years, displayed in the center of the Iankwanemwi kava ground. The captured shell boasted and proclaimed kastom’s powers and people’s firm resistance to outside meddling. Luckily, I once took its picture. A few years later,
a *kleva* fingered the artillery shell as the cause of a spate of illnesses, and pulled it up and dumped it somewhere in the deep bush.

Even if daringly resisted, British naval muscle must have unsettled Soarum. Even worse for stubborn island traditionalists, most of those who departed for Queensland and farther afield were younger men and women, many of these ambitious. A flush of returnees came home from 1906 to 1908, including at least 104 in January 1907 alone. When the Australian colonies federated in 1901, the new Parliament passed white Australia legislation that mandated the deportation of most Melanesian workers. Back home on Tanna, many of these disrespected their stick-in-the-mud, traditionalist elders. Several self-made island preachers attracted missionary attention including Tommy Tanna, Nirua Monkey, and Johnny Pata. These were former Queensland cane-field workers who returned to Tanna and shared the Christian gospel without missionary supervision. This turn to Christianity gave younger men a leg up in political status competitions and shielded them from oldsters rattling their power stones. Soarum’s great-grandchildren say that he had secreted somewhere at least one of these, a war stone (*nukwei naruagenien*).

John Paton and the Mathesons certainly believed in spirits but they scorned island power stones, trusting instead in Christian prayer. Nonetheless, they confiscated these stones whenever they could from converts, like Kapuku at Imoa. They cemented them into new church foundations and entry thresholds so that Christian converts had to walk over them. Paton once volunteered himself as sorcery victim in a spiritual challenge that he thought would demonstrate Jehovah’s higher powers. He took a few bites out of a *nekori* (dragon fruit) and passed along his leftovers to three “sacred men” sorcerers who controlled deadly *nukwei nahak* stones, challenging them to do their worst. The sorcerers worked their stones heating the half-eaten plum over a fire, aiming to toast the annoying missionary’s innards. Things turned out well, for Paton at least. The week during which he was meant to expire came and went, and he happily acquired new material for subsequent sermons on island wickedness and folly: “This whole incident did, doubtless, shake the prejudices of many as to Sorcery; but few even of converted Natives ever get entirely clear of the dread of Nahak.” Even so, Soarum and other traditionalist elders faced more and more young converts and intensifying challenge to their chiefly and senior authority.

When Soarum’s own son Kauke admitted that he wanted to learn more about *nafakiien* (Christian gospel and prayer), Soarum threatened to kill him. Instead, he banished him to Iankahar, a small associated kava-drinking ground a quarter mile away from Iankwanemwi. Iankahar had come to shelter the community’s
growing number of Christian converts, leaving Soarum and other resistors entrenched back at Iankwanemwi. Soarum’s kinsman Iapwatu also worked in Queensland, and when he returned home to Tanna his son (a namesake Iapwatu) went on pilgrimage to the mission at Port Resolution to take Christian instruction. Kauke went along, as did Iau and his wife Nahi both of whom had moved up from the valley floor to escape their angry, traditionalist neighbors.

Today’s Iapwatu recalls that his ancestral namesake joined Iau in a Christian Iankahi hamlet, on the western shore of Port Resolution, to investigate the alien religion. To bring Christianity to Iankahar, their home village, Iapwatu, Kauke, and Iau followed local practice. Given Tanna’s scant public domain and the absence of a cultural commons, they assumed that Christian knowledge was private property owned first by Presbyterian missionaries and then by their initial converts. To access these stories and spirits, they must apprentice themselves and acknowledge the authority of Christian masters. Knowledge and all other sorts of island exchange goods flow along suatuk (roads), networks of relationships that conjoin places. In addition to recognizing the primacy of Christian sources down at Port Resolution, Iapwatu, Kauke, and Iau would also respect the secondary rights of other Christian converts living along the road that connected Port Resolution with Iankahar hamlet. Christianity, thus, traveled from Iankahi up the mountain west of the harbor to Iankahar as might the gift of a pig. It emerged from Port Resolution, and then jumped from place to place as it ascended the mountain from Iuea, to Iamanuapen, to Ikurupu, and then finally to Iankwanemwi/Iankahar.

By 1910, many more Christian converts from the surrounding area had moved to Iankahar. The village grew large enough to erect a church alongside the three banyans that shaded the kava-drinking ground. They built this church (with surrendered power stones at its foundation), and rechristened the village as Samaria, after the capitol of ancient Israel’s northern kingdom, the year missionary William Watt and his family retired to Melbourne. Their descendants in 2019 funded and built a new cement block church where the original wooden chapel once stood. Some of Soarum’s great-grandchildren, his mwipwuni eraha, remain committed Presbyterians. Others have joined a plethora of newfangled churches that crowded onto Tanna after Vanuatu’s 1980 independence. Most living over at Iapiro, Soarum’s old Iankwanemwi home, are active or lapsed supporters of the John Frum movement. The original religious schism between Iankwanemwi and Iankahar still endures, although it was remade in the 1930s with another, overlapping divide between John Frum supporters and remnant Presbyterians in the area.
Place and Road

Just as island personages endure across generations, so do places. When I first came to Tanna, friends pointed out the sites of phantom villages and invisible kava-drinking grounds. To me, these appeared only as lush forest and overgrown bush. Three decades later, many of these empty places are back in business, just as unused personal names/personages can lie dormant in memory until enough babies are born who need these. A topographic grid of used and unused named island places, linked by roads, lies just beneath the surface, under the visible landscape. Since the 1970s, more than ten thousand children have been born. Many of these have moved into unpeopled places where they belong by virtue of titular personal names. A post-1980 influx of new sects and missions, funded by the metropolitan televangelist boom, also scattered people about as fresh converts moved away to repopulate empty places. When they can, people prefer only to live with family with whom they share political-religious affiliations. Once vaporous places, like Iakwanemwi’s neighbor Ikurupu, are again bustling hamlets.

Tanna’s network of named roads, some seen, others unseen, connects kava ground to kava ground from one end of the island to the other. The longest of these roads, including Kwatarhen, Neivo, and Mwatakeiu, loop around the island. Perimeter sea roads also encircle the island, while others connect specific landings or passages on Tanna with neighboring islands, and with other places far over the horizon in north-central Vanuatu. Men, thanks to their personal names, gain titular rights to send messages and goods up and down the roads connecting with partners at the next kava-drinking ground along the way. These roadmen control what properly flows through the network. In Bislama, people call these mediators “gates.” In Nafe, road partners call one another napugi nenimen (pupil or eyehole). Looking down the road, they stare directly into one another’s eyes, catching attention. At kava grounds where major roads meet and cross, kout kasua transduce information and goods from one system to another. These kout kasua, who belong to neither island moiety, once stood between the two opposed solidarities Numrukwen and Koiameta. In Soarum’s day, restless with new weaponry, they could pass information between hostile camps. Today, people use the label disparagingly to criticize those who let down their side or betray their family.

The Tannese insist that the island’s grid of place and road, like its sets of personal names, is eternal and never changing. But men’s names have indeed adjusted, in historic times at least, as most have transformed into binyms. Soarum became Soarum Isaac. People also name or rename places to celebrate personal
experiences. New place names that augment island toponymy also get stereotypically reproduced from one generation to the next. Taken away to Australia, Iapwatu signed a labor contract to work in Queensland’s Pioneer Valley, upriver from the sugar town Mackay. He may have toiled three years at Homebush or at another one of the valley’s cane plantations. European migrants settled the area in the 1860s, some planting cotton then scarce in global markets thanks to the American Civil War. After 1865, planters shifted to sugarcane and recruited Tannese and other Melanesian workers to cultivate, harvest, and process this.

Thirty miles southwest from Homebush, the eroded remains of Nebo Volcano rise at the edge of the Pioneer Valley. The small township of Nebo lies farther west beyond this, connected then by bush track with Mackay. Coming home to volcanic Tanna after his years in Queensland, Iapwatu commemorated his travels abroad. He named a small plateau and resting point on Iankahar’s southerly road after Mount Nebo. Another labor recruit who worked at the Homebush plantation carried that name, too, home with him. Ombus today names an area on the southern flanks of Iankahi Ridge, where the valley road splits to go either north to Port Resolution, or south to Kwamera. Another overseas recruit named his garden Inwaisuka, “place of sugar,” after his Queensland experience. And still another brought home the name Iantina, now a hamlet namesake of Yandina, a small river town located seventy miles north of Brisbane.

The island’s new Christians, too, were no slouch at renaming places. Near Ianpinan, the site of Neilson’s and then Watt’s Port Resolution church, a hamlet once inhabited by London Missionary Society Polynesian teachers came to be called Isamoa, after Samoa. Christian converts ransacked the Bible for new place names to signpost their faith. Ikurupu became Jericho; Irumanga Jerusalem; Isaka Galilee; and Imreag Nazareth. Other Christian communities around the island renamed their villages Bethany, Bethel, Tarsis, Athens, Macedonia, and Antioch. And, more secularly, also Sydney and Melbourne. Iapwatu and Iau rechristened Iankahar as Samaria.

Missionaries and their Presbyterian converts also remade Tanna’s network of roads. They focused on those they actually could see and traverse on foot or horse, not so much the invisible suatuk exchange nodes veiled beneath the land or seascape. The road between Port Resolution and Kwamera, although these places are only a dozen or so miles apart, climbs high to cross an eastern spur of Mount Meren that falls precipitously into the sea. The Mathesons and Patons, and then the Watts and Neilsons, much disliked sailing in choppy waters along the coast between the two mission stations. A linking land route became viable when sufficient numbers along the way converted, ensuring safe passage. They
cleared and widened footpaths as part of their new Christian duties, and by the 1870s mission parties were hiking back and forth, or riding on horseback.

The road from Port Resolution south to Kwamera passes through Lamanuapen, Iatapwir, Ikurupu, and then Iankwanemwi before it crests the ridge to descend again to the sea. After Iankwanemwi, the trail follows a deep and narrow passage, eroded between earthen walls. Agnes Watt, who knew her book of Numbers and who walked this mountain path many times, liked to call this defile “Balaam’s Pass.” Rushing to confer with the Moabites, biblical Balaam encountered an angel of the Lord who stood in a vineyard trail, a wall being on one side and a wall also on the other. But only Balaam’s ass noticed the angel who stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn. The donkey, respectfully, fell at the angel’s feet. Hapless Balaam then whacked her with his staff. Miraculously and suddenly talkative, she roundly rebuked her oblivious master.

Although lacking asses or angels, the south road today still squeezes through the narrow defile near Iankwanemwi. When the Presbyterians established additional east coast stations at Weasisi, and then at White Sands, the road between these new outposts and Kwamera passed through Iankahar, through Balaam’s Pass, and then down south. This footpath today carries considerable traffic as people travel back and forth between east and south Tanna. A more recent, very rutted, sometimes impassable truck road parallels this as the colonial government pushed along the original missionary project of road expansion and improvement. Chinese and Australian international aid supported cementing the muddier patches, and later concreted the road’s steeper stretches.

Missionaries schemed to put Christian converts to work, upgrading island roads for horse traffic, and building houses along the way for sleepovers. The new roads spread across Tanna after 1900 when swelling numbers of islanders, boosted by returnees from Queensland, organized novel Christian polities governed by Presbyterian moral codes. This religious regime—local folks called it “Tanna Law”—lasted from the early 1900s to the late 1930s. During this period, church police nabbed, and church courts tried and punished, backsliders and miscreants. Traditionalists like Soarum were outraged. Tenacious heathen they might be, Christian police arrested them too on morals charges. Drinking kava, adultery, cursing, stealing—any of these new sins was likely to get a man sentenced to thirty lashes, to impromptu imprisonment, or to forced labor on those expanding Christian roads. Iapwatu recalls Sero’s punishment. Christian leaders forced him to plant mangoes, coconuts, and orange trees along a new Christian road that cut through Iankahar. Many of these trees, especially now stately mangos, still stand today. These lines of mangos and oranges mark the course of the
old Christian pathways most still in use. A few, though, are lost beneath tropical overgrowth, with isolated mango trees surviving in unexpected places.

Soarum Again

Soarum held firmly to island *kastom* despite the mounting waves of Christian conversion that soon isolated him and other stubborn traditionalists. It was a losing battle. By 1890, Ikurupu, the next village down the mountain road to Port Resolution was hosting Sempent, a Christian teacher from Erromango. Ikurupu villagers also built a house for the itinerating Watts to use. Sempent died, and the Watts replaced him in 1892 with an Aneityumese teacher couple, Kamil and his wife. Just up the road at Iankwanemwi, Soarum’s old kinsman Nasueiu converted that year. Agnes Watt wrote that Nasueiu put on a shirt, truly upsetting his orthodox wife who drew back in terror when busybody Agnes tried to shake her hand. She “uttered an exclamation of horror when she saw her husband being dressed in a shirt as the outward sign that from henceforth he was going to attend church.” Agnes reported that one or two “wild-looking fellows,” Soarum perhaps, stood sullenly by eyeing this *kastom* apostasy.

Soarum’s great-grandchild and namesake followed his grandfather Kauke, Soarum’s prodigal son whom he had exiled to Iankahar, now renamed Samaria village, into the Presbyterian church. At least he did until he married a granddaughter of Nouar. Nouar’s family was one of the first to join a new sect, the Seventh-day Adventists, brought to Port Resolution by subsequent missionaries in the 1930s. The newcomers had ambiguous relations with the Presbyterians. The Nouar of 1860 was an early supporter of John Paton and the mission, although Paton thought he was “changeable and doubtful” (figure 6a). In 1862, Nouar urged Paton to abandon Tanna for both their sakes. His subsequent namesake (figure 6b), along with most families in 1930s Port Resolution, jumped from the Presbyterians to the Seventh-day Adventists. They replaced their pigs with goats and looked for a quicker end of the world.

After Vanuatu’s independence in 1980, Soarum was one of the first teenagers from Samaria to attend high school. Completing this, he returned to Tanna and then, in 1987, moved up to a Port Vila migrant settlement. He wasn’t alone. Most Samaria families then had already decided to send their children north to seek work in Port Vila. By the 1970s, even traditionalists admitted that education was the road for the good life. Young men and women headed for Port Vila to access better schooling and to earn more money to pay vexing school tuition and fees for their children and their siblings. In the 1970s, Samaria families earned
FIGURE 6A. Nouar, c. 1860.

FIGURE 6B. Nouar, 1985. Photo by author.
an annual cash income of not much more than US $500, and school fees could burn through at least half of this. In years since, primary schools (except for many subsidiary charges) are tuition free, but parents still struggle to support any lucky children enrolled in Vanuatu's secondary schools.

Soarum, in Vila, found a job working for Unelco, Vanuatu’s monopoly electric company. He disconnected and reconnected electrical service in the town’s cash-poor settlements when people failed to pay, or then found enough money to cover the bill. After several years of working this depressing job, he saved enough to buy a used taxi. International tourism surged in the 1990s, and a swarm of taxi entrepreneurs made a living waiting for fares at Bauerfield Airport or at Port Vila’s cruise ship dock. For twenty years, Soarum followed a different kind of road, driving around Port Vila’s potholed streets. His own children are now grown; one son has studied law at the University of the South Pacific’s Port Vila campus.

The Melanesian Labor Trade, too, has returned although transformed. Beginning in 2007, New Zealand and then Australia permitted the recruitment of temporary agriculture workers from Vanuatu. Islanders once again travel abroad to pick apples, kiwis, and grapes, or to fill boxes in fruit-packing houses. More than a century after Iapwatu sailed for Mackay’s sugarcane fields, Soarum several times has left Port Vila behind to work in New Zealand, as has Glenda, his wife. Between the two of them, they made enough money to swap the taxi for a four-wheel drive Mitsubishi pickup truck, a vehicle sturdy enough, they hope, to survive Tanna’s rough roads. They left Port Vila for home in Samaria, although Soarum has temporarily returned to town to take up a job as a driver for his relative, a member of Parliament. Thanks to Iasur and Port Resolution, tourism is booming on Tanna. Soarum and Glenda figure to raise and sell chickens to the string of tourist bungalows that have popped up along the road under the volcano. Motor transport remains limited on Tanna and, in addition to visitors hungry for chicken dinners, Soarum’s taxi truck will also attract tourist vatu.

Most urban migrants claim, someday, that they too will come back to Tanna. Soarum and Glenda are among the first to attempt a homecoming. They returned to the island with plans to cultivate cash crops and raise chickens for sale. Migrant strategy, though, almost always involves leaving one or more grown children back in Port Vila. The trans-island family is now the modern ideal. Economic calculation suggests keeping one foot in Samaria, the other in Port Vila. Back home in Samaria, Soarum again walked and drove the road that skirts the gravesite of his unbending ancestral namesake. In Port Vila, his son pursues a degree in real estate law. The last century and a half of peripatetic people, of roads
rerouted, of places renamed, has unsettled the landscape and clouded personal and village claims to home grounds. People are lawyering up.

Notes

1. Julius L. Brenchley, *Jottings during the Cruise of H. M. S. Curaçoa among the South Sea Islands in 1865* (London: Longmans, Green, 1873), 194.

Further Readings

*Labor Recruitment in Queensland*


*Weapons Trade and Work in New Caledonia*


*Maps of Tanna’s Network of Kastom Roads*