Kusi is a dignified grandmother, living in Port Vila. She was a wild child though. Willful and strongheaded, her parents called her. They greatly suffered her teenaged energy. Kusi’s father died when she was a child but her mother remarried his brother Koke, her uncle. In the 1970s, Kusi’s parents sent her to live with an older sister in Port Vila where, like Sivur before her, she found work as a housegirl with a Chinese trading family. Tanna parents then reluctantly let their daughters travel to Port Vila, and only if some family member could closely guard them. Kusi’s sister did her best, but Kusi managed to evade sisterly surveillance. She found a boyfriend. Antoine, was raised in Ipikil village, John Frum headquarters on Sulphur Bay, and had also moved up to Port Vila. Like many Tanna boys in those years, he was enamored with boxing and, in Vila, he found a trainer who had opened a boxing club. Handsome and muscular, he was popular with many but Kusi especially captured his romantic attentions.

Island teenagers, in the pre-mobile phone era, used to flirt through third parties. Boys and girls found it difficult to speak directly with one another, at least publicly, although they might give one another sly, welcoming glances. A boy who liked a girl, or a girl a boy, entreated an intermediary to speak for them. Boys, hoping to charm, often sent along some love token: the gift of a handkerchief, or a packet of sweet biscuits, or some tinned fish. If Antoine gave Kusi a love token, it worked. The two found secret places and times to meet. Eventually, to escape critical surveillance, both returned to Tanna. One of Kusi’s kinsmen in Port Vila paid her fare on the British administration’s boat. (The captain was from Tanna.) Back home, Antoine returned to Sulphur Bay, and Kusi to Samaria, to ask their parents to arrange their marriage.

Antoine was the last male in his family and the last named heir to his abandoned kava-drinking ground. Down the mountain from Samaria, secondary forest had overgrown this historically significant site although banyan trees still towered over it. Antoine’s father moved the family to Sulphur Bay during John Frum excitements of the 1940s, and he eventually died there. His mother
remarried one of the younger leaders of the movement, and Antoine grew up participating in Friday night John Frum dances and marching and drilling in the Tanna Army.

Kusi’s parents voiced several objections to the marriage although ultimately, they agreed. Antoine was a John Frum boy while Kusi was raised Presbyterian. Parents, however, scarcely consider religious disparities as they expect wives to convert to their husbands’ religious affiliation. A newly married girl, who enthusiastically sang Presbyterian hymns one Sunday, will dance for John Frum the next Friday night. Kinship, though, was a more serious concern. Antoine also called Kusi’s father “father” and, in island terms, Kusi was his sister. People deplore and certainly gossip about such awkward espousals. One of Kusi’s uncles, however, figured that the kinship connection was distant enough to be overlooked. Islanders, in a pinch, skillfully readjust kin relationships to create exceptions to their cultural codes. My old friend Rapi, noting the regrettable changing times, commented that kids nowadays were marrying almost anyone at all, “just like white people.” Antoine stopped calling Kusi’s father tata (father) and began instead to address him as kaka (wife’s father/mother’s brother/father’s sister’s husband). Everyone else in the two families juggled revised kin terms as they could.

Kusi’s parents embraced the opportunity to make the best of this awkward marriage. She had been a difficult daughter. The Tannese operate a complicated marriage system that anthropologists call “sister exchange.” A boy cannot marry a girl without his family giving over one of its girls in exchange. This balances marriages between the two families. The return girl—the tain—should properly be one of the new husband’s sisters, but marital debt often defaults to the next generation when a husband returns a daughter in exchange for his wife. Antoine had three sisters but all had already married and no tain for Kusi was immediately available.

The families convened a nagkiriian, a decision-making meeting, and invited interested parties to attend. At this, they devised a typically intricate marriage deal. One of Antoine’s sisters had married a Sulphur Bay boy who had yet to return her tain. A third family (that had looked after this man’s father and adopted one of his brothers) would provide Antoine’s brother-in-law a girl whom he would then give to Antoine, in exchange for Antoine’s sister. And Antoine next would give this girl to Kusi’s family where eventually, everyone supposed, she would marry Kusi’s brother Tio. But this convoluted scheme collapsed. Although the girl’s mother and uncles were at the decision-making meeting, her father cannily avoided attending the meeting and he thus could refuse the deal,
which he did. Antoine was left owing a girl to Kusi’s family, and people contemplated the future arrival, someday, of one of his and Kusi’s daughters.

The marriage, because of all this, was a low-key affair. Kusi and her mother merely brought along a basket of baked pig meat and a few of Kusi’s dresses when she joined Antoine in Sulphur Bay. Parents in happier situations may arrange an elaborate series of ceremonial exchanges between the two intermarrying families. First comes the nafukarua (the doorway) when families who have concluded a marriage agreement exchange gifts of kava and food, either on the kava-drinking ground or in the village. Next comes the tenarup (the basket) when the bride’s family transfers the girl, with her possessions, to the groom’s (figure 10). And finally, ambitious families may arrange a navegenien asori (big feast) where more substantial gifts of pigs, kava, food, baskets, mats, dyed bark skirts, blankets, and cloth are exchanged, often after the birth of the couple’s first child. The groom’s family generally gives a little more than it receives, but all this balances out in the end, at the mirror marriage, when the groom’s sister (or her replacement) marries one of the first bride’s brothers, and gifts between the two intermarried families flow once more.

Families like to invite neighbors and friends to all-night nupu dances to celebrate marital exchanges. Fathers and other family leaders in attendance take the opportunity to speechify, reminding the new couple, and everyone, of the proper responsibilities of husbands and wives. The bride should prepare a nufar, a yam or taro pudding she has baked in an earth oven, that she shares with her new husband after they receive even more marital advice inside a house. During these lectures, boys, embarrassed, keep quiet. Girls, even more embarrassed, often cover their heads with calico cloth. The groom’s family clubs a pig and lays its body across the house’s threshold. Escaping with relief, the new bride steps over the pig—stepping over dead pigs being an island sign of cooperative harmony.

Afterward, the groom goes one way to hang out with his friends and brothers, and the shy bride goes another, sheltering with her new female affines and one or two of her sisters who keep her company for a few days. Men repair to the kava-drinking ground to prepare and drink kava and, when darkness falls, to dance. The groom’s new father-in-law or his mother’s brother (often the same person) prepares kava for him to drink. Officially, at least, this should be his first taste of the potion. Most boys, of course, drink kava as soon as they can get away with it. Particular leaves might be added to this supposed first intoxicating draught to soothe its effects, and to protect the just-married young man from the dangerous vaginal discharges of his new wife. Everyone spits tamafa, asking the
ancestors buried there to safeguard the boy’s health from baneful female secretions and, maybe, for his fruitful marriage.

Kusi and Antoine avoided all this ceremony and, perhaps because of this, their marriage was not a happy one. Married women move to live with their husbands’ families. Teen boys build small bamboo and cane houses looking forward to their eventual marriages, and they tend to situate these next to parents’ dwellings. Some women do not travel far if they marry a boy from their home village. Kusi, though, moved with Antoine to Sulphur Bay, a two-hour walk away around the other side of the volcano. A man’s mother and sisters can demand domestic assistance from his new bride, and Kusi once again was mostly working as a housegirl. Island mothers-in-law can be critical, and she found Antoine’s mother unkind.

Antoine’s chronic flirting with other girls also angered Kusi. She discovered some photographs of girls that Antoine had brought home from Port Vila. Enraged with jealousy, the two quarreled. Kusi called Antoine a lazy good-for-nothing when he let some seed yams rot before planting them. Kusi swore and cursed, and Antoine beat her. John Frum guards rushed in to separate the two. She escaped, returning home to her family in Samaria. Marital swears and curses evoke community concern, as do runaway wives. Kusi’s father walked

![Figure 10: Bride handed over to groom's family with her “basket,” Samaria 1985.](image)
down to Sulphur Bay to attempt to repair the marriage. Antoine’s stepfather suggested that the boy was particularly troubled that Kusi wasn’t yet pregnant. As the last man in his name-set, Antoine was determined not to “let his blood die.” Kusi’s father led her by the arm back down to Sulphur Bay. Antoine hid inside his house, refusing to come out to greet them.

Word was that, while working in Port Vila, Kusi had drunk nui (leaf medicine) to prevent pregnancies. This now became the main marital issue. The fathers sent word to a blind urumun (spirit medium) who lived up the mountain in Nazareth village. Keihaker had a secret recipe (which involved killing a tree by ringbarking and burning it) that reverses contraceptive potions. He demanded a pig and kava root to cure Kusi. The fathers sent him a chicken and smaller kava instead. Kusi drank the medicine and she did soon become pregnant, but bore a girl who Antoine named after his father’s sister.

The two continued to bicker and Antoine left for a month or two to cut timber on Aneityum Island. When he returned, the couple quarreled again. They moved temporarily to Antoine’s abandoned lands to collect, scoop, and dry coconut meat (copra) to sell. But then Kusi suddenly disappeared. This is difficult on Tanna where people (“where are you going?”) closely track one another’s movements. Her panicked family searched for her at Sulphur Bay, in Samaria, and parts in-between. Kusi turned up the next day, reporting that two spirits had appeared to lead her away into the bush. She only saw the backs of their heads, but she knew that they were her dead father and her grandmother. The spirits asked for food and she found something to feed them. Everyone accepted Kusi’s story as indisputably true, knowing that ancestral spirits may indeed intrude if angered by discord among their descendants.

Spousal swears, curses, and beatings trouble families who hurry to mend a marriage, if they can. Spiritual kidnappings are even more worrisome. The two families convened several more community meetings to discover why Kusi and Antoine fought so much, and what to do about this. Family elders suggested that Antoine return for good to his original home ground, as geographic displacement can make trouble among the living, and with the dead. Home grounds demanding tending. Antoine eventually would do so, but with a different wife. Kusi’s family instead gave up on the marriage as hopeless. Her father and uncles told Antoine that they could accept a divorce (no tain had yet been received), and they blamed Kusi (as men tend to do) for causing most of the trouble.

When the couple broke up, Kusi found her way back to Port Vila. Antoine wooed a second wife, Rachel, the daughter of one of Kusi’s father’s brothers (another girl whom he also should have called his “sister”). Kusi had more children,
including a muscular son who well could have been Antoine’s. Officially fatherless, who would name the boy? Kusi’s father Koke gave his grandson his own name, having already bestowed this on one of Kusi’s brothers. Samaria then had three namesake Koke’s all of whom shared the same named personhood. Kusi, somehow managed to drop the baby on his head, and people since have blamed this for the boy’s deafness. Young Koke, hardworking and convivial, lives in Samaria where he looks after his grandmother. When she can, the now venerable Kusi sends home small gifts for her mother and son in the village. Children may cause worrisome turmoil, but families eventually absorb their wildness.

Families

Tanna is one huge family. Even with thirty thousand inhabitants, people know and track one another. Should two strangers meet, if one can discover how anyone in one family is related to anyone in the other, this immediately situates the two within the island’s vast web of kinship. A person calls everyone two generations older kaha (grandparent); and calls everyone two generations younger mwipuk (my grandchild). Those who are one generation older are either mother or father, or mother-in-law or father-in-law. Those in one’s own generation are either brother or sister, or spouse or brother/sister-in-law. Everyone one generation down is either son or daughter, or niece/son’s wife or nephew/daughter’s husband.

This kin system corresponds neatly with island marriage patterns. One calls all the children of one’s father’s brothers and of one’s mother’s sisters brother or sister, and (despite the marriage of Antoine and Kusi) one should neither have sex with nor marry them. Anthropologists call this sort of cousin a “parallel-cousin.” But the children of one’s father’s sisters or mother’s brothers (“cross-cousins”) are attractive sex partners and marriage material, and the Tannese have been marrying their first cousins for three thousand years. Island demands for marital sister exchange shape families. In an ideal marriage exchange, two boys marry each other’s sisters. When this happens two generations in a row, a boy marries a girl who is at once his father’s sister’s daughter and also his mother’s brother’s daughter.

With contemporary urban migration and increasing educational opportunities, children are even wilder than they used to be, but most island families continue to demand marital balance. People weigh marriages carefully. Debts must one day be repaid and the exchange balance restored. When one girl leaves a family, another must come. Sisters are not scarce. Even a boy from a daughter-less
family has many sisters. His father’s brothers’ and mother’s sisters’ daughters are his sisters; as are his father’s father’s son’s daughters; and so on. Island marriage arrangement, though, can be intricate and convoluted, as with Antoine and Kusi. A marriage between a boy from Family A and a girl from Family D may involve Family B (who has a marital debt with A) giving a girl to Family C, who gives one to Family D to balance the girl who is marrying into Family A. And a young man like Antoine, with no unmarried sister or other available girl to exchange, can promise to return a future daughter to his wife’s family.

Traditional island marriage is both easy and hard on children. Easy, because parents undertake the work of finding their spouses. Maturing youth know the likely possibilities in the neighborhood, and they can nudge their parents toward one boy or girl or another. But sometimes parents abruptly announce a marriage arrangement to a surprised son or daughter. Fathers and mothers affirm that children have rights to refuse an arranged spouse, but complicated marriage deals and the hinging of one marriage on another make refusal difficult. Girls, in particular, come under much family pressure to accept the man whom their parents have found for them. Attempted suicide may be their only effective means of resistance. Koraku’s family, for example, arranged her marriage with Johnny, an amiable, older man whom everyone liked. This marriage would balance that of a girl from Johnny’s family who had married into Koraku’s. But Johnny was deaf. Even though he was an excellent lip reader, and the community had invented an efficient sign language, he wasn’t Koraku’s husbandly ideal. Desperate, she climbed a banyan tree and jumped. She survived but she threatened to jump again if pushed to marry Johnny, and her family backed down.

The hinging of two marriages makes island divorce difficult and uncommon. Families pressure miserably unhappy women to stick with a marriage. Koke returned Kusi back to Antoine in Sulphur Bay several times. Dealing with a wayward runaway woman, men mutter that in the old days they could cut her hamstrings. Divorces, like Antoine and Kusi’s, are easier if the tain has yet to be arranged. After both marriages are accomplished, however, the breakup of one undermines the other. Should a wife return home, her abandoned husband’s family will demand a replacement (and Antoine’s subsequent marriage to Kusi’s sister Rachel is one example of this). Koraku’s refusal of Johnny jeopardized a hinged marriage in this way. Exasperated by her refusal to marry Johnny, his family threatened to grab back the girl who had married into Koraku’s family. Death also disrupts marriage exchanges. When possible, a widow (like Kusi’s mother) marries a brother of her dead husband, thus keeping alive the marriage exchange that conjoins the two families.
Tanna families are difficult to escape. They provide children with names, identities, land, a home ground and other resources, and all the usual sorts of physical and emotional support. In return, children shoulder serious obligation to support their parents and siblings. Some, like Kusi, attempt to escape family surveillance by running off to Port Vila or beyond. But families today have members living abroad, too, and few island migrants manage to achieve urban anonymity, independence, or modernist freedom from their family demands and kin obligations.

Sex and Love

Love feelings bedevil systems of arranged marriage. Marriages are political agreements between families and name-sets. They establish alliances that last until the death of the last child born to a couple. When this death comes to pass, additional marriages between the families typically have already sustained that alliance. Diligent parents, who make these deals, can be dismissive of their children’s immature romantic fancies and complaints. What’s love got to do with it?

Island languages do not offer much by way of love words. The Nafe verb okeikei, which indeed means “love,” also covers like, prefer, want, and need, as in “my truck rokeikei a new wheel” (this also can be akeikei). Presbyterian missionaries like the Mathesons and Watts brought new, alien understandings of love to the island, in tentative, fuzzy sermons that celebrated the love of God. A second Nafe verb, api, is sentimentally more profound. This means “cry” but also pity, sympathize or empathize with, or have feelings for. Women, especially, cry when a loved one leaves home or returns from abroad. Missionary William Watt put this word on his wife Agnes’ headstone at Port Resolution, IN RAPI NAKUR IPARE, “she felt for the people of Ipare.”

Island husbands and wives do indeed love and care for one another, but many couples find love after they marry, not before. Few, until recently, expect a spouse to be a best friend. Sometimes romance flares too fiercely, however, and lovesick youth like Kusi and Antoine elope and later beg their parents to make marital arrangements, cleaning things up, to satisfy burning desire. Parents, however, suspect that marriages that originate in love are bad bets, as they are suspicious of love feeling in general. Kusi and Antoine managed to convince their parents to make the best of it and arrange their tempestuous marriage, but family elders and also John Frum police and guards have chased down other eloping couples, separating these and dragging them home. When couples elope to Port Vila, parents sometimes contact related town policemen to arrest and ship them back to the island.
In addition to a modest love vocabulary, other island institutions work to dampen romance. Men’s deepest emotional attachments typically focus on village age-mates, on other men, as do women’s on other women. In addition to brother/sister avoidance, Tannese worry about cross-gender pollution, a concern common throughout Melanesia. Island etiquette maintains two gendered spheres, and gender also structures island topography. The masculine is centered, surrounded by a periphery of women. Hamlets of women and children encircle masculine kava-drinking grounds where, until missionaries boosted the nuclear family ideal, men and circumcised boys slept apart in men’s houses.

Gender separation continues to structure a number of important everyday and ritual activities on the island. Farmers plant symbolically male yams in the center of their gardens, and surround these with female-associated taro and other cultigens. Men and women both join in *nupu*, the island’s standard circle dance, but they remain in their own spaces, the men dancing together in the center surrounded by a periphery of pairs of bouncing women. *Nakwiari* festivals, large regional exchanges of pigs and kava, feature separate men’s and women’s dance teams. Male guards, protected by kava *tamafa*, monitor the space between women dancers and the assembled crowds, and only they safely may pick up any feathered hair sticks, odiferous leaves, scraps of bark skirt, or other paraphernalia that female dancers might drop. Most church meetings also are gender segregated, men seated on the left and women on the right.

Daily kava preparation notably enacts gender difference. Contact with female secretions pollute kava, making drinkers ill or at least spoiling the plant’s psychoactive effect. As noted earlier, women thus must not drink kava. They must not see men drinking kava. No one should utter a woman’s name as men prepare kava but rather use the euphemism, *nari ia rukwanu* “village thing.” Only a circumcised boy may chew kava for his fathers and infuse this in water with his hand. After an initial sexual exploit, boys must no longer squeeze the cuds of chewed kava through their fingers but must instead, like mature men, use a short stick to poke and mix the kava and water as it strains into the drinking cup. Embarrassed teenaged boys, come one evening, whisper to their fathers to explain why they may no longer touch chewed kava.

After the yam harvest each year, families organize *tamarua* exchanges to celebrate a boy’s circumcision. Island boys typically are circumcised between six and twelve years of age. Local experts once undertook the operation with sharp bamboo knives, but fathers now prefer to take their sons to one of the island’s clinics. They also like to circumcise several boys at the same time, so these will have company during the six-to-eight week period when they are secluded in a *nimua*
urur, a circumcision house constructed on an out-of-the-way kava-drinking ground or other place distant from female gaze. Twice daily, circumcised boys make their way to a water source or the sea to bathe. Their attendants blare triton shell trumpets to warn of their passing. No woman may look upon them.

During this period of seclusion, while circumcision wounds heal, fathers (or name-givers) gather the usual sorts of exchange goods (pigs, kava, cooked and raw tubers, mats, baskets, bark skirts, lengths of cloth, blankets) that they will present to their wife’s brother (the boy’s mother’s brother), or some other man in that family. This uncle, or his representative, is responsible for feeding the secluded boy. A typical rite of passage, Tanna’s boy initiates revert to the status of helpless baby. Men make boys into men, transforming their feminine wetness into masculine aridity, coldness into heat, and softness into hardness. In the past, a circumcised boy no longer could wander about naked but must put on the ninbhum, the leafy penis wrapper, to conceal his newly exposed glans penis.

When everything is ready, fathers invite the community to attend the circumcision exchange and also to dance nupu. Uncles lead healed, face-painted boys onto the kava-drinking ground and around the heap of exchange goods piled up in the center. Mothers greet their sons for the first time since fathers snatched them away from the village. They burst into tears and offer them a snack of mother-prepared tuber or banana pudding. “What a man you have become!” The newly circumcised are now tamarua, handsome youths eligible to marry (even if still six years old) and to chew their fathers’ kava. No longer are they puerile kapiesi, a rude term that refers to an uncircumcised penis.

Tannese parents assiduously circumcise all their boys, and kastom demands an exchange of significant goods between father’s and mother’s families. This exchange will be balanced when that boy’s uncle, in future, circumcises his own son that his brother-in-law will look after, the flows of gifts reversed. An uncircumcised boy is never fully adult and remains unmarriageable. Families have the option of organizing a lesser exchange (o napuei te nipran, “arrange a coconut for women”) to celebrate a daughter’s first menses. This also involves an exchange of pig and kava between husband’s and wife’s families. Many skip this opportunity, however, unless they need to balance a previous first menses exchange.

Menstruating women no longer retire as once they did to a nimwa opwei, a secluded menstrual hut, but while blood is flowing they should neither cook for their husbands and children nor garden. They can still feed the family’s pigs. Because they bleed, women are open. Men, in counterpoint, are closed, and curers often bleed sick men, unsealing them to let contaminated blood escape their plugged bodies by slicing open their foreheads. Couples ideally should avoid sex
during a wife’s pregnancies and during the subsequent two or three years when she nurses her child, lest unsafe sex contaminate and sicken the husband and child alike.

Men warn their sons that overindulgence in sex, which drains a boy’s semen supply, will render him ugly and dry and wrinkle his skin. Islanders deplore adultery, and community moots assign fines to two-timing husbands and wives. If a man is particularly sickly, people may accuse his wife of an illicit affair. Men attribute contemporary decline in their masculine prowess to sloppy sexual precautions. In the old days, when men were tougher and more virile, after some sexual encounter they would disinfect themselves with a potion of coconut oil and medicinal leaves (including aromatic *Evodia hortensis*) to wash away *nipeki pran*, the “smell of woman.” Today, men worry, is soap enough? Wet dreams are particularly troubling. People blame these on a malevolent spirit, *Nakwa*, who comes for sex in a dream, often disguised as a loved one, to steal men’s semen. Wet dreamers suffer body fatigue and muscle stiffness, the typical effects of over-ejaculation.

Female connection, moreover, spoils male accomplishment. Men’s dance teams, and their football and sports teams, gather the night before an event to ensure its success. They convene at a kava-drinking ground to drink kava, but also to monitor that none sneaks away for sex, as female affairs, here too, can undermine communal masculine perfection. Kieri’s dance mates presumed his fling with Rigi explained his sorry, lackadaisical dancing and they fined him a kava plant.

In homosocial societies, one finds customs of men sharing the same female sexual partner. Before significant Christian conversion, Tannese men, too, cultivated manly relationships with mutual carnal relations with a *preihap* or *pran vi* (new woman). Local groups of men exchanged girls and installed these in a hut on their kava-drinking grounds. Circumcised boys enjoyed their first sexual experience with a *preihap* (although those six-year-olds might have to wait a few years). The girl also served married men, which could anger their wives. That period of customary sexual abstinence running from pregnancy through the end of a child’s breastfeeding, however, was a lengthy one. Men at one kava-drinking ground without a *pran vi* could borrow one from elsewhere, with the return gift of a pig.

Presbyterian missionaries deprecated these arrangements and they insisted that their Christian converts abandon the girls. Anthropologist Clarence Humphreys, who visited Tanna in the early 1920s and enjoyed missionary hospitality, labeled them “prostitutes.” After a circumcision *tamarua*, he reported, a *pran vi* arrived “to initiate the young men who have reached man’s estate into the mysteries of sexual intercourse,” but “when she is absent a period of abstinence
prevails, and very little indulgence in sexual intercourse takes place.” Miscel-
naneous island prophets, dreamers, and would-be chiefs over the years have at-
tempts to revive pran vi, but none have succeeded for long. That kastom, along
with sorcery power stones, endures only in the amber memory of past times.
A century later, risky sex continues to cause worry and unease, and love in-
creasingly troubles marital arrangements. Tanna today is flooded with powerful
discourses of romantic love. String boy bands strumming guitars, ukuleles, and
gut buckets became popular after the Pacific War, and novel love songs crept
into island repertoires. Many youth who have migrated to Port Vila enjoy easy
access to romantic movies, songs, and suggestive international advertisement.
Those back home have smart phones that connect to global social media. Urban
migration has loosened sexuality. Kusi and Antoine thereby escaped family sur-
veillance, and young people in town continue to find private places to meet.
They pursue boyfriends and girlfriends, and demand more say in spousal choice.
Tannese parents have had to hone their negotiation skills when a child wants to
marry someone from one of Vanuatu’s central or northern islands, where fam-
ilies demand bride price gifts from boy’s family to girl’s, rather than some ex-
changed sister, and these interisland romances are increasingly common.
On Tanna, beady-eyed neighbors are deeply suspicious should they find a boy
and girl alone together. Girls and women travel in groups, and they avoid catch-
ing the eyes of unrelated men. A pigheaded Australian woman I once hosted
refused cultural advice and she strode off alone down the road, eyeing men along
the way. She returned bedraggled after repelling a lustful local boy. The night of
a nakwiari festival, when teams of women dance until dawn, offers Tanna’s main
carnivalesque occasion when boys and girls might meet up in darkness. Town
life multiplies these opportunities. Mediated gifts of handkerchiefs or candy
have waned. Mobile smart phones are increasingly common, and youth today
flirt through texting and sexting. Their phones also tap into the world of global
pornography that offers frank images of alien sexual practices. Connoisseurs
complain about the production values of locally produced material. Tannese
men always firmly deny any homosexual dalliance on their island, although on
Malakula and other islands in the north boys’ initiation ritual included same-sex
intercourse. But today, Port Vila shelters a number of homosexual boys and men
who have latched onto global gay discourses to identify themselves.
In 2016, Tanna played on movie screens worldwide. This Australian-made
film (Two Tribes, One Love), which featured amateur island actors, won several
prizes and was a Foreign Language Academy Award nominee in 2017. Romeo
and Juliet in the South Pacific, the film is a romantic pastorale that celebrates
love, native virtue, and Tanna’s brilliant green forests. The filmmakers relentlessly eradicated all signs of modernity from their sets: no mobile phones, no trucks, no wristwatches, no solar panels, and barely an aluminum cooking pot. Dain and Wawa, in traditional penis wrapper and bark skirt, fall in love. Their parents shatter the romance by arranging instead for Wawa to marry into an enemy village, hoping to make peace. The two lovers escape to the rim of Ia-sur’s volcanic caldera where they commit suicide by eating poisoned mushrooms (which do not exist on Tanna). The sorry parents remorsefully decide to yield to their children’s future romantic desires.

The film screened in Port Vila’s only movie theater and Tannese people loved it. But the theater rang with hoots and laughter. Dain and Wawa hold hands. They even kiss! Island boys should only hold hands with other boys, and girls only with other girls. Everyone knows. Kusi in Port Vila, now genteel and gray-haired, deplores such modern licentiousness.

Note


Further Readings

Tanna Kinship


Island Gender and Sex Relations


Tanna the Movie