Reuben

Reuben is a computer whiz. In 2010, I found him living in Ohlen. Reuben’s family, leveling the slope, had crowded several houses at the cliff edge of Tio’s Ohlen compound. A few steps beyond the land falls away to Tebakor Creek and, across this, to the national airport. Reuben was in Port Vila to attend secondary school. An old desktop computer anchored his small room. Scraps of cloth disguised sheet aluminum walls and roof (figure 12). A long extension cord ran up the hill, pirating electricity from his uncle’s better-equipped shack. Reuben and his family paid a little money for this though electric service was sporadic. With no Internet connection, Reuben and his friends traded computer files on floppy disks and, later, flash drives. He liked burning popular and gospel music. When electricity flowed, compound residents squeezed in to watch his video files. In years since, I bought Reuben two smaller laptops. He has tended these carefully in Port Vila and back home on Tanna. Settlement dust and Tanna’s acidic volcanic soils are rough on equipment of all sorts. Computers, and books, have short lives in these islands.

Like Tio and Natis, Reuben’s parents struggled to find money to send their sons to secondary school. Pita and Natumwi married a few months after Tio and Natis. Natumwi, although Natis’ aunt, was about her age. She came along to support Natis when her niece returned to Samaria, and she too would balance a marriage exchange from a generation before. It looked at first that Natumwi would marry Kasu, Tio’s father’s brother’s son, but she had her eye on Pita instead, another Tio cousin. The families organized a small feast of two small pigs, several kava roots, a taro pudding, a few blankets, mats, and lengths of cloth in that marital exchange, here, was between two brothers. Tio’s father, who managed Natumwi’s marriage futures, passed her along to his brother, Pita’s father, to marry Pita.

Natumwi chose well as Pita proved to be a devoted husband and affectionate father. Kasu later would marry another girl and move to Port Vila where mostly he has lived since. Urban migration undoubtedly worsened his diabetes. Eating
more sugar and fats, ni-Vanuatu increasingly suffer from this and other diseases of modernity, like old Tio’s deadly stroke. When diabetes affected Kaso’s blood circulation, doctors amputated his feet. He stayed up in Vila until he passed away, as wheelchairs ambulate poorly back on home hamlets’ rougher terrains, even Kaso’s that is located on the relatively level coastal plain.

Although Pita and Natumwi worked sporadically in Port Vila and have left several grown children living there, they are one of a few families to make do in Samaria, minding the interests and property of relatives who have migrated north. Pita served on the valley’s Nepraineteta Area Council of Chiefs and sought out several other government appointments. He follows his ancestral namesake, looking after the village’s historic Presbyterian affiliation. A church elder, he worked diligently to raise money to build a new church in the village to celebrate and restore the first Samaria chapel that his grandfathers built in 1910. The church is open to all including Kwatia’s Apostolic congregation.

Tanna is an island of generalists. Most everyone knows how to farm, fish, reef gather, build houses, make bark skirts and previously to engineer penis wrappers, drink kava and pray, and to contact God and the spirits. Alongside their shared occupational abilities, however, Islanders are keen to specialize. Tanna boasts
two different chiefly titles. Personal names endow men with rights to manage particular stones that control this or that plant or animal species, as well as natural phenomena like the winds, rain, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. Farmers seek out new and unusual crops to plant. Men command exclusive chronicles about past doings of ancestors and culture heroes. Women plait distinctive family designs into mats and baskets. Almost everyone knows ways to cure, but they differ in which illnesses they treat, and how. Such specialization, which typically is inherited from one’s ancestral namesakes, confers some distinction, respect, even, on those who otherwise share much in common.

Typically, then, where Pita pursued religious leadership, his older brother James specialized in *kastom*. In 1982, I recommended him to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre’s Local Fieldworker Program. This well-regarded endeavor recruited dozens of island men, and then women, who work as culture experts, studying and documenting their own customs and traditions. This at least partly obviates need for sometimes bothersome foreign ethnographers. James took part in annual Fieldworker workshops convened in Port Vila and he found work as a National Museum security guard, a job he passed on to his son when he brought his family home to Samaria. Back on Tanna, he worked with a museum outpost, the TAFEA (Tanna, Aneityum, Futuna, Erromango, Aniwa) Cultural Centre, when this was better funded. He guided visiting archaeologists and other researchers around the island assisting their research projects, including two of mine focused on Pacific War history and urban migration. Retired to Samaria, like many he considers going into the tourist business. I wired him money to buy aluminum sheeting for a new tourist bungalow roof, although this has yet to materialize.

Pita and Natumwi found enough money to pay Port Vila school expenses for Reuben and his brother. When neither was accepted into a state high school, they scrimped to send both to a private academy. Reuben moved in with his family in town, walking to school either from the Ohlen compound or from Sivur’s house in Blacksands settlement, by the sea. Both brothers did well and graduated with secondary school degrees. Reuben’s brother registered for coursework in legal studies at Vanuatu’s University of the South Pacific branch campus. Reuben decided to be an elementary school teacher. He enrolled in Vanuatu’s Institute of Teacher Education, the country’s main teacher training college. I helped with tuition so he could board at the college. Taking after his father and his commitment to the church, Reuben does not drink kava or use tobacco. Instead, he filled his school nights with studying, unlike some college friends who failed their coursework. Reuben completed the three-year program with good marks. He excelled particularly with technology, setting up computers, projectors, speakers,
and other equipment that left his professors flummoxed. During his final year, Reuben practiced teaching skills as a trainee in a Pango village primary school, just outside Port Vila.

Pita and Natumwi booked passage on an interisland boat to attend Reuben’s graduation. Ni-Vanuatu have adopted Fijian salusalu, flower garlands that bedeck honorees, and Reuben’s face peeks out beneath a dozen of these in his official graduation photograph. With his diploma, the Ministry of Education posted Reuben to teach at Iquaramanu, the Nepraineteta valley primary school below Samaria. Home in the village, as should young unmarried men, he built a new house up the ridge from his parents. From here, he walks to work. It took the ministry nearly a year to put Reuben on its payroll, but he loyally met his class daily, working for free he told me, “like a slave.” He teaches a mixed third-and fourth-grade class. When I visited him in 2018, forty-three rambunctious nine and ten-year olds belted out a welcome song before Reuben led them into a lesson. The ministry has developed a new vernacular education program for its primary schools. Children begin schooling in their local language and shift gradually into English and French as they progress. Reuben, that day, calling out for student responses bounced from Nafe, to Bislama, to English. He worries, though, that not much of the latter language soaks in.

Comfortable dealing with outsiders, Reuben manages money donated by a Christian college in Queensland that his school used to build and furnish a new kinda (kindergarten) building. On my way to the airport, I treated him to lunch at one of the better equipped tourist resorts on Tanna’s west coast. He immediately struck up a conversation with a talkative visitor, a member of an Australian mission campaign. Missionaries of many sorts continue to wander around Tanna no matter that most island families converted a century ago, and even John Frum supporters pivot back and forth between religious affiliations. Our fellow diner looked friendly. An ambitious young man, Reuben likes to make connections, new roads. Thinking ahead, he imagines several possibilities. He could return to the Teacher Education Institute for a second degree that would qualify him for a better-paying secondary school teaching position. Or perhaps he could become a pilot. Or, like his uncle James, he thinks hard about all those new tourists.

Several valley families living just south and east of the volcano in the Nepraineteta valley have gone into the hospitality business. Island entrepreneurs have been quick to learn the ropes. What do tourists eat? How do they sleep? What do they demand? Water, electricity, toilets? Wi-fi, maybe? Samaria families, up on their ridge, enviously look down on these valley enterprises. Next door
to his new house, Reuben built a second shelter, a possible tourist bungalow. In 2017, a government bulldozer widened the narrow footpath that connects Samaria to the valley floor road, and village tourists now are a more likely possibility. Previously, only the hardest visitor would scramble up that steep path. Leaning over too far, one could fall off the cliff. Now, taxi trucks with four-wheel drives could haul them easily up the mountainside. Reuben purchased a hundred yards of plastic pipe to link his bungalow into the community’s spring-fed reticulated water supply system, although this often runs dry. I helped him write a blurb, a potential bungalow advertisement that he could upload to Bookings.com and Airbnb.com. Beautiful and hospitable Tanna awaits!

**Tourists**

Before there were tourists, there came travelers. Overseas visitors began to call at Tanna toward the end of the nineteenth century, arriving on personal sailing vessels and, later, as passengers on Burns Philp or Messageries Maritimes cargo steamers. Tanna’s volcano, and its missionaries who were obliged to host these sightseers, were main attractions. Travelers then came in search of savage thrills, cannibals, and new territory for colonial exploitation. They were conventionally critical of the island’s inhabitants. Freelance journalist Julian Thomas, writing as “Vagabond,” stopped off in 1883 on a ship that brought plantation workers back home from Australia. He enjoyed William and Agnes Watt’s hospitality at Kwamera. He complimented Tanna’s farmers and was taken by cute island children, but in his account he conveyed typical stories of island savagery: The Tannese “were jealous, and sudden and quick in quarrel, bloodthirsty and vindictive, with less respect for human life than any other race in the Pacific. They are still cannibals.” No matter, Islanders he met borrowed his names Vagabond and Julian, and their descendant namesakes have continued to recycle these down to the present.

Beatrice Grimshaw, another wandering journalist and Irish-Australian lady traveler, booked passage in 1905 on a Burns Philp steamer for the “island of murderers.” Her mordant account of Tanna’s charms did admit Islanders’ cheerful and helpful character: “Indeed, the Tannese, when not actively engaged in murder or cannibalism, is not at all a bad sort of fellow.” Islanders even promised to train into a “fine race,” one day, when they could be “induced to clean their houses and themselves, and live decently and quietly.” Grimshaw quizzed an amiable elder about his cannibalistic proclivities. He responded: “He had never heard of cannibalism, not he.” Grimshaw didn’t believe him. She collected a
human thigh bone as a souvenir. With two local guides, the intrepid Beatrice climbed the volcano at dusk to journal its explosions. Apart from herself, she found tourists to be “rare birds in the islands.” Britain, she advised, should best annex the archipelago.

Various oddball travelers followed journalists to Tanna. Proto-hippie and artist Charles Gordon Frazer, “the first white man to penetrate into the wild interior of Tanna,” found his way to Port Resolution in 1888. He survived to produce a seven-foot long oil painting, *Cannibal Feast on the Island of Tanna*. This, still esteemed in 2004, sold for more than $59,000. In 1894, Austria-Hungarian Count Rodolfe Festetics de Tolna and his rich American wife, on a honeymoon cruise across the Pacific, moored their newly built yacht in Port Resolution. Countess Festetics would later abandon the voyage and sue for divorce, but Rodolfe (“the Cannibal Count”) got a book out of it. He opened his Tanna (“The Cannibal Island”) chapter with usual sensationalist keynotes: The savages “were truly appalling, with a fierce animalistic expression, of craven cunning and cruelty.”

Adventurer John Voss in 1902 also found shelter in Port Resolution. The *Tilikum*, Voss’ modified Nootka (northwest coast) red cedar dugout canoe, surprised Islanders, and the Watts, when it sailed into the bay. William and Agnes treated Voss to “a very nice dinner.” Voss, of course, was eager to find cannibals and copra trader Wilson, a fellow guest at the Watt’s table, assured him that a man had been eaten only a few days previously. Voss admitted that the Tannese were hospitable and generous, but he scorned shabby island villages where huts reminded him of dog kennels.

More distinguished literary travelers also visited Tanna, including Jack and Charmian London, assisted by Martin Johnson. Johnson with his wife Osa would return a decade later to film the archipelago’s first silent movies, released as *Cannibals of the South Seas* (1918) and *Head Hunters of the South Seas* (1922). The Londons, in 1908, navigated into Port Resolution on Jack’s yacht, the *Snark*. They also leaned on the Watts’ hospitality. Charmian found Port Resolution’s Christians to be “individuals of one kind or another of striking personality.” One elder even “proved a lovable chap.” Yet, she too pushed cannibal stories: “five miles back in the bush, the savages are unclaimed ancestor-worshippers who eat one another to this day.” Watt assured Charmian that everyone was perfectly safe. This news, however, spoiled her storyline. Johnson more crudely burlesqued the Islanders he met: “They were the most savage, heathenish looking folk I have ever looked upon.” He didn’t like William Watt, either, who refused to let him use the mission darkroom on the Sabbath. Jack and Charmian with Martin and other *Snark* crew members trekked along the valley and scrambled
up Iasur’s fiery summit. Eighty years later, visitor stories haven’t much budged. Travel writer Paul Theroux in the 1990s, describing the Tannese channeled Martin Johnson’s earlier snubs: “They were not much bigger than pygmies, and they were blacker and more naked . . . they looked like cannibals.”

Tourists on Tanna are no longer Grimshaw’s rare birds. Visitors today are hard to miss. In 2003, I was astonished to run into a pack train of portly German tourists on horseback heading for the volcano. They, migratory birds, quickly have become commonplace. Tafea, Vanuatu’s southern province, attracts 40 percent of the overseas visitors who travel outside Port Vila. In 2017, 10,700 tourists went south, and most of these headed for Tanna for a three or four day stay. These numbers increase annually. Iasur remains the principal draw, but tourist entrepreneurs also market the nakwiari dance festival and other elements of Tanna kastom, even John Frum spectacles like the movement’s annual 15 February anniversary celebration.

Several expatriate businessmen were early boosters of island tourism. They developed a tourist lodge or two and composed initial blurbs to attract visitors. In years since, however, island entrepreneurs, particularly in the valley underneath Iasur and also at Port Resolution, jumped into the business. An enlarged airport at White Grass served by larger planes arriving twice daily from Port Vila facilitates tourist arrivals. Occasional cruise ships crammed with seagoing holidaymakers, some tipsy, call at the island and vague plans circulate proposing new boat docks and wharves. In the 1980s, the government bulldozed a road up the southeast side of Iasur. Visitors no longer need to hike up 1,184 feet of gritty volcanic ash to reach the caldera. Taxi trucks chug up the rutted trail that Grimshaw, the Londons, Martin Johnson, and even I once struggled to climb.

In the late 1970s, Samaria families on average eked out little more than US$500 each year, mostly from drying and selling copra and working casual jobs. After independence, almost everyone abandoned copra making. Oil palm plantations elsewhere in the tropics undercut copra’s price, and interisland shipping dwindled. Villagers instead turned to urban migration, seeking work in Port Vila and beyond to earn cash. Today’s tourists present new, potentially lucrative opportunities for those like Reuben and James now back home in Samaria. Most tourists book accommodation in several west coast lodges that offer electricity and running water. Increasing numbers, however, find their way to the bungalows that village entrepreneurs have constructed in the valley below the volcano, and eastward toward Port Resolution. The foundations of William Watt’s Workers Memorial Church, Agnes’ grave still nestled nearby, now support the Yacht Club Resort. Beer is on sale inside. Bungalow keepers also have
tapped into an odd tourist taste for sleeping in treehouses, throwing up a half
dozen of these around the volcano.

As they did a century ago, most visitors today come to Tanna to do Iasur,
particularly at night when its magma and lava bomb explosions glow orange-red.
Promoters advertise Iasur as “the world’s most accessible volcano.” Visitors pay
upward of US$100 to truck up to the crater’s lip. A second trip up to the caldera
comes with a 50 percent discount, and a third is free. The volcano is spectacular,
but how might tourists stay longer and spend more? Upselling, promoters now
also boost the island’s unspoiled nature and its age-old kastom: Tanna Island,
boasts one tourist brochure, is renowned for its “active volcano, custom villages,
potent kava, cargo cultists, strong traditions, exciting festivals, gigantic banyan
trees, magnificent wild horses, long black and white beaches, velvet nights, and
much more.”

Before the John Frum movement fell on hard times in 2000, splitting into
three factions, entrepreneurs also tried promoting cargo cult: Tourists will
“learn about the fascinating John Frum cult.” Daring visitors found their way
down to Sulphur Bay’s Friday night “cargo cult dances,” there joined by crew
members from occasional visiting yachts. Air Vanuatu’s in-flight magazine, for
example, in several of its issues celebrated Tanna’s “ancient culture” and “un-
touched waterfalls” but also promised tourists that

there are also cult tribes to learn about, including the Prince Philip cult
and the John Frum cargo cult. If you visit on a Friday, you will be privy to
the weekly ceremony when John Frum members conduct rituals such as
raising flags and marching in unison, holding the belief that mimicking
these American acts will lead to the delivery of magical cargo like radios,
jeeps, fridges and other manufactured items owned by American visitors
during WWII.

Tourism marketers also have moved along to feature island kastom, particu-
larly village exchange ceremonies. Promoters everywhere convert exotic dance
festivals into touristic spectacles. The nakwiari is certainly stunning but is
irregularly organized. Nieri feasts, village exchanges of garden produce, are more
common but also irregular. However, during the cool harvest season from April
through September, one family or another is certain to organize a tamarua, a
circumcision exchange. Entrepreneurs also hire relatives and neighbors to stage
dance performances for tourists if no actual kastom ceremony is on hand. Num-
bbers of tourists nowadays wander into these family circumcision exchanges,
cameras clicking, as they also drop into first shave, first menstruation, and other
occasional village ceremonies. Islanders are welcoming and generous, but some think strategically about how to monetize their *kastom*. *Nakwiari* organizers typically demand visitor admission fees, and they charge extra for picture-taking.

Then there is cannibalism. Islanders are rightly incensed at previous generations of visitors who came to Tanna, looked into people’s faces, and saw savage cannibals, or at least so they claimed when they wrote up their travels. But cannibalism still sells. The Jungle Cultural Tour, located just down from Samaria, promises that tourists will “experience the past in the present.” An entrepreneur in the valley under the volcano charges tourists to attend cannibal dances, guaranteed to raise goosebumps. Another, at Port Resolution, cleared a cannibal trail charging about US$10 to walk along this. Promoters elsewhere in Vanuatu offer similar cannibalistic thrills, including man-eating tours on Malakula and cannibal encounters on Efate. Elau’s Erromangans ceremonially have apologized for killing and eating John Williams and James Harris.

It is a tricky business when one’s culture goes on sale in the global tourism marketplace as primitive and peculiar. Connections between tourism and identity work both ways. Primitive or romantic nature attracts tourists, but tourism then feeds local identity as Islanders find it profitable to sell themselves as living primitives, jungle natives, cargo cultists, and even as erstwhile cannibals. Everyday life is colored by the themes that situate Tanna within the overseas touristic marketplace. When sightseers arrive, Islanders learn something about who they are, or what they are within global circuits. The touristic gaze is a sort of surveillance that transfigures the everyday into spectacle. Culture is no longer a lifeway, but a product. A dance is no longer a dance, it is a performance. A house is now a bungalow. A basket a commodity. Those beneath the gaze come to look back at themselves as tourists see them. Although most Islanders repudiate John Frum, and certainly deny any cannibal appetite, despite their protests Tanna is framed as the island of cargo cult and cannibal. Still, Reuben, his uncle James, and many other island businessmen are happy to host.

**Digital Island**

Creeping infrastructural buildup of airline and airport, roads and trucks, and village water supply systems has made tourism possible on Tanna. The mobile telephone, after 2008, also brings tourists to the island as entrepreneurs use smart phones to check their Internet bookings. Islanders have come to rely on their cell phones, *mobael* in Bislama, to do much more. As soon as two telephone companies pierced Tanna with cell towers, including one looming over Samaria on
Nukwaneinupum peak, everyone wanted a mobile. Within a year, 76 percent of households had access to a phone and this number has approached 100 percent. Mobiles quickly became expensive necessities. They require prepaid credit that people purchase from local trade stores, or from company kiosks in Lenakel (Blackman Town) on the other side of the island. With no electricity, villagers find ways to recharge their phones, bringing these over to Blackman Town where they pay storekeepers 100 or 200 vatu to plug in, tapping into automobile batteries, or using their own generators and solar panels. Everyone much appreciates cheap SMS text messaging. When out of credit, needy friends text free “please call me” messages. Linguists note that these fresh waves of text messaging, and also Internet postings, are transforming Bislama’s orthography in extraordinary ways.

Reuben, in Samaria, charges up his mobile phone more often than he does his laptop. While Blackman Town boasts an Internet café that sometimes is open for business, a youth center with computers, and outposts of the University of the South Pacific and the Vanuatu Institute of Technology that offer occasional courses in information technology, mobiles are more versatile devices than computers. Many have upgraded to smart phones (dak skrin, “dark screen” in Bislama) that connect into the World Wide Web and also function as cameras and as handy flashlights at night, easier to light up than burning coconut fronds.

When mobiles first came into the market, Vanuatu buzzed with nervous urban, and rural, legends. Microwaves and computers sparked parallel anxious tales when these devices originally appeared in the USA, as elsewhere. Island friends warned me not to pick up at night if I didn’t recognize a number. They feared a new form of sorcery where enchanters hijack one’s brain through the phone. Young telefoners quickly figured out prank calling. One midnight caller asked me if I smoked marijuana and if I could please send over a young girl. I hung up. He called back. Boys trade girls’ numbers. They dial randomly, aiming to flirt with any girl who might answer. Teenagers (and adults, too), with mobiles, appreciate digital possibilities to escape incessant family surveillance of their romances and other affairs. No one can ask “where are you going?” if one can’t be seen going (or relating). Parents complain of these digital devils that eat money and deprave their children. However, mobiles lubricate and expand people’s social networking in approved as well as deprecated directions. Trans-island families notably live online.

Mobiles are even more powerful mechanisms and objects of criticism as Islanders increasingly go online. Many who can afford dark screens, and enough phone credit, sign onto Facebook. Here, they vigorously engage with many popular Vanuatu Facebook Groups and Pages that feature island news, religious
affirmations, sport commentary, critique of politicians and government, climate change and other worries, advertisements, and much more amidst all sorts of gossip, local rumor, and salacious tidbit. Facebook groups Yumi Toktok Stret, Whu i Luk, Yu Save Seh!, Living in Vanuatu, Mi Harem Se, and Mi Laekem Yu are contemporary digital kava-drinking grounds where people gather to discuss and debate, if often anonymously. Some shelter behind clever usernames that only their friends recognize. Many online, like Reuben, like to post selfies. They also recirculate popular memes, both local and global. Before mobile phones, Islanders tapped only occasionally into global frenzies and scams including chain letters, dubious baldness cures, pyramid marketing schemes, and other money-making swindles as these arrived in the sluggish mails. Now, all sorts of doubtful fiddles pop up daily onscreen.

Despite widespread technological worry and doubt, few will surrender their mobiles. These devices sustain today’s trans-island families. People regularly text and call from Samaria to Port Vila and beyond, sharing family news, making plans, and rendering appeals. Growing numbers of family members, like Soarum and his wife when working abroad in New Zealand or Australia, likewise use their mobiles, and Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp, to stay in touch economically. Felina, Sivur’s daughter and Reuben’s cousin, messaged me from Australia. She’s employed there in a mango-packing house at the Top End, near Darwin. She’s okay but misses home. Take care, I told her. Next time I buy a mango I’ll think of you. And my dark screen.

Notes
2. Beatrice Grimshaw, From Fiji to the Cannibal Islands (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1907), 284, 285, 293.
Further Readings

Vanuatu Cultural Centre’s Local Fieldworker Program


Early Island Visitors


Tourist Statistics


Tourists (and Cannibals)


Mobile Telephone in Vanuatu

