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Chapter 14

Last Island

People are convinced, Tanna is the center of the world. Go Ipare: Up toward the mountain, to the middle. Tied into global grids for nearly 250 years, the island is well connected. Traffic and travel are constant. Captain Cook and crew came ashore, Elau shanghaied to London, Manehevi jailed in Port Vila, Soarum wandered a Queensland plantation, Nouar and his team shipped north to work on Efate’s American military bases, Sivur, Kusi, and the rest of the family migrated to town, Soarum and Felina flew overseas to pick grapes and pack mangoes, and Mwatiktiki and other spirits continue to rove. Islanders worry, though. Perhaps Tanna is only the center of their world. Maybe they are only the tail of the fish, not the fish. Ipare, sometimes, looks to be at the outer edge of the grid, the last stop along the road. Some, ruefully, call their home the Last Island, and tourist brokers have marketed the place as such. But yet—with kastom, the volcano, John Frum, pig exchange feasts—the world keeps coming.

Those on the Last Island sometimes predict that the Last Day will soon arrive. Evangelical missionaries cultivate the expectation of the world’s end, but Tanna time concepts also presume sudden earthly disturbances and transformation. John Frum predicted a new day and, so some say, a new island. The Prophet Fred foresaw volcanic Lake Siui’s vanishing. Many village families, on 31 December 1999, decamped to sleep in bush hidey-holes. Rumors of impending world calamity and catastrophe had amplified fiercely as the third millennium approached.

Whether first or last among islands, villagers fret uncertain aspects of the future even as they draw strength from the past. Although linked since 1774 into global networks, Tanna remains distinct, its own place, although this is a place deeply figured and shaped by local and global forces alike. Islanders zealously cultivate kastom, but they also welcome strangers and novelty if these promise advantage and esteem, leading to respect—the converse of shame. They hop ships and board planes for destinations overseas, but keep in mind future homecomings even though these returns may be years away. Tanna endures as
a refuge, an island sanctuary, where wayfaring villages root their identities and, when need be, return to find shelter.

Home Ground

Nafe language has no generic verb or noun for “work,” although it offers words for particular tasks like farming, fishing, and making things. Missionaries (and plantation recruiters), who aimed to inculcate an appreciation of honest labor among the converted, struggled with this verbal gap. William Watt, in his 1890 Nafe New Testament, sometimes defaulted to the English loan “work,” sometimes opted for Nafe tafaga (behavior), sometimes an invented paraphrase narimnarime ikamo (things you do), and sometimes he omitted “work” altogether from a translated verse.

Islanders discovered wok when they learned Bislama, and they have worked ever since on plantations, mission and colonial roads and gardens, American military bases, in Port Vila’s settlements, and again overseas in New Zealand and Australia’s farms and orchards. Money drives them. Those employed abroad express powerful nostalgia for island life, where everything is free, although of course people must work at home, too. The island, though, offers a haven when things go bad. When overseas relocation and employment become troublesome or impossible, people retreat to their village homes, gardens, and pigs. Almost no island land has been lost or alienated, unlike on Efate and Espiritu Santo Islands where overseas investors have leased large tracts. On Tanna, land remains in the hands of its kastom owners. And land is more than real estate. It is home ground. The island’s given name after all, thanks to James Cook, means ground, earth, or soil.

Anthropological theories of the dividual argue that single persons incorporate within themselves elements of others, notably their close kin, and also traces of material elements including the land and food that nourished them. On Tanna, persons profoundly identify themselves with places. When abroad, they pass as Man Tanna, associated with the island as a whole. On Tanna, they distinguish themselves according to their villages, their home grounds. This is particularly true of men whose personal names embed them in landscape, but home places come to define women as well. When someone is distressed or ill, home food is the best cure. Old Tio’s kin brought food grown on home ground to sustain him during his final days in hospital. Pita and Natumwi insisted that a sickly granddaughter, born in Port Vila, come straight home to Tanna where local foods would heal. Families on Tanna ship home-grown food to kinfolk
living in Port Vila’s settlements. This local food both nourishes and sustains their island personhoods.

Globalization, however, unsettles us all. Surging flows of people, goods, and ideas reach even out-of-the-way, last islands like Tanna. In response, nationalism, xenophobia, and chauvinism spark around the world. People romanticize home values in the face of the strange and the unfamiliar. Islanders, thanks to John Frum, turned once before to kastom to resist the world and they may well do so again: Banish outsiders and ditch their money. But what are the chances here? Pavegen’s line of wild cane stuck into Port Resolution’s sands didn’t deter those alien sharks for long. The lighthouse of the Pacific continues to attract its sightseeing moths. Several thousand new Chinese have moved into Vanuatu, opening trade stores and petty businesses, although the Tannese so far have kept them off their island renaming Lenakel, pointedly, Blackman town. Tanna’s population has recovered from deadly nineteenth-century epidemics and probably exceeds its 1774 numbers. Island ground has filled up. Most personal name stocks currently are bestowed and enlivened. New possibilities abroad, however, increasingly beckon. Trans-island families today root themselves at home and away. Children find overseas spouses. Grandchildren in town may or may not learn much Nafe language.

Climate change, too, keeps people on edge. There are, nowadays, about as many global warming missionaries wandering the island as there are Christian. Armed with munificent resources these, too, preach visions of dark and dismal futures. Salvation is possible but demanding. Some on Tanna seize on global warming messaging to explain passing drought and threatening cyclones, but also common colds, unruly pigs, and mischievous winds. The world is increasingly dangerous. Yet the good life as most imagine this, including travel, education, cement brick houses, solar electric systems, mobile phones, and even Reuben’s computers, requires at least some cash and this pulls people away for work in Port Vila and beyond.

Educational opportunity and urban migration have loosened Tanna’s gender roles and expectations. Women in town enjoy new possibilities to relax familial surveillance. Many now speak for themselves; they choose their own spouses. Some ignore masculine kava-drinking prerogatives. The island’s kastom pattern of peripheral women who cleave to a core of men in the center is eroding as women find ways to live independently, particularly in town. People elsewhere in Vanuatu figuratively describe men as banyans, with deep roots sunk into their home grounds, and women as birds who flit from tree to tree. A few of the birds now have flown the forest altogether, nesting on their own in Port Vila or beyond.
Kwatia, reflecting on his life and times, urged everyone to mind their home ground. Uri, his homesick brother-in-law who left Tanna for Port Vila years ago, also longs for the island’s peace and harmony. In perilous times, home ground remains a refuge, but it too needs protection. How might village justice systems be remade in order to address and resolve novel problems brought by sharp increases in tourism, possible land leasing and alienation, conflicted urban settlements, global appropriation of island cultural property, and more? Will future lease holders of island lands, when disputes erupt, be convinced to take part in all-day moots that culminate in mutual gift giving? Sorcery fear may work to deter neighbors from violating one’s kastom privileges on Tanna and in town settlements, but how far will this fear extend? Can nakaemas or Tanna’s power stones reach beyond Vanuatu’s borders to bump off outsiders who misbehave?

Land disputes are a particularly vexing issue and Islanders actively reach out to councils of chiefs, island and state courts, and the Ministry of Land hoping that these official bodies might solve home-ground rows that local dispute-settlement systems fail to handle. Villagers take land squabbles to court where previously they would have dealt with these in local moots. Three of Samaria’s families have enrolled sons, including Reuben’s brother, in legal studies.
at the University of the South Pacific maneuvering to protect home ground from future mischief-makers.

Tanna’s entwined persons, home grounds, and its embedded personal and place names have sustained island \textit{kastom} since 1774 despite much coming and going. Vibrant island \textit{kastom}, though, entices even more overseas visitors who pay to experience sizzling volcanic eruptions and romantic, sometimes savagely romantic, cultural spectacles. This traffic brings novelty and change to the island, but it also firms up people’s insistence to remain themselves. Villagers travel down many roads leading abroad, but Tanna’s ground calls many back home. Globally networked, Tanna’s places and people have endured. The island, although in the world, is greater than that world.

\textbf{Kaha Monty}

The last day has nearly arrived for me, too. I found my way luckily to Tanna several decades ago and the island has pulled me back many times since. Not quite twenty-five, I wasn’t yet feeling old and it was then disconcerting when new friends instructed their children to call me Kaha Monty, \textit{kaha} “grandfather,” and Monty my island-ish name. This grandparental kinship title, of course, signified good village manners, an effort to ease an awkward stranger into ordinary island relationships. Many years later, I happily embrace my grandfatherly status (figure 13). Age and grey hair on Tanna command respect, deserved or not. Village grandchildren, my \textit{mwipuk}, continue to find and reach out to me, on Facebook, as their \textit{kaha}.

\textit{Kaha} I am, but maybe also a \textit{Kout Kasua}. Kout Kasua belonged to neither of the two island moieties, Numrukwen and Koiameta, which united families across Tanna. Instead, they passed messages between the two sides and, when disputes flared, opened negotiations between them. \textit{Kasua} derives from the verb \textit{asua}, which means “paddle, travel by canoe” but also “be alert” or “be knowledgeable or wise.” Kout Kasuas were useful characters when nineteenth-century feuding intensified with imported firearms. People’s appreciation of their mediating and communicative functions, though, is always tinged with suspicion. Kout Kasuas also tell stories behind one’s back, spilling the beans to island rivals. Anthropologists, too, like to tell other people’s stories. We carry these from one place to another. And we, too, hope that this cultivates new understandings and deeper mutual appreciation among those living on last, or first, islands.

As my last day on the last island approaches, village friends eye my \textit{kwanakw-evur}, that grey hair. Tanna’s places, persons, and their relationships ideally never
go away. They are, rather, actively and persistently replaced. Yesterday’s named personages living on their designated home grounds should recycle and reappear, come tomorrow. Islanders carefully maintain good connections and valued roads. I followed instructions and brought two of my daughters along to Samaria so that they will know how to find the village and replace me when I’m gone, when I transform into a *kaha eraha*, a departed grandfather spirit.

Until then, I say *tanak asori* as do Islanders today, having now found a Nafe phrase that is expressive of gratitude, as earnest missionary Mary Matheson once put this. Or, more aptly, I echo Agnes Watt’s gravestone epitaph at Port Resolution: *In rapi nakur Ipare*.

Further Readings

*Place, Ground, and Personal Identity in Vanuatu*


*The Anthropologist on Tanna*