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The Ethnographer Unbared: Crossing Beaches of the Mind on Tanna

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Abstract: Using the metaphor of beach crossings made famous by ethno-historian Greg DENING (2004), in this article I reflect on my first experience of ethnographic fieldwork. In the article I document how, as a doctoral student investigating 19th century missionary activity, I transitioned from archival to field-based research on the southern Vanuatu island of Tanna in 1975, completed my PhD two years later, and have continued to develop my relations with the Tannese to the present. I argue that this reflects, not only the notable capacity of the Tannese to embrace strangers, but also the extraordinary bond I forged with one "informant", David KAUKARE. I describe how more than any other person it was David, a primary school teacher at an isolated east coast village, who mediated my crossing into a society profoundly different from my own. In the article I explore how together we negotiated the crossings between our interconnecting and shifting worlds—sometimes mindfully, but more often than not serendipitously. In focusing on those initial encounters, I reflect on how prepared—and unprepared—we both were for the experience, and the impact it had on our sense of self and connection with the world.

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1. Introduction

It might reasonably be expected that my account would start in 1975, the year I made my first fieldtrip to the island of Tanna, in what was then the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides, now the Republic of Vanuatu. Instead, I am going to start in 2006, the year I learned that David KAUKARE had died. David befriended me on that first fieldtrip and over the next thirty years became my closest friend in life. As ethnographers, in the course of our fieldwork we develop many different relationships with the people whose world we are trying to understand—sometimes positive, sometimes negative. The relationships evolve reciprocally, usually over extended periods, during which perceptions and expectations can change—on both sides. In the field, the sense of connectedness can be intense and passionate, and then fade into the background after we return home and have to attend to life's other demands. We

never stop being parents or partners (or academics and researchers), but how we view and experience those connections may have shifted by the time we return home. We cannot pretend that our encounters in the field have not changed us in some way. The intensity might fade over time, but our interactions with the people we "research" remain part of who we are. A similar process is in play with the people we encounter. They have their own commitments and responsibilities to resume after we depart, but their encounter with the researcher can reshape their "normal" life—sometimes profoundly. In this article, I focus on the changes I and my so-called "informants" like David experienced from our interactions in the field, especially what I see as the single most important change—a shifting sense of self vis-à-vis the world. If half a century of fieldwork on Tanna has taught me anything, it is that this shifting sense of self belongs, not at the margins, but at the heart of ethnographic discourse. [1]

Before making my first fieldtrip to Tanna, I had for some years been researching the island in archives in Australia, France and Britain. In that sense, my encounter with Tanna began in 1971. However, the fieldtrip in 1975 was the transformative moment for me—as a researcher and as a person. It was then that I shifted from merely reading *about* the Tannese and started interacting *with* them. It was also in that year that I began my thirty-year association with David KAUKARE, the primary school teacher in the isolated east coast village of Yarkei. As I describe in the article, from a chance meeting our relationship evolved into one underpinned by mutual affection and respect, empathy and honesty, loyalty and commitment. It was, then, a moment of profound loss when I learned that David had died in the village from a heart attack on the morning of December 6, 2005. [2]

2. A Letter from Tanna

I learned of David's death four months after he died—on April 18, 2006, Easter Tuesday, a holiday for Australian universities. I had taken advantage of the free time to go to my office early to catch up on some work. One of the tasks I had set myself was to photocopy the captioned map in Greg GOW's "The Oromo in Exile" (2002) to send to a student. Greg had accompanied me to Tanna after completing his PhD some years before, and thinking of him and Tanna reminded me of the letter to David and remittance cheque that had been sitting in my briefcase for a week. [3]

Stepping through the front door on my return home that afternoon, I noticed the distinctive red and blue border of an airmail letter. The stamps told me it was from Vanuatu. I felt annoyed with myself that I had not already posted the letter and a cheque to David. That way our mail would have crossed and it would not have looked like David had to push me into writing. At the same time, I felt the joy of the anticipated pleasure of catching up on all the news from Tanna. I put it aside while I attended to the everyday domestic chores not even a researcher can escape. Then I turned to the letter. It was in David's characteristic handwriting.

> "Yarkei Village
> White Sands
> Tanna
>
> 5th/04/2006
>
> Dear Ron
>
> Let me take this moment to greet you with a New Years greeting from the family back on Tanna to you and the family out there in Australia". [4]

No reproach in those words for not having written recently. I read on.

> "Ron I am very sorry to tell you that David Kaukare got a severe heart attack on the 6th of December 2005 and we lost him. He fell down at around 6 o'clock in the morning on his way to Charlie's house. The men of the village rushed him to the hospital and the nurses tried to get his breath back, but they couldn't. So he was buried on the same day 6th of December at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. It was a great loss for the family and also for the community.
>
> I graduated from the Teachers College on the 1st of December 2005". [5]

I turned to the end of the letter. It was from David's son Albert. Albert was the last KAUKARE I had seen the previous May, at the Teachers' College in the capital Port Vila when I was heading back to Australia after a fortnight on Tanna. We had gone downtown for a takeaway lunch of fish and chips. I had given him the remaining local currency I had on me. I went back to his news.

> "Linnet, Nelson and I were in Vila when we got the news about our dad. Kalsale was also in Santo. We tried to find a way to come to Tanna but the planes were all full so none of us came to his funeral service, except Nanet, Charlie and mum. Linnet and Johny Iawia flew to Tanna the next day but Nelson and I came by ship on the 10th of December. Kalsale came on the 12th. We all didn't enjoy the Christmas holiday and the New Years day feast because of the sudden loss of our dad.
>
> Ron David's family wishes to apologise to you for not informing you about your friend's death earlier. We are all very sorry. We were expecting you to call as you had always done. Ron even though David has gone, we still believe that the long friendship that you two had established will linger on forever. Your home is still here, on Tanna". [6]

I was numb with pain and disbelief. Robyn was not home from school yet, and I remember going from room to room reading the letter out loud first to Samuel, then to Ben, then to Sarah, hearing the words as if they were being spoken by someone else. My children were confused and bewildered, as uncomprehending as I was. All had grown close to David, from our family visits to Tanna, from when he stayed with us once over Christmas and was more excited about putting up Christmas decorations than I had ever been, and because they knew how important he was to me. Sarah, in bed, flushed and head thumping from a tough day at the school where she was teaching, sat up with a flustered look and was

about to protest when she remembered something: "Is that what the postcard from Tanna's about?"

> "What postcard? There's no postcard."
>
> "Yes there is." [7]

I retrieved the postcard. It was from Charlie, who had become David's eldest son following the death of the first-born Kalsale. After David, I was closer to Charlie than anyone else on Tanna. From the mid-80s it had been Charlie, at the behest of his father, who accompanied me everywhere on Tanna and who took care of my fieldwork arrangements. The last time I was on Tanna it was Charlie who had guided me down south to Port Resolution and Kwamera, up north to Point Loanbakel, inland to the waterfall at Fekel, and across the island to villages along the west coast I had never visited before. The postcard was dated 7 April, two days after Albert's letter. It had been posted at the post box that sits on the rim of Tanna's volcano, a tourist gimmick that suits the locals, who do not have to go to the other side to post letters. In other circumstances that would have raised a smile.

> "Dear Ron, New year's greetings to you and family. We sadly hope that you heard the news of your dear friend. We're not really sure whether you got the message but he was laid to rest on the 6th of December 2005. But we're happy to tell you that whatever you established, please continue with. Do come as you promised. Anytime!!" [8]

I noticed that Charlie avoided using the name of a deceased person, in contrast to Albert, who had left no room for ambiguity. The underlying message was the same. The reference to what their father and I had "established" was not coincidence. Individuals come and go, but the relationships they create continue. Albert and Charlie were making it clear that the onus was now on me to continue the relationship that David and I had forged and maintained for thirty years with all the reciprocal obligations and responsibilities that such relationships entail. [9]

3. Encountering Tanna

In 1975 Tanna was part of the colonial Anglo-French condominium of the New Hebrides and the site of my PhD fieldwork. Since that first fieldtrip, I have returned to the island on average every eighteen months. In that time, Tanna has changed from colonial backwater to modern tourist destination. It boasts an asphalt airfield complete with navigation aids, websites for choosing accommodation, restaurants serving flying fox and pigeon, and taxis to transport you to the volcano or a custom village to be welcomed with a well-rehearsed dance and pressed to buy a carving or grass skirt or pretend penis-wrapper. Ubiquitous mobile phone towers enable visitors to share their exotic experiences 24/7 with family at home, and film crews make travel documentaries, survivor reality shows, now even award-winning feature films, in out-of-the-way villages. [10]

It was not like that in the 1970s. The kind of infrastructure taken for granted in Australia simply was not there. You could not count on there being a telephone to contact someone. There was little point arranging a meeting at a precise time if you were lucky and the stars were in alignment you might get to meet on an agreed day. Getting to and from Tanna on one of the four- or nine-seater *Air Melanesie* planes was subject to the vagaries of the weather, and landing on the bumpy airstrip cut into the jungle near the administrative centre at Isangel required someone first shooing off the grazing horses. Getting to the other side of the island was unpredictable; finding a driver to transport you from the airstrip 5 kilometres to town—much less to my destination on the other side of the island—depended on negotiating for the limited space among the supplies and produce and relatives already stacked on the tray. And once you *were* on the move, a sudden downpour could wash away entire sections of the "road" and with it any plans you had made for reaching your destination. [11]

In many ways, the New Hebrides *was* a colonial backwater, with many New Hebrideans—soon to be rechristened ni-Vanuatu—looking to a different future. People were talking of imminent independence. Anglophones and francophones were positioning against each other to inherit whatever might replace the existing system. But cutting across the language and political divide was a quickening sense, shared by all, of the need to clarify and resolve where *kastom* [custom], or traditional ways, fitted into whatever the future might bring. I was carrying out my fieldwork in the former Presbyterian stronghold on the east side of the island, where many Tannese had experienced first-hand the mission-based "Tanna Law" repression of *kastom*—which everyone now seemed intent on resurrecting. Even Presbyterian elders wanted to talk about *kastom,* wanted to reclaim their ancestral past. The presence of a researcher investigating the history of the mission on the island presented them with an opportunity to articulate their rediscovery (or reinvention) of the past and the ways of their ancestors. I was keen to listen to their stories. And they were keen to hear what I could tell them about what was in the written records that was being withheld from them. [12]

Apart from what was in the historical records, my knowledge of Tanna had come from what I had read in the accounts of earlier anthropologists. Chief among them was Jean GUIART (1956), who had carried out fieldwork on Tanna in 1952-1953. Just days before departing for the island in 1975, I had been thrown into a panic after reading in his "Un Siècle et Demi de Contact Culturels à Tanna" [A Century and a Half of Cultural Contacts in Tanna] that the colour yellow signified death—as I had just purchased a bright yellow tent in which to sleep. I remember rushing back to the camping gear store to make a swap, only to discover that they had completely sold out of tents—though I did manage to exchange the yellow fly for a neutral jungle green (ADAMS, 1987). I do not believe now that it made a mite of difference to how I was received by the Tannese, but it does highlight the extent to which GUIART influenced what I expected to encounter on Tanna. [13]

The other anthropologists who had worked on Tanna were Felix SPEISER in 1912 (SPEISER, 1913, 1996 [1923]) and Clarence B. HUMPHREYS in 1920

(LANGHAM, 1981, pp.201-202, 281). Neither gave any sense of having encountered the living world of the Tannese. For SPEISER (1922), it was only because the missionaries had turned "heathen of very low type into useful and civilized folk" (p.37) that the Tannese were spared the fate of other "inferior" native races of collapsing under the weight of "superior" (p.51) Western civilization. For HUMPHREYS (1926), the Tannese were a case study to test his theory that they represented "woolly-haired people, the taller branch of the Oceanic Ulotrichi" fused with "Austronesian-speaking people" (p.193). The other anthropological-type account of the Tannese was "Some Notes on the Tannese", written for the 1892 meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science by William GRAY, a missionary at Weasisi on Tanna's east coast from 1881 to 1894. "There is no scepticism amongst Tannese on any religious matter", GRAY (1892) declared, "scepticism [being] a parasite of the Gospel" (p.12). On the efficacy of *nuruk* [evil magic], "even men with minds better trained than the unsophisticated native mind", he pointed out, "have been unable to resist drawing the inference natives draw" (p.13). "Good intelligent christians", he noted, "accept evidence of direct answers to prayer less satisfactory and conclusive than that presented in cases of Nuruk" (ibid.), and to understand the Tannese required something "more satisfactory than the stock explanations of mental reflex action and imposture" (ibid.). Reading GRAY led me to revise my prejudices against missionaries and further fired my interest to go to Tanna. [14]

However, it was GUIART who most influenced my expectations about what I would discover when I got to Tanna. The Sorbonne-educated anthropologist had been sent by the French administration to Tanna to investigate the John Frum movement, the so-called "cargo cult" that since the Second World War had repudiated European control. By the 1950s the movement's violent phase had given way to a more reflective preoccupation with *kastom* and tradition, and GUIART found that everywhere the men were willing to share their knowledge with him. He crisscrossed the entire island, village by village, returning two, three, even ten times, crosschecking his information against that gained at adjoining villages. This constant coming and going was common knowledge to all on the island, which, he noted, assured him of the most accurate information, each informant aware that his information would be checked by a neighbour. In a lengthy appendix to "Un Siècle et Demi de Contact Culturels à Tanna", GUIART (1956) listed who had customary rights and privileges for the entire island. This included all the *yeremwanu* [masters of the land] and *yani nengoo* [voices of the canoe][1], all those with the right to feast on the head of the turtle, or supervise the cooking of the smooth pig. It named those who could preside at the preparation of *nekawa topunga* [a particularly potent variety of *Piper methysticum* from which kava is prepared] or practise magic, and so on. A total of more than 1,100 "dignitaries" out of a total adult male population just under 1,800, with each dignitary's standing determined in relation to the presence and privileges of other dignitaries, whose status in turn was similarly in constant flux. There was little,

1 There are five languages on Tanna, and the dignitary known as the "voice of the canoe" is referred to in this article variously as *yani nengoo*, *yani nengau* and (reflecting the Polynesian influence at Port Resolution) *yani en dete*, and the "master of the land" as *yeremwanu* and *yeremwanang*, depending on where the information was obtained. GUIART's text is in French; the English translations "voice of the canoe" and "master of the land" are mine.

GUIART concluded, that an outsider would recognise as a well-defined social system. However, from the Tannese perspective there was what GUIART recognised as a great sociological unity binding the islanders together, if not at the political then certainly at the ceremonial level. [15]

Written in the language of his informants—representing the five languages on Tanna—the *Inventaire sociologique* is a meticulous and comprehensive record of Tannese men's rights and privileges. It was a lodestar, not only for me but also for the Tannese keen to have *kastom* recorded and acknowledged. Whenever I asked a question about the names I had found in the archives, the reply would almost invariably run along the following lines:

> *Supos yo wantem save samting blong kastom blong Tanna, yu mas go long offis blong Franis District Agent. Mister Kia em I bin cam long Tanna long taim finis: em I ritem olgeta samting long buk blong em. Buk I stap long offis blong Franis* [If you want to know something about Tannese customs, you should go to the French District Agent's office. Mister Guiart he came to Tanna a long time ago and wrote down everything in his book, which you'll find in the French office]. [16]

GUIART recorded that it took him almost two months to discover which questions to ask and how to ask them. His painstaking efforts saved me considerable time in establishing a meaningful point of contact with the Tannese in my initial weeks on the island. So too did his comment on how drinking kava—a powerful narcotic prepared from the roots of *Piper mesthysticum*—won him an immediate acceptance. Arriving on Tanna just after a period of heavy-handed colonial repression of "neo-paganism", GUIART had found that his presence and his constant questioning aroused an understandable fear that the information could be used as a pretext for more repression. However, the initial distrust and hostility evaporated after several bouts of kava drinking, a practice frowned upon by the administration and forbidden outright by the mission. Given its preparation—chewed by strangers before mixing with water and drunk—GUIART recounted how drinking it was a formidable challenge for a doctor's son brought up with a phobia about germs. But it is in the *yimwayim*, the kava-drinking sites passed down from time immemorial, that Tannese men conduct their serious business, and drinking with them during the nightly ritual conveyed to the Tannese GUIART's preparedness to challenge colonial and mission preconceptions and engage them on their own terms. [17]

On Tanna, I set out to emulate GUIART. As GUIART had found, drinking kava facilitated acceptance and interaction with the Tannese. For me, it also provided a sense of connectedness and intimacy that compensated for the isolation and loneliness I experienced living by myself in a secluded tourist hut on the west coast, waiting for official permission to commence my research on the other side of the island. On weekdays, I could walk the three kilometres into Lenakel and wander the shelves behind the counter in the trade store run by an Australian expatriate—a privilege that didn't extend to the Tannese—or check out the price (in pre-decimal shillings) of the taro, bananas and island cabbage at the roadside women's market. Then I would continue up the hill to the administrative centre of

Isangel to check for mail and quiz the British District Agent (BDA) on when he expected word would come through from the British Residency permitting me to proceed to the east coast to start my fieldwork. I could also talk with Abel, the tourist bungalows' caretaker from the nearby Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) village of Bethel. Abel would take the time to explain in *bislama* with the aid of elaborate maps and diagrams he drew in the sand the complex rights and privileges associated with the cooking of the turtle, or the magic to keep sharks at bay, or how love potions and evil spells worked. He himself, he pronounced with obvious pride, had the right to collect the wood for the cooking of the turtle. It was through Abel that I was introduced to kava. Being SDA, he did not himself drink kava, but on my third day at the bungalows he arranged for one of his sons to take me to the local *yimwayim* to try it. [18]

According to my field notes, it was on Monday May 26, 1975, in the jungle just above the bungalows, that I had my first shell of kava, chewed by one of Abel's sons. And my second. And my third. After the first shell, Abel's son and the other men shared *nufunu*—Tannese canapés—with me: small baked yams, taro, shellfish baked on the edge of the fire. By the third shell, the kava was starting to talk to me, as the Tannese say. Under the narcotic's influence, I lost all sense of time passing. I could barely speak, my arms and legs would not do what I told them. The campfire mesmerized me, until suddenly hands on my shoulders jerked me backwards just as I was starting to topple into the flames. That gave rise to good-humoured chuckles and knowing nods from the experienced kava drinkers. Abel's son and one of the other men half carried me back to my bungalow on a bush track I couldn't see. There, between frequent visits to the lavatory, I lay on my back drifting in and out of a drug-induced sleep, head spinning and stomach churning, the woven grass walls of the bungalow pushing in on me, with someone, or something—I imagined a *yarmus*, or ghost—breathing heavily outside the hut. [19]

Next morning, I discovered it was not a *yarmus* that had terrified me, but a stray horse scratching its rump against the thatch. The hangover was bad, but after trudging with blurred vision and aching head into Lenakel to buy cigarettes to share and a packet of Sao biscuits to contribute to the *nufunu*, I went back for more. Around 3 o'clock, Abel's son collected me to walk up to the *yimwayim*. While the kava was being chewed, the men answered my questions in *Bislama* about marriage arrangements, schooling, SDA life, and how many *yani nengoo* [GUIART's "voices of the canoe" (1956, pp.86-90)] there were on the island. They volunteered that they were all *Koyomera* whereas I'd find that everyone at Port Resolution belonged to the *Numrukwen* moiety. Sometime after 5 o'clock, I drank kava. Just one shell. The effect was even stronger than the previous night, and I wondered if someone had added something—special bark or crushed seeds—to enhance the effect. The men brought out Tanna food for me to try, more substantial than the usual *nufunu* offering: *laplap* (savoury "pudding" cooked in an earth oven) wrapped in banana leaves, island cabbage in coconut cream, a plate of flying fox, delivered hot by young boys from the nearby village. I ate a bit, but was starting to feel sick from the kava. When one of the men announced he was returning to his village, I gladly departed with him, holding onto him all the way

down to the bungalow, with him supporting me whenever I had to lean to the side to vomit. [20]

More than forty-five years later, I continue to associate those moments of bravado of a 26-year-old with what is distinctive and unique about Tanna. The experience of connectedness and solidarity. The intimacy of huddling together for warmth around the campfire. The feeling of taking leave of the everyday world as the kava starts weaving its spell and of entering the world of the ancestors buried on the edge of the *yimwayim.* The whispered conversation as the kava takes hold and amplifies every sound. The overwhelming sensation of losing control and just letting go, allowing the kava to talk. These are the well-documented narcotic effects of *Piper methysticum*. For me back then it was more than that. It was crossing the beaches of the mind. I was stepping out of one world and entering another. I was able to do this, I think, because in many ways (like many ethnographers) I was already occupying a liminal, in-between space that disposed me to explore what was on the other side of the beach. So too, I suspect, was David KAUKARE. [21]

4. Encountering David KAUKARE

The BDA's driver drove me from Lenakel to White Sands on May 29 to work through the records at the mission house before moving south to Port Resolution. The BDA had made arrangements for me to stay at Port Resolution with "old man Miaki"—where "making arrangements" amounted to the colonial official telling the old man that a young researcher from Australia would be staying with him and that he had to look after him. [22]

It was not my first contact with the missionary, Ken CALVERT. Ten days before, I had been with his wife Anne and their four boys on the plane from Nouméa to Port Vila, when we had to turn back because of high crosswinds at Port Vila. We stayed the night in the unexpected luxury of the Le Lagon resort, where Anne spoke at length about her experience of Tanna. When we arrived at Port Vila the next morning she introduced me to Ken, waiting at the airfield. He offered to let me stay with them for a week or two at White Sands to go through the mission records. He was not exactly welcoming and in later comments made it clear that he did not approve of "spongers" coming to Tanna expecting to be put up. He was less prickly when we met at White Sands, inviting me to join him for lunch with a visiting ANU linguist and someone from the Condominium Survey team, and telling me I could sleep and cook my meals on a small gas in the small bungalow at the back of the mission house. A scientist by training and a Presbyterian minister by calling, his attitude towards *kastom* was ambivalent. Like the earlier missionary GRAY, he acknowledged that things occur on Tanna that seem to defy scientific explanation—like when his son Andrew was struck down by blinding headaches until a visiting *kleva* [clairvoyant] told him to get rid of a "magic stone" resting on a sideboard, after which the headaches "miraculously" stopped. Or when, the previous August, following an extended period of drought, one of the church elders had prevailed on him to pay a local "rain-maker" to bring rain, after which there were two "record-breaking" downpours. [23]

The next morning, I walked to the village of Ipekel at Sulphur Bay, the "headquarters" of John Frum, the so-called cargo cult movement, to meet with the renowned John Frum leader *jif* [chief] Meles. It was an uncomfortable meeting. Old Meles talked in riddles to the delight of the surrounding crowd but befuddling for me, as I suspect he intended. In answer to one of my questions, Meles indicated that he thought Miaki would have no objection to my staying *near* (pointedly, perhaps, not *with*) him at Port Resolution. Walking back to the mission house meant passing the adjoining primary school, Petros ("the rock of the church"), the old mission school now part of the British education system. It was lunchtime. Leaning against the school notice board was a Tanna man a few years older than I was. He was smoking hand-rolled bush tobacco. He introduced himself as the schoolteacher, David KAUKARE. I did not need to introduce myself. He seemed to know everything about me: my name, why I was on Tanna, my sleeping arrangements behind the mission house, and that I had tried kava over at Lenakel. He knew that I had just been to talk with Meles—even what had transpired. He pressed me on what he did not yet know. Did I have a wife? Children? Was I brought up a Christian? What parts of the world had I visited? Did I know how to ride a horse? Did I have sheep? I guessed that knowing the answers to these questions would give him knowledge that other Tannese did not have—and while it is true everywhere that knowledge is power, this was especially the case on Tanna. [24]

We yarned for the next hour. David told me about how his father was a *yeremwanang*, or *jif*, and his father before him. How his father had died when he was young, and that he, David, had inherited no privileges. How his great-grandfather, the legendary warrior KAUKARE, was the first Christian convert on Tanna. Years later I learnt that David's famous ancestor had fled from the west side of the island in the second half of the nineteenth century, a time of widespread civil war on Tanna, more deadly than in the past because of the firearms that were traded for copra or brought back from Queensland. It was a time of mass movements of people seeking refuge with traditional allies, or with groups that belonged to the same *Numrikwen* or *Koyomera* moiety, and in the east KAUKARE joined forces with Yaukilipi and Ringiau, the two "voices of the canoe" for the village of Yanemwakel, to fight against enemies who were trying to wipe them out. He saved them. In return, they gave him land at White Sands so that he would stay on. Kaukare not only stayed. Attaching his star to the rising Presbyterian ascendancy, he cut his ancient ties with his birthplace and positioned himself as *the* leader on the east side of the island in the mission-inspired Tanna Law regime. He collected all his family's and community's magic stones, the *kapiel*—the bedrock of magical and cosmic powers (BONNEMAISON, 1985), the tangible link with the supernatural realm and the basis for rights and privileges—and paddled them out beyond the reef, where he emptied them over the side of the canoe. Even the name of the new village he founded, Yarkei, signified turning away from ancestral tradition: "Yarkei"—"R K", the initials for "Righteous Knowledge". Yarkei became the epicentre of the Presbyterian Mission at White Sands, with the KAUKARE family the anchor of the regime. I did not know it at the time—and David only ever hinted at it later—but it was common knowledge that the KAUKARE pre-eminence was a recent invention, and one can

imagine on an island where such a high premium is placed on ancestral connection based on possession of *kapiel*, the destabilising impact on the psyche of KAUKARE's descendants. [25]

Like the KAUKAREs before him, David was a church leader, who had grown up in the shadow of the expatriate missionary, for whom his mother worked as a "house-girl" after David's father died. The church at that time was fiercely anti-*kastom* and, as a KAUKARE, it was David's duty to prosecute that position. After primary schooling on Tanna and junior secondary schooling on Efate, he went on to the Presbyterian Teacher Training Institute located at Tangoa off the south coast of Espiritu Santo in the north of the archipelago. After that, as a teacher in the Presbyterian-British system, he was moved from island to island, meeting his future wife Marnah while teaching on Emau in the central Shepherds group. [26]

These circumstances would have further separated him from the *kastom* world of Tanna, and while he identified as "man-Tanna", the identification would have been refracted through a "modern", Europeanized lens. Like many other teachers in the British system, he became active in the fledgling National Party, which was pushing for Independence in the 1970s. For much of our hour-long meeting David talked party politics. Mainly positive things about the National Party, but also negative things about the Francophone UCNH and MAN parties and Jimmy STEVEN's Nagriamel. Knowing I had just returned from meeting Meles at Sulphur Bay, he recounted how he and other National Party people had gone down to the John Frum stronghold to get the people to fill in registration cards for the upcoming September elections, and how the people had refused, saying they did not support the National Party, though later, after the French donated a new truck to the community, all the cards were filled in. [27]

I suspect now that David was anticipating how other Tannese could give me less flattering accounts of him and his politics, such as how, in the lead-up to the 1975 elections for the Representative Assembly, he had drawn a poster of the *yani nengoo [voice of the canoe]* at the village of Yanemwakel with a pig's head. It was an "insult to the chiefs", which was neither forgotten nor forgiven within *kastom* circles (BONNEMAISON, 1994, p.271). I learned that much later, not from David, but from other Yarkei villagers, who told me with regret how the repercussions of the insult continued for many years. Looking back now, I am sure it would have been a matter of regret—and perhaps shame—for David as well. He may have had a foot in the world of the European and a modernist perspective on the future of the New Hebrides, but there was no way he could step completely out of the world of man-Tanna, where the landscape itself is made up of signs of a parallel magico-religious universe. Where the sun rises, the rains fall, crops grow, and people fall in and out of love because of the intercession of "magicians" with their *kapiel*—and where even missionaries with a western scientific bent like GRAY and CALVERT found themselves at a loss to account for the power of the dreaded *nuruk* stones. It is clear reflecting back now that David occupied a liminal space between the world of Tanna and the European world, and was searching for a way of reconciling the two. Like me, he was looking to crossing beaches of the mind. [28]

We arranged to meet when school finished at 3 o'clock and go and buy *nekawa*, the root for making kava, from a nearby village to leave at Yarkei's *yimwayim* for someone to chew while we went to the village trade store to purchase something for *nufunu*. Until very recently, the resident European missionary had opposed the drinking of kava as pagan custom, and Yarkei's *yimwayim* was known simply as "Ekasukei"—referring to the aerial roots of the banyan tree—a natural feature devoid of cultural meaning. Any village men wanting to drink kava as part of the island-wide post-war resurgence of *kastom* had to go to others' *yimwayim*, such as Itou in the neighbouring village of Ipekangien. The kava-drinkers at Itou included not only young men from Yarkei but also Presbyterians from other parts of Tanna who came to worship each weekend at the mission. They would arrive on Saturday, the men would drink kava, stay overnight, and go with their wives to church on Sunday. Making their way back through the bush from Ipekangien, in the dark and inebriated, some would stumble, injuring themselves, and the senior Presbyterian elder Semu—not himself a kava-drinker but ever the pragmatist—declared that it would be better to have their own *yimwayim* at Yarkei. They cleared Ekasukei and renamed it "Exzuki", the name of the tribe on west Tanna whence the founding KAUKARE had fled a century before. The process of reclaiming their own *yimwayim* and reconnecting it with a more ancient social and symbolic realm had only commenced a couple of years before my first fieldwork visit in 1975. At that time, I had no idea of this history. For me, Exzuki was simply the place where I could go to get drunk on kava and share stories with the men. [29]

Around 4 o'clock, we returned to the *yimwayim*, where the boys were busy chewing and talking excitably through full mouths. Tonight would be a special occasion. Many men would be there. David was bringing someone who had stories to tell about Tanna from *taim bifo* [time before]. There would be lots of kava and plenty of *nufunu*. David had said all he needed to say on politics. His talk now, on the *yimwayim*, to an audience that would have included Tannese not favourably disposed to David's National Party, was all about *kastom*. He explained the different roles of the *yeremwanang* and *yani nengau*, the ceremonial routes between villages, the collective food exchanges of the *nekowiar* with is exuberant *toka* and *napen* dances, the use of magic against a neighbour's crops, the practice of *narek* (*nuruk* or "evil magic"), the native names and uses of the surrounding trees and plants, and so on. Around 5 o'clock, it was time to drink kava. As a guest, I was offered one of the first shells, along with David. Back at Lenakel, I had been oblivious to the ritual surrounding the drinking of kava, but here I carefully watched David's every action out of the corner of my eye, doing exactly as he did. Accepting the proffered half-coconut shell in both hands from the boys squeezing the juice through coconut frond, we walked, eyes to the ground, to the edge of the *yimwayim*, with the shell now in one hand. Facing the bush with our backs to the men sitting around the fire, feet apart, leaning forward, we drank the cloudy mixture down in one draught—for me, the only way I could avoid gagging—except for a small portion we left to spit into the bush as an offering to the ancestors, accompanied by a loud whoop. After returning the shell to the boys doing the mixing, we took a swig of water from a length of bamboo to rinse away the kava residue, collected a portion of *nufunu*, and re-joined the men at the fire. David had arranged for Nase KRANGKILI, a

church elder respected for his knowledge of *kastom*, to come to the *yimwayim* to meet me. Nase knew I was headed for Port Resolution, and he quizzed me on what the nineteenth century missionary records had to say about "friends" of the mission like Nowar and "enemies" like Miaki and Nauka. He told me that the present-day Miaki with whom I would be staying was a *yani en dete [the local term for "voice of the canoe"]*, that Nowar was also a *yani en dete* who could eat the head of the turtle, and that Nauka possessed the magic stones for all fruits. The next day, he announced, I would visit him at his place to continue our talking. [30]

David took me back to his place for tea. Not his thatched hut in the village, constructed in the classic beehive shape I recognised from William WOOLLETT's 1777 engraving based on William HODGE's 1774 drawing, "View in the Island of Tanna" (COOK, 1777, Plate XXIX), but the two-roomed teacher's house with cement sheeting walls and corrugated iron roof on the school grounds. There I met his family—his wife Marnah and his young children: Kalsale, Charlie and Linet. Marnah and the children were painfully shy and avoided all eye-contact. David was embarrassed that he had no table or chair, and no meat—just boiled yam and taro. Marnah was struck dumb with confusion and fear. We sat on the concrete floor strewn with used woven grass mats and ate in awkward silence. I was probably the first European they had had in their home, and crossing that beach was an act of courage on David's part, and a painful experience for the rest of his family. Given the colonial set-up and the rigid expectations on maintaining distance with the "natives", I too was crossing a beach where, under the numbing effect of the kava, I allowed myself to embrace and to be embraced by those on the other side. [31]

5. Fieldwork at Port Resolution

When I headed south to Port Resolution some days later, my reputation as a kava-drinker with stories to tell about Tanna that stretched back to Captain James COOK preceded me. It was at "Port", as the Tannese refer to the harbour and its surrounds, that COOK had ushered in Tanna's connection with Europe back in 1774. It was here that the first traders and missionaries had settled. And it was from here that visiting British and French gunboats launched retaliatory strikes against Tannese who had threatened and attacked Europeans in response to the kidnapping of their people, bringing deadly diseases, stealing their property, or otherwise infringing against the rules governing social life. Accordingly, Port Resolution loomed large in the archives and was the natural fieldwork site for collecting stories of those early encounters. [32]

One of the things I had been doing during my archival research was compiling a biographical index of all the Tannese named in the official, mission and trader sources for the period 1774 to 1865 (ADAMS, 1977), and of all the resources I brought to Tanna this generated the most interest. I quickly found myself sought after to share my *stori blong taim bifo* [stories from times past], with daily invitations to drink kava at the local *yimwayim*, where the leading men would interrogate me about what I knew. It did not matter that the stories I shared reflected Eurocentric and often racist phantasies. The Tannese would attach

meaning to them according to a fundamentally different framework, parsing what might have been intended as an inconsequential aside for evidence of who might have an ancestral claim to a piece of land, or the right to exercise certain privileges. The Tannese jealously guard and protectively pass down names within families, and the mere mention of someone I had come across in the records could evoke an almost visceral response on the part of their latter day namesakes. Given the conversational practice of referring to their forefathers in the present tense—so that you might hear (as I did at Port Resolution) someone say, "I was standing right there [pointing] when Captain COOK fired upon my enemies"—the overwhelming and perplexing impression was that the men I was talking to on the *yimwayim* were hearing stories about themselves. [33]

The other resource that excited intense interest around Port were the mission texts written by Rev. George TURNER and printed by the London Missionary Society (LMS) on their press in Samoa in the 1840s. By establishing the local (albeit current day) meaning of the words chosen by the pioneer missionaries to express their core religious concepts, my research aim had been to understand how the Tannese at the time might have perceived their religious message. I had not anticipated the excitement generated by the 10-page Kwamera language catechism and 12-page primer of lessons and hymns written by the missionary Turner in 1842. This was *their* history—and I was bringing it back to them. Old men would wait for me on the tracks leading from Port to the surrounding villages and ask to see copies of "Naresian Tenankerian fei Iehova" [Asking About God's Word] (TURNER, 1845a) and "Naukukua Kamauseni Nankerian" [Language Book] (TURNER, 1845b). They would pass around a pair of spectacles produced from someone's pocket so that everyone could see with their own eyes the words printed on the page. Then would ensue animated discussion on the finer points of the etymology of the words chosen by the early missionaries. There was joy and laughter as someone attempted to put a tune to the hymns, and claps on the back for me when I managed to get my tongue around the vowels and consonants of the words they were teaching me to pronounce. [34]

Witnessing how those words printed in Samoa 130 years before came alive on the tracks leading from Port made me decide to write my PhD the way I did. Hearing how the stories told on the *yimwayim* subverted and transformed the European understanding according to a profoundly different worldview led me to a case study of the double-sided nature of European-Islander encounters. Today I look back on that fieldwork at Port Resolution as the highlight of my career as an ethnographic researcher. [35]

It did not start that way. The BDA had gone down to Port Resolution to announce that "old man Miaki" would be responsible for me, and that there would be consequences if he did not look after me properly. It was an instruction, not a request. At White Sands I was approached by a young man named Freeman—a *yeremwanu*, or *jif* he proudly declared—who had been appointed to take me to Port Resolution and introduce me to his *kaha* [grandfather] Miaki. David was visibly irritated that he would not be the one taking me to Port and was openly dismissive of Freeman. Though we parted on friendly terms, with my promising to

return to White Sands and this time sleep at his teacher's house rather than the mission bungalow, I was made to feel that I was betraying our friendship. I spent that night at Freeman's village Samaria. Next morning, we rose before sunrise and, accompanied by a gaggle of boys and youths with nothing better to do, made our way over the Yanekahi hills down to Port. [36]

Miaki's reception was cool. He avoided eye contact and directed all his comments, in language, to Freeman, who was clearly uncomfortable, looking around blankly and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Freeman left as soon as he could, leaving me, the unwelcome guest, alone with the unwilling host. I felt trapped by the awkwardness. Sitting on a log with nothing to do, my attempts to have a conversation in *Bislama* were met with silence. Stony silence. Miaki went about his business, which I gathered was preparing food in the cookhouse. I took out notes from my backpack and pretended to read, the words lost in a haze of self-doubt and growing feeling of dread at the prospect of this being my base for the next weeks and months. I retrieved from my pack a small loaf of local bread I had not eaten as I intended at Samaria because Freeman's sister had prepared a meal of chicken and "Tanna soup", the ubiquitous standby containing whatever was available from the garden. The bread by now was teeming with small black ants, which raced up my arms. Without giving it a further thought, I tossed it into the bush. Miaki immediately scurried to pick it up and, seating himself on a log opposite mine, spent the next twenty minutes painstakingly picking out the ants, saying nothing and not looking up. Later that afternoon he served up the bread on a tin plate, as part of the Tanna soup. [37]

Things did not improve. As dusk fell and the still unspeaking Miaki cleared away the plate and the spoon, I had come to a decision. A PhD was not worth feeling this miserable. Looking directly at him and addressing him in English, I apologised for having landed on him the way I had. I had no idea, I explained, that the BDA would just assign me to someone and expect him to look after me without clearing it with the person first. This was wrong, I said. I did not mean to impose and to be a burden. I could see that the arrangement was not going to work, and therefore I had decided to leave the following morning and go back to Australia, where my wife was waiting for me. "I know you probably won't understand what I am telling you, Miaki", I concluded, "but tomorrow I will be gone." The old man looked over and made eye contact for the first time. Holding my gaze, tears welling up and starting to trickle down his face, he spoke in carefully measured English: "Oh master [mister], I am so sorry. I did not want to make you feel this way. You have to understand. I am an old man. My son has died and it is left to me to bring up his two daughters. My wife has died. I have no one to do my cooking. I have no meat to feed you, only island cabbage and taro and the bread you brought. I don't have a table or a chair that you Europeans sit in. I don't even have a fork for you. I feel ashamed. Please do not leave." By now, tears were running down both our faces. [38]

In quavering voice, Miaki went on to recount the terrible wrong done to him by the missionary Charles BELL thirty-five years before. It was the beginning of the island-wide rediscovery of *kastom* after half a century of harsh mission repression

of so-called heathenism, including total prohibition of kava—which had become the touchstone for church adherence. In 1940, a Presbyterian elder and teacher of twenty years standing, Miaki took his first tentative steps towards personally reconciling Christianity and *kastom*, by going to church after drinking kava the night before. The missionary stood in the doorway barring his entry, and dismissed him with the sneer that he "smelt worse than a pig". The public humiliation was the end of Miaki's association with the mission. He toyed with John Frum and the Seventh Day Adventists for some years, he told me, but it did not last. Now an old man living a lonely life looking after his two orphaned granddaughters and waiting for nature to reclaim his dead son's closed-up hut, he would sit in his own hut and read his Bible. Choking up, he talked about how he still followed God and Jesus—how he was ready for Judgement when it comes. But he could never forgive BELL. He told me how alone he now felt, and how "uplifting"—his word—it was to have company and the opportunity to talk to someone. Perhaps for the first time, Miaki was telling a European about how Europeans treat the Tannese—and how one European in particular had treated him. Not with any bitterness towards me—more a gift to a young naïve outsider struggling to understand the meaning that European encounters held for the Tannese. [39]

It was a cathartic moment, and acted as a fillip for my research. It gave added moral purpose to what I was doing on the island: to document how Europeans had treated the Tannese, from the point of view of the Tannese. I stayed on with Miaki for some weeks at Port Resolution. I visited the surrounding villages to share stories—and of course drink kava—with the old men, I located graves and foundation stones of nineteenth century missionary dwellings, and I systematically set out to identify places and people referred to in the historical records. I made expeditions south to Kwamera, where a mission station had been established in the 1850s, and north to White Sands to visit David and purchase supplies to share with Miaki. The fieldwork was highly productive. But I missed home and ached for Robyn, and was determined to gather what I needed to complete my thesis as quickly as possible. [40]

Taking leave of Miaki was hard, for both of us. Together we had crossed a beach and experienced how behind the crude categories of "European", "Tannese", "researcher", "research subject", are real people, with the loves and hates, doubts and certainties, ambiguities and contradictions, that real people have. When I returned to Tanna after completing my PhD (ADAMS, 1977), Miaki was dying. He was lying on the floor of his hut, drifting in and out of consciousness under the watch of one of his daughters. It is unlikely that his rheumy eyes gazing blankly ahead recognised me. I would like to think, though, that he might have registered that his young naïve guest had returned to pay respects to a man who had had a profound effect on his life. [41]

Back in White Sands, I met up with David. His first pointed remark was that I was not wearing the knife on my belt. I had given it to Freeman, I explained, to thank him for taking me down to Port. It was not news to David, who did not need to say anything. His message was clear: on Tanna, I should work through him. Only

him. He would always be there to help me, to answer my questions, introduce me to the men I needed to meet, be my guide and friend—but I had to work through him. It is what in the anthropological literature is described as a classic manoeuvre by an aspiring "bigman" to assume a controlling middleman position. That night David and I went to the *yimwayim* together to drink kava. I shared meals with his family and slept on his floor. By the time I left a couple of days later, we had reached an implicit agreement to maintain our connection. [42]

6. Back Home in Melbourne

When I returned to Melbourne, I wrote the first of many letters to David. His reply was immediate. He hinted at how our encounter had challenged his preconceptions: "Anyway Ron", he wrote,

> "since you left us we were very sorry that such a man like you could accept any food that New Hebrideans could offer him. I was wondering whether you will write to me … I was glad when I got your letter. My wife and children send their greetings to you and the lady you live with and also to your family. How about kava, did you tell your wife that you tested [tasted] kava?" [43]

Our correspondence continued on a regular basis for the next thirty years. Every year or so I would visit Tanna for a fortnight, always staying with the KAUKAREs in Yarkei. A few times, my family came with me. One Christmas, David came and stayed with us in Melbourne. He visited my university, where he was treated royally by an accommodating vice-chancellor, who presented him with an old Footscray Institute of Technology medallion. It was a trophy David would proudly display back on Tanna. In 2002, our paths crossed in the PNG highlands, where I was giving a workshop and David was attending a Bible translators' course. And every couple of months I would try to speak with him on the telephone—not a straightforward process, which involved calling the public telephone next to the White Sands soccer field and asking whoever picked up if they could go down to Yarkei and let David KAUKARE know that his friend Ron would call back in 20 minutes. Often the connection was down because of the weather, or the person who picked up was not prepared to walk the 500 metres to the village, or David was not there. More than the telephone calls, it was the letters we wrote each other that sustained and defined our relationship, and reinforced the unspoken pact we had made back in 1975. [44]

The letters—upwards of 120 of them to 2005, tens of thousands of words—chronicle how David was looking ahead to our connection outliving us through our children, already hinted at in that first letter I received after returning home in 1975. To that end, in the mid-1980s, he assigned his eldest son Charlie, then 15 or 16, to take on the responsibility for looking after me on Tanna. Charlie had always been the one to climb coconut and mango trees, spear crayfish and shoot flying foxes for the "*kaikai blong Ron*" [the food that Ron liked]. Now he also chewed my kava—together with his father's—at the *yimwayim*, and later, after his father died, he would take the first shell with me. I began to sleep in Charlie's hut, reflecting the Tanna-wide pattern of the close bond between a boy and his

uncles. Typically, it was between a boy and his maternal uncles, but with Marnah's brothers on Emau and with me adopted as the *brata blong David* [David's brother], I was made an "honorary" uncle—a neat example of the Tannese capacity to adapt *kastom* to changing circumstances. My association with David continued to be central, but more and more Charlie facilitated my research. With David teaching, not only at Yarkei but also at surrounding villages and even neighbouring islands, it made sense for the ever resourceful and obliging Charlie—living in the village and unattached—to arrange the meetings with people I wanted to interview, obtain the permission of landowners for me to cross their land, and accompany me around the island. When he learned to drive, he would borrow a truck to take me wherever I wanted to go, insisting that, befitting my status, I sit up front with him in the cabin. Looking back, I would have to say that David's strategy worked: nowadays when I go to Tanna my son Ben always comes with me. Strong, and like Charlie a boxer and spear gun diver, a climber of trees, Ben has now established his own connections and reputation on Tanna. [45]

7. Conclusion

In the letter I received from Albert on Easter Tuesday 2006 informing me of his father's passing, he had written: "Ron even though David has gone, we still believe that the long friendship that you two had established will linger on forever. Your home is still here, on Tanna." For getting on to fifty years the friendship has served me well as a researcher, giving me unparalleled access to the Tannese, notwithstanding the anti-KAUKARE sentiment of a few who will try to extract information that might reflect poorly on the family. It has also served me well as a person. Being embraced by David and in turn Charlie and all the rest of the KAUKAREs, being accepted by the people of Yarkei and the surrounding villages as *brata blong David* [David's brother], *papa blong pikinini blong em* [father to his children], and *kaha* [grandfather] to their children, has satisfied the deep human need we all have to belong. Charlie christened his only son, David's grandson, "Ron Adams KAUKARE". A gesture of respect and affection and love, it was at the same time a shrewd move, locking me into a continuing reciprocal relationship—and I am sure Charlie would hope, if not expect, that if Ben has a son he would name him "David Kaukare ADAMS". [46]

My former PhD student Greg GOW called the second chapter of his PhD thesis on Oromo identity in Melbourne (1999) "What has home got to do with it? Being ethnographer and becoming-person". The phrase "being ethnographer and becoming person" captures well my experience of Tanna. The designations *brata blong David*, *papa blong pikinini blong em* and *kaha* or elder to the children of Yarkei all point to my adoption into a family and a village—to my becoming person—which can be traced back to that first fieldtrip and my initial contact with David. Today, when I reflect on what might have been if David's heart had not given out on the morning of December 6, 2005, I wonder if we would have grown old together, as we so often fantasised, sharing stories in the fading light and simply enjoying each other's company before making our way to the *yimwayim* for our customary kava. I wonder whether the plans we hatched for village-based

tourism to support us in retirement would have amounted to anything. Whether the contact we made with the people of Loubilbil in the far north-west would have seen pilgrims coming to admire the crescent-shaped and circular rocks in the cliff that the locals believe guided the wise men to Bethlehem. Whether they would have marvelled at the font-shaped coral on the beach where John the Baptist is supposed the have baptised the baby Jesus, and the bat-filled cave where the body of Jesus was placed after the crucifixion, the large boulder at the entrance pushed to one side evidence of his resurrection. I wonder whether our joint expedition—years in the planning—to discover the final resting place of Noah's ark north of Port Resolution would have presaged tourists coming to that isolated part of the island. Since David's death, I have brought groups of university students to Tanna. They give English lessons in the local schools and show the children how to record and transcribe *kastom* stories from their elders, which the next study group brings back as illustrated books for the school library. Hosted by families in Yarkei, eating local food and bathing in the warm springs down on the beach, and struggling to master *Bislama*, the students experience life in a village. Trekking down to Port and listening to the stories about Captain COOK, they begin to understand the double-sided nature of the history of Tanna (for an example, see ADAMS, 1992). Climbing the volcano, visiting Sulphur Bay on a Friday night to dance to the John Frum string bands, learning how to make fire without matches and cook food without pots, drinking kava at the *yimwayim* (for the male students) or learning how to weave mats in the village (for the females), they experience the call of Tanna. Like I did decades before. Some have made return visits to the island, bringing friends and family—small steps along the way of realising David's and my vision for Tanna's future. [47]

The cultural geographer Joël BONNEMAISON (1984) observed that travel for the Tannese was never the neutral movement from one place to another, as it is for Europeans. It is always "a journey in the cultural sense of the word—an experience imbued with meaning and ritual, inherent in the action of movement and sanctioned beyond the territory of identity, concluding with an encounter" (p.117). The man who risked a journey beyond the sanctioned limits, or along unfamiliar paths, was an explorer—facing many dangers, but if successful in creating a new connection also winning great prestige and influence. In the thirty years following that first fieldtrip in 1975, David KAUKARE and I risked a journey beyond the sanctioned limits. Together we explored unfamiliar paths, and created new connections that promise to outlive us both. It was a gamble on David's part, and on mine. And it paid off. [48]

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