CULTURE CONTACT AND THE JOHN FRUM MOVEMENT ON TANNA (NEW HEBRIDES)

par

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As he is called in the New Hebrides pidgin, Tdan Tannatt has had, since the advent of Captain Cook, on August 6th, 1774, close to two hundred years contact with the white man’s culture. The detailed study of this contact, if not a really revealing one, is nevertheless one of the most interesting chapters of the history of culture contact.

Tama is a volcanic island, mountainous at the north and the south, with rich and densely inhabited tablelands in the middle. The sea approaches are of coral formation on the western coast; of volcanic rock on the eastern coast, which boasts a diminutive and tame volcano. Streams are numerous, but in most cases, dry up before getting very far and rarely come down to the sea.

The population actually of 6,956 inhabitants, as far as I,
curiously only one man died a martyr to his faith, a native of the island, Numwanyan of Lenakel, at a much later date, in 1899.

Christianity took thirty years to gain something of a foothold on the island. During these thirty years missionaries came in and out, feeling more or less all the time that their lives were in
traders was recognised as a failure. In any case, the evangelical
trader disappeared from the picture at the time of Macmillan’s and
Nicholson’s taking over of the mission work. In a way, their activ-
ity started by a struggle with the ordinary traders for influence
over the native society.

It must be remembered that the first locally written document
of international value referring to Tanna is dated 1875, it being
a letter signed by the European residents, mostly Britishers, asking
for French protection. This letter is a sign of the times. Up to
now the European trader on Tanna plays any card which comes in help-
ful. British traders will represent French firms and British firms
will have locally French agents, any one nationality, that of the
man, or that of the incorporated society will be made use of as the
necessity requires. The only difference to-day is that there remains
next to no quarrel between the traders and the mission, which has long
forgotten its erstwhile commercial temptation.

In reading the published missionary literature and the unpu-
blished official correspondence between the missionaries and the
British side of the New Hebrides administration, and remembering
reasons which were often given by the missionaries to explain the
slowness of their work, one gets the impression that two external
factors were at least partly responsible for the mission policy in
the first years of our century. Presbyterian churches at home were
tired of this hard island, of the so many years of missionary labour
with so very few results to show; as a consequence of this feeling,
funds were coming in lesser amounts; results had now to be shown to
keep up the giving fervour of the mission’s friends and the Tanna
mission had, as a body, the first feeling that in some ways at least
it should try to become self-supporting.

The prudent and seemingly wise attitude of the older mission-
rries was discarded and the Christian conquest of the island was or-
ganized politically. It must be said that the young native Christian
communities, with their tendency to be more intolerant than their
masters, were quite ready for the new policy and put into it much
of the aggressiveness it came to bear.

These Christian groups were made of coastal communities, which
had the only workable anchorages of the island: Port Resolution, White
sands, Waesisi, Lenakel, Kwamera. They were the first to have come
in contact with the white man and now the principal ones to suffer
from the acts of the recruiters, plying their trade at the time for
the benefit of the new settlers on Efate or Espiritu Santo, or the
young mining concerns in New Caledonia. Dissatisfied with the traders
whom they already accused of cheating them, resentful of the women
recruiting activities indulged in mostly by the masters of French
ships, they were ready to lean on the mission, as much to resist Eu-
ropean intruders as to push into political and religious submission
their still heathen neighbours. Moreover, there was a general feeling
that it was time some law and order was established on Tanna to put a stop to the persistent killings of native wars and guarantee the lives and belongings of the European residents. There was at that time no Government to take on the job; the two Resident Commissioners in Vila were still haggling over minor disputes and the Condominium administration had not yet been formally organised. So the missionaries took upon themselves the establishment of law and order; it can be said that they gave the thinking and the guidance, but left their most trusted followers, Brown at Port Resolution, Kourare at White-sands and Loohmae, at Lenakel, more or less at liberty to act according to their own views in the practical carrying out.

This was the time of the so-called Tanna law. The Christian chiefs presided over native courts which enforced an unwritten and strict moral code: no wars, no fighting to settle quarrels, no thieving, no adultery, no drinking of Kava; the use of the customary prostitute and the practising of death-magic were banned. Most of these measures had popular appeal and were agreed to more or less generally. But the outlawing of the prostitute and of Kava drinking inflamed the heathens, who resisted, at times violently, the enforcing of the Court's decisions on these points.
between the missionaries and the traders was replaced by strained relations between Wilkes and Macmillan or Nicholson. In 1915, Wilkes got an Officer's Commission in the Army and a new Agent was sent, Mr. Nicol who was to rule the island until his death in 1944, this time in close co-operation with the Presbyterian mission.

It is evidently impossible in the little time at our disposal to go through all the incidents, some at high level, between Paris and London, which filled up the years of the "Tanna Law" and the first years of the direct Condominium administration. One important development has nevertheless to be mentioned; in 1914, the campaign of the Presbyterian mission to persuade the natives to let their land be surveyed and put in the trust of the Mission. There had been talk of partition of the New Hebrides. Native land going over to the Mission would be a valuable asset in partition discussions; in any case, it would help prevent any land grabbing on the part of traders or settlers to come. The land which was taken in trust, not so important as it could have been, so great was the opposition on the native side, is to-day let at a nominal rate (4 shillings per year) to the previous native owners; the lease stipulates that under no circumstances could heathen practices be held on trust land.

This direct interest in land matters was another facet of the activities of the mission. Internecine wars had left a legacy of land quarrels. Macmillan decided that the situation should be cleared and definitely so; his stated policy, for which he got official approval, was recognition of land occupation, that is land conquest in some cases, as it stood at the time of the Mission's coming. This was in contradiction with native custom which does not recognise military conquest but only very temporary occupation; land must be handed back to its traditional owners, against formal presentation of gifts for having looked after it, as a result of negotiations which can last over years. Each of the land troubles settled in his way at the time by Macmillan, and later confirmed by decisions of the District Agent, are still to-day a thorn in everybody's side and particularly the administration's and the Mission's. As a matter of fact, at Lenakel and Whitesands, the first Christians were in each case conquerors and thus got official backing for the land-grabbing of their own in which they felt they could now indulge, with the unconscious complicity of the Mission.

All this active prosecution of Man Tanna's Christianisation lasted until 1920, when the Missionaries could sit down and consolidate their conquest. Except for a few difficulties about divorces granted by the District Agent Mr. Nicol's administration gave full satisfaction to the Missionaries who did not have more to attend to the preservation of law and order. Adultery was severely punished; the last prostitute was married, and although it had theoretical legal recognition, polygamy was banned from the island. The Mission's land policy was sustained and Nicol went on with their policy of
regrouping people in large villages. Mr. Nicol’s time lasted for the best of a quarter of a century, ending with his violent death on the island in 1944. Inasmuch as the administrative reports he sent were few, the greater part of his time seemed to have been a happy one as we say in French "happy people do not have any history". Nevertheless, it ended in a kind of fiasco, with the outbreak in 1940 of the John Frum movement.

The 1940-52 so-called John Frum happenings seemed to have come as a shock, and until now, no one has related them to any previous events. As facts go, there evidently had been signs of the change to come.

It seems that at the height of the Mission’s influence, around 1920, the proportion of Presbyterian converted natives to the heathen was of nearly four to one, about 4,000 against 1,500. The Pagan remnants were scattered in small groups in the north and along the central ridge of the island. Organised opposition to the Church had practically disappeared. Nevertheless, from Nicol’s first years and over nearly two decades, until the mass desertion of May 1941, one could notice signs of growing disaffection towards the Mission. The individual disgruntled people took the habit of going back to Kava drinking which was no more outlawed. Entire local groups quietly got out and stayed out of the Mission. The presence, after 1930 of a French District Agent, jointly responsible with Nicol, gave the native people the assurance that there was little risk left in leaving the Church. Important Christian villages broke up for good.

In 1932, the settling on Tanna of the Seventh Day Adventist Mission, brought the matter to a first climax, whole communities leaving the Presbyterian for the other Mission; in many cases, they were old opponents of the Presbyterians, who had only been converted of late when they thought no other way open to them. In the words of Nicol, "all the trouble-makers went Seventh Day Adventist", that is, all those who had a grudge and saw a hope in following this dynamic, rich and apparently powerful Missionary body.

At the same time, in 1933, the Marist Fathers too, established a Mission Post on Tanna, but with little success.

In 1939, Nicol gives the following numbers for the island as a whole; Presbyterians: 3,381; S.D.A.: 656; Catholics: 72; Heathen: 1,659. At this time, the unrest between the two Missions, Presbyterians and Seventh Day Adventists, had cooled down. At the beginning of 1940, Nicol complains of too much Kava drinking even inside Christian groups. Unhappy war events had resulted in a slump in the price of copra and production was very low. At the end of the year, the District Agent got annoyed with persistent rumours of the existence of a supernatural being, John Frum by name, who, it seems had made wild promises about a golden age to come soon, the preamble of which was the abandonment of Christianity. The drinking of Kava and the shedding of European produced customs, particularly of money, which was to be spent to the last farthing, if not thrown in the sea. It seems
that all this talk had been going on, spreading slowly for at least three years. Nicol's interest in it, once both missionaries and traders had become alarmed, and the subsequent repression brought the affair to a climax. On the 11th May 1941, Nicol being on Aneityum, and it being said that his launch had capsized, nobody was present at the normal Sunday office in the Lenakel Presbyterian Mission Church. The Missionary, then on leave, later found on his return, his flock reduced to seven men. Teachers, elders and ordinary church members had all "gone John Frum", and started drinking Kava on the old ritual grounds. They will never come back.
repress the rising. The punishments however were the less harsh than in the previous instance.

Nothing happened next until 1947 when a few people raided an European store at Whitesands to destroy coloured price labels: a
later came a new vision this time of an unknown being called Sam Nikgru. After her recovery, she did not see him any more, but only heard his voice. She thus got to have the reputation of a clairvoyant, a clever as they say Pidjin: her reputation was enhanced once she had revealed an adultery affair of which no one knew. Her success seem to have started a craze. Nomnae's husband, too, started to have visions of this same Sam Nikgru. Another woman had visions of her dead son. This was normal enough in the native society, but it had been unheard of for a long time. At the end of February 1952, at a name-giving dance at Loonelape'nm, the village of one of the principal assessors of the Island, Nagat, a number of people revealed having had similar visions; one of them being about a person called Jack Navy whose name was, if I not mistaken, taken from a cigarette advertisement. The gist of all this was that warships had come from the land of the dead and were, for the present, staying at the bottom of the sea, They would soon come to the surfaoei, They were evidently the warships of John Prun and the long-awaited day of his glory seemed near. Scouts were sent to the top of a hill and they reported back having seen lights on the sea, The next day everybody, men from eight different tribal groups, went down closer to the sea and awaited the coming warships. They Bi& in the bush by day and reassembled at night, Nobody was to go to buy in the stores except on permission of the elders. It had been said, by an old an, folklore, who had an old reputation of clairvoyance, enhanced by the fact he was from the south of the Tshhd, that the visions were true, that out of the warships would come a man, with long hair following the custom of Tanna, and the body entirely covered with leaves of nesex, odoriferous plant the leaves of which are normally worn in armlets on ceremonial occasions, In February the young men and even children wore such armlets every day and this aroused comment which went to the French and British District Agents The collective expectation lasted for nearly a month and a half; then *he meeting broke down, *nothing having Come and the general fear of administrative action helping the leaders, at first obliged to follow their people, %o disband them now* At the beginning of June everybody had gone back and the situation was calm. It is I&L~Q only that factual denunciations enabled the bistriet Agents to stream. the districts mom %o the south, wild stories on the same theme had circulated, too, and the responsible ones for the rumours were severely punished, On the Whitesands side, the elders of the Sulphur Bay people, only just back home after seven years' exile, were sent back to EPate, for slot having abandoned, if not their convictions, at least for having expresse the now long-cherished myth of John Framin in the terms of The problem, which to-day faces the observer and the admints-
tration, is best given by the double aspect of the affair: thirteen years at least of existence and twelve years of more or less intense and apparently useless administrative repression.

The situation in which the people were placed and the way in which they reacted towards it, can evidently give us the reasons which conditioned the existence of the movement itself.

A hundred years of progressive Christianisation and forty years of direct administrative control had brought to the people very little they considered of value to them, very little to help them in the daily problems of their material life. On one side: suppression of dances and feasts, suppression of the tradition of prostitution, of polygamy, of kava drinking, partially-successful attempts
in ten was claiming chiefly rank\(^{(1)}\). Even if they had recognised the implications of such a state of things, they were bound to make a choice, for the sake of the practicalness of their work. It is a case of a few ambitious individuals recognising the possibilities of the new Christian set up, and of the missionaries leaning too heavily on their first converts, and being incapable of remaining neutral in the former's very secular quarrels.

Then came the administration and native political structure it superimposed upon the traditional one, not without success.

The fault of the chosen solution was that theoretically, all had to go through the hands of the District Agent, and that the powers of his local native representatives had never been fixed; they were, in fact, only meant to be his assessors at the native tribunal. This organization left the people no other hope of attaining autonomy in their local affairs, then without or against the condominium structure. One could even say that any amount of local autonomy had to be acquired against the Mission whose hierarchical structure: pasters, teachers, elders, nominated and directed by the missionary, was very closely patterned on the local Christian society, as organized inside the villages, modelled by the Mission's and the Administration's influence.

Thus any new step, in the absence of any hope of bettering their material life, had to be directed towards recovering political autonomy at the lowest level. This was almost obtained through the abandonment of the Mission and the breaking up of the Christian villages. The years passed have helped to reorganize, in a traditional way, what had seemed to be at a time an almost anachronous state of affairs.

To-day the Condominium Government is more or less considered as a nuisance, although as an existing fact which must for the present be taken into account. Native leaders are influential and

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\(^{(1)}\) These so called "chiefs" are of two kinds:

- \(\text{véréméré (yèlmalü)}\) who boast the prerogative of carrying, helped by their people, very high plumed head dresses called \(\text{kweriya}\). They are the more numerous and yield very little apparent political power.

- \(\text{yani niko (yani nèngo} = \text{master of the canoe)}\) whose privilege is of speaking on the matter of peace of war. Negotiations pertaining to this vital problem must go through them, and some of these office holders appear to be influential over wide areas.
popular only in as much as they play along with the District Agents, to the best of the interests of their people, that is they strive to reduce in the greatest possible measure the practical role of the European Administrators.

We have just spoken of a reorganization of the native society. After May 1941 this was done with a very traditional bias: the Presbyterian Christian Society with its hierarchy of dignitaries under the control of the missionaries was replaced by the native Melanesian gerontocracy with an insistence on the traditional sets of feasts, dances and pig-killings, where the important people come to the fore, but with very little predominance anywhere of an individual man.

The desertion of the mission came as the crux of a long developing crisis, for which the John Frum myth gave what was considered an answer. Its irrational aspects hides certain facts about it from us. We know "John Frum" or "John Brown", the one who will "broom" the white man out of the Islands, is said to be the reincarnation of the former god, Karapenmun, whose name was invoked in the last century by the enemies of Christianisation.

This gives us the link: the message of John Frum provided for decisions, for acts which were already in the minds of people and for which some had already shown the way. The myth here gave an opportunity for the crystallization of long kept-down feelings, and as far as can be seen, helped towards a positive, if very partial solution.
had only accepted Christianity and European supremacy as a temporary state of things, as a solution to the necessities of change which could any day be reviewed and rejected.

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