

A close-up photograph of a young person, likely a child, in traditional Vanuatu attire. They have red and yellow face paint on their face and are wearing a headdress with white feathers. They are holding a long wooden staff. The background is dark and out of focus.

VANUATU

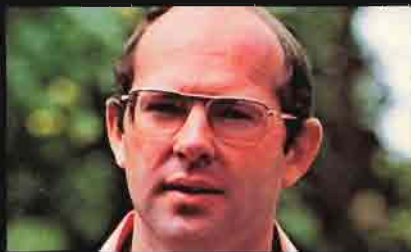
Bernard Hermann Joël Bonnemaïson

LES·EDITIONS·DU·PACIFIQUE



BERNARD HERMANN

Born in Paris in 1941, Bernard began work as a photo journalist with "France-Soir", France's leading newspaper. Then, as a special reporter for the Gamma agency, he travelled extensively throughout the world. In 1971, he discovered Tahiti. Soon after, he began working with Les Editions du Pacifique with his first book, "Tahiti and Its Islands", followed by many other books in the "island" series including Martinique, Guadeloupe, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Haiti, plus books on great cities, including San Francisco and Rio-de-Janeiro.



JOËL BONNEMAISON

Joël Bonnemaïson, born in 1940, is a research geographer with the Office de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique Outre-Mer (O.R.S.T.O.M.) and has been engaged for several years in conducting a study in the archipelago of the New Hebrides. He is the author of several publications, in particular, his "Système de grades et différences régionales dans l'île d'Aoba" (cahiers O.R.S.T.O.M., série Sciences Humaines 1972. Vol. LX No 1) and "Espaces et Paysages agraires dans le nord des Nouvelles-Hébrides" (Journal des Océanistes – septembre 1974).



Vanuatu

Les Editions du Pacifique

422 Thomson Road, Singapore 1129.

© Copyright by **Times Editions**, 1975, 1980, 1986

Typeset in France by Publications Elyseés

Printed in Singapore by Toppan

All rights reserved for all countries.

ISBN: 9971-40-018-9

VANUATU

**Photography Bernard Hermann
Text Joël Bonnemaïson
Translated by William Reed
and Jane Philibert**

Contents

the archipelago of vanuatu

page 5

history

page 11

vanuatu

page 19

port-vila

page 23

the art

page 39

pentecost

page 43

santo

page 63

malakula

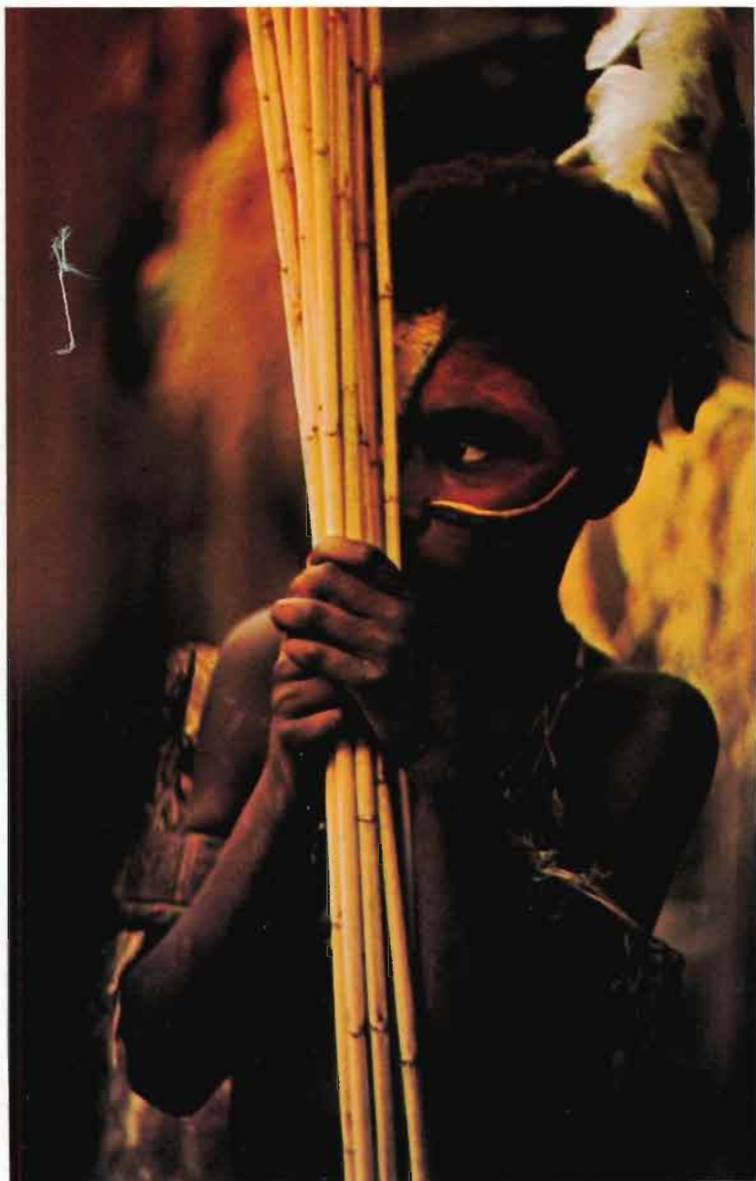
page 73

tanna

page 87

the toka

page 102





*"Volcanic activity, which formed Vanuatu, continues to this day, and during the frequent eruptions, thick clouds of ashes can be seen belching forth from the craters".
(Aubert de la Rüe)*

the archipelago of vanuatu

Lying at the extreme south of the volcanic arc-shaped formation termed Melanesia, the archipelago of Vanuatu is made up of some sixty isles and islets of various dimensions and differing altitudes. The total land area of the archipelago is 13,000 km², with 900 km separating the most extreme points. From the Torres islands in the north to Anatom island in the south, the group forms more or less a "Y" shape with the stem of the Y pointing towards the south.

There are a dozen principal islands: Espiritu Santo, with an area of 3,947 km², Malakula, 2,024 km², Erromango, 975 km², Vaté, 915 km², Ambrym, 615 km². These "large land masses" are surrounded by a chain of much smaller islands, some lying in groups and others being isolated; the smaller islands have the most important population density.

Very few of the archipelagos in the South Pacific have such a complex geological formation as that of Vanuatu. The islands first appeared towards the end of the geological period known as the Tertiary, brought about by the influence of powerful volcanic movements which alternated with periods of sedimentation. Coral platforms were raised

A complex geological formation



"Islands of ashes and coral", the sandy beaches fringed with coconut palms are peaceful, the lagoons calm and transparent. With its extraordinary beauty, Vanuatu has a hundred faces, a hundred masks.

several hundred metres upwards before breaking into a series of gigantic misshapen blocks. This intense volcanic activity caused thick deposits of lava and ashes, which alternate with the calcareous reef formations.

There are no true atolls in Vanuatu, for their jagged and rugged profiles class them as high and mountainous islands. At Espiritu Santo the highest peaks, Pic Santo and Mount Tabwemasana attain, 1,600 and 1,800 metres respectively. Certain isolated cones, such as Mere Lava or Lopévi, rise almost vertically to 900 and 1,447 metre altitudes. Because the slopes are of fairly recent geological formation, alluvial plains and penetration lines are rare. There are some relatively wide and deep rivers on the larger islands, but elsewhere the streams are mostly small creeks, some of which flow only for brief periods following heavy rainfall.

There is a continual process of raising the land mass, for there is still much volcanic activity and quite frequent minor earth tremors.

Active volcanoes

The archipelago boasts three active volcanoes: the Benbow of Ambrym, the Yasür of Tanna and the Lopévi. Several others are semi-active, notably those of Aoba and Gaua. These pour out vapour and smoke, and have sulphur geysers and springs near their craters. Numerous thermal springs are also found on most of Vanuatu's islands, and an undersea volcano has been discovered near the island of Tongoa.

The Lopévi volcano is by far the one which causes the greatest anxiety, for it alternates between periods of calm and of violent eruptions, when it sends forth incandescent balls of fire and streams of lava which sometimes flow right down to the sea. During the last serious eruptions of Lopévi, the villages lying near its foothills had to be urgently evacuated. The island is nowadays uninhabited; a fairly dense forest scarred in places by wide streams of black lava covering the lower slopes of its huge volcano.

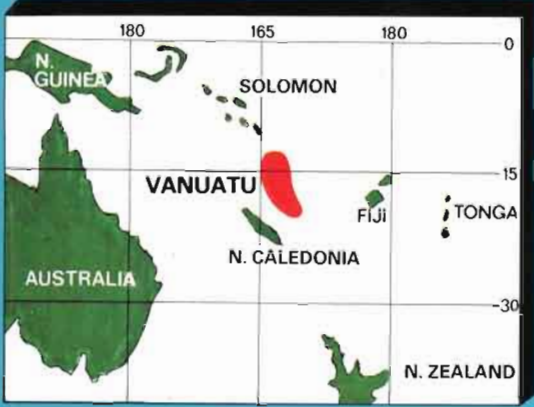
The inhabitants of Vanuatu have become accustomed to these frequent earth tremors – seismological readings show that the entire archipelago is in almost constant movement, but only the more important tremors are actually felt by the local people. There are perhaps two or three of these tremors per month and it is rare that any damage results. In January 1927, however, Port Vila was shaken by violent tremors which caused extensive damage. More recently, in 1965, another major tremor raised the coastline of North Malakula and South Santo by some 30 or 40 centimetres.

Navigation is, of course, quite difficult around and in between these mountainous and jagged islands. Barrier

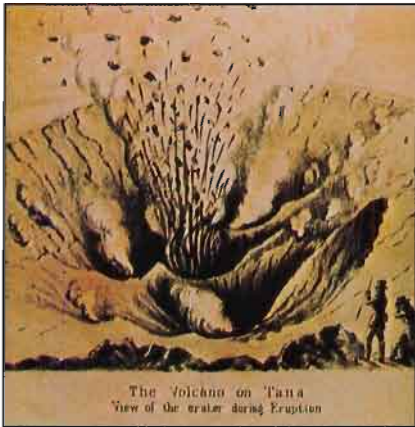
VANUATU



- VOLCANS
- HOTELS



The climate, the fauna and the vegetation



The Volcano on Tanna
View of the crater during Eruption

The crater of Yasür at Tanna is certainly one of the most easily accessible in the world, and one can approach its entrance with practically no risk whatsoever. The famous volcanologist, Haroun Tazieff, planned to make a detailed survey of the volcano, but was prevented by the local tribesmen who consider Yasür as the origin of the universe; a sacred place where their magic stones of wisdom are hidden.

The Lopevi volcano (right) has its slopes covered with streams of lava.

reefs of coral exist in many places, with a shallow and treacherous channel or lagoon between the reef and the shore. Small islets, some resembling immense sandy hats floating in the blue water, are often found in these lagoons.

The climate of the archipelago is hot, humid and wet, and occasionally very uncomfortable, especially in the northernmost islands where the air is saturated with moisture. In the south, however, both the rainfall and temperatures are lower. Average annual temperatures are: 26°C at Santo, 24°C at Port Vila, and 23°C at Tanna – not excessive for tropical islands, particularly as the nights are pleasantly cool.

The hot season, from November to April, is very rainy, while during the southern winter, from May to October, the weather is both cooler and much less humid.

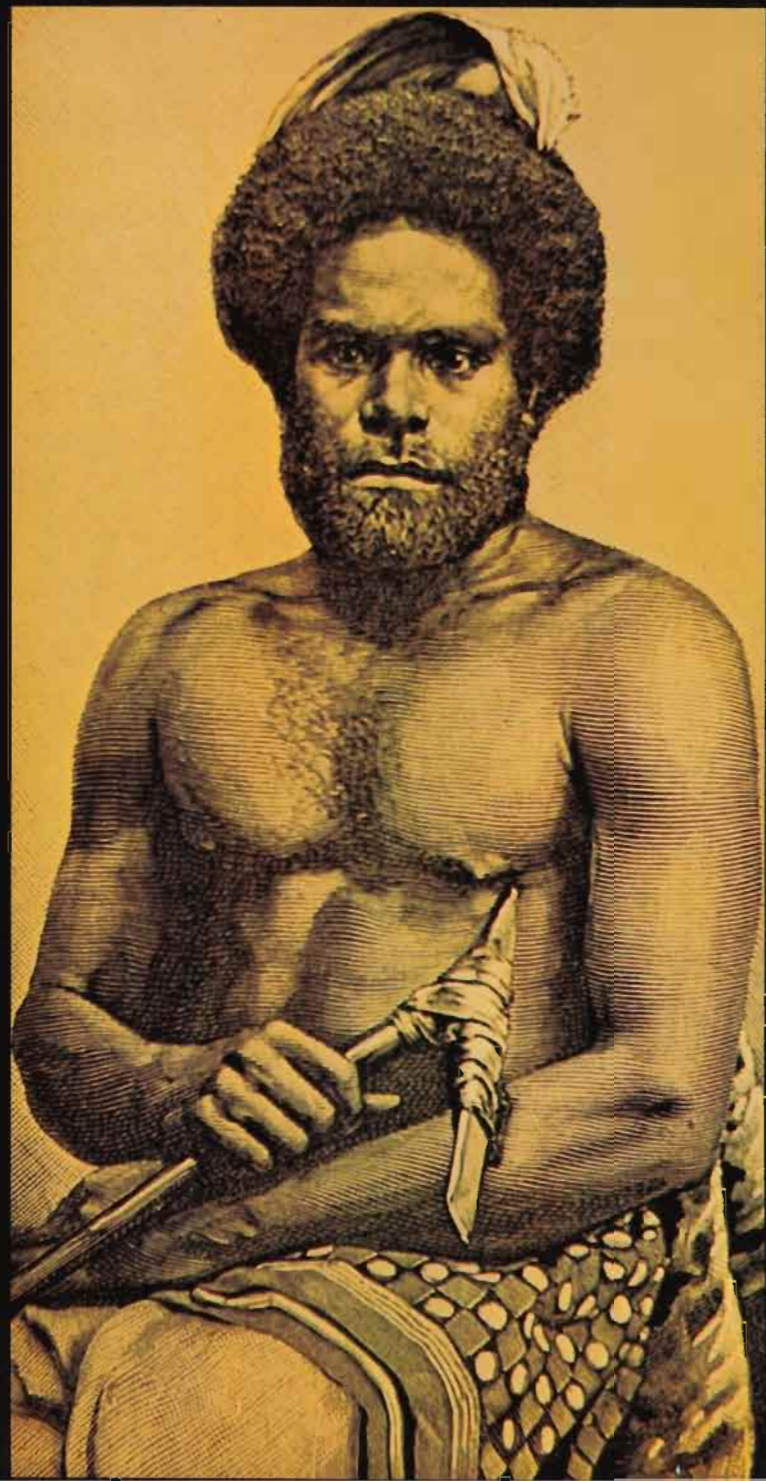
The climate is at its best when the trade winds blow only gently from the south-east. Then the sky is clear and blue and complements the green of the vegetation and the limpid waters of the lagoons. On the other hand, when the trade winds blow strongly, the sky turns grey and a kind of melancholy seems to descend upon the entire archipelago.

The fauna of Vanuatu is relatively poor, except for its many vividly-coloured birds such as the green pigeons and parrots and its numerous lizards. In the Banks islands, one finds a species of crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) which migrates from the Solomon islands. However, perhaps due to the physical conditions in the rivers, it does not reproduce there.

The first explorers often compared Vanuatu's islands to pyramids of greenery seemingly flung haphazardly into the middle of the ocean. However, the luxuriance of the vegetation is much more superficial than it would at first appear. Thus, although the forest seems so very dense when seen from the sea or by air, one can easily walk around it on foot.

Many primary forests have disappeared owing to increased demands for garden land. Small forested areas remain in the interior of Vanuatu's larger islands and on the steep inclined slopes. However excellent soil, due to continuous fertilization by volcanic ash carried by the winds and the hot and humid climate, ensured rapid regrowth. This lushness inspired the admiration of the early Spanish and British explorers: "These islands are true gardens, everything grows", remarked Quiros upon his return to Madrid. The botanists who accompanied Captain Cook collected many plant specimens in a country they described as a wonderland. The beauty and the variety of these islands and their natural fertility are in fact the main geographical characteristics of the archipelago.





history

It was probably some 4,000 years ago that the Melanesians' earliest ancestors, who knew how to build canoes and practiced horticulture, began slowly migrating towards the Pacific Islands. They brought with them their cultivated plants (taros, yams, bananas, sugar cane) and domesticated animals, probably pigs and chickens. Later they were joined by other seafaring peoples with whom they remained in unbroken cultural contact from that time on. The ethnic and linguistic influence of these new people is still strongly felt in Vanuatu, and at the time of the birth of Christ these islands formed a sort of "Oceanian Mediterranean", as archaeologist José Garanger has called it. A particular ethnic mixture, a tradition of openness to, and acceptance of, outside influences and, in the earth itself, the remains of a type of pottery called *lapita*, which the shore-dwelling peoples used to make – all these are part of the heritage of that period.

Traditional social and cultural organization among the Melanesians of Vanuatu is extremely varied. In the north, chiefs earn their power by moving up through a hierarchy; in the southern and central islands they either inherit their titles or are chosen by their peers. In both cases their position depends on consensus rather than authority, and jockeying for power between customary "big men" is part of the pattern of social life. These systems of chiefdom vary enormously when it comes to details, and so do kinship systems, rituals, and the content of the great myths of origin. Linguistic fragmentation is also very marked; more than 100

Settlement



More than one and a half centuries after Quiros, Cook again discovered Vanuatu.

"I decided to go ashore, where we found ourselves face to face with 400 or 500 natives armed with bows and arrows, spears and clubs... I advanced alone, a green branch in my hand. One of the men who seemed to be their chief gave his weapons to one of his companions, broke off a branch similar to mine, and we then exchanged branches".

(James Cook: disembarking on Malakula. From his log book dated 22nd July 1774).

The discovery

languages are spoken in these islands – an average of one for every 1,000 inhabitants – some of which are as different from each other as English is from Russian. It is as if each island, and within islands, each community, had deliberately set out to assert its uniqueness and originality as compared with its neighbours.

Today, the population of the country is growing at a rapid rate. It increased from 72,000 in 1967 to 111,251 in 1979; almost all these people are of Melanesian stock.

It may be said that the discovery of Vanuatu by Europeans was the result of a mistake. The Portuguese navigator, Pedro Ferdinand de Quiros, pilot to the Mendana expedition which discovered the Solomon Islands in 1595, obtained from the King of Spain the leadership of another expedition whose goal this time was to locate the much sought-after Southern Continent.

De Quiros has been likened to a “Don Quixote at the twilight period of the Spanish Empire”. He was something of a mystic with grandiose ambitions which were as much to exploit the fabled riches of this unknown continent that haunted the imagination of the old world, as they were to further the realm of his church. His far-seeking dreams were well-matched by his limitless enthusiasm and exceptional energy.

This great explorer left Lima on the 10th March 1605 with three ships manned by 300 sailors and soldiers under his command. Additional members of the expedition were six Franciscan priests and four monks from the Order of Saint Jean de Dieu, who acted as nurses.

On the 1st May 1606, after 14 months of difficult sailing and frequent bad weather, during which time the ships revisited the Solomon Islands and passed near to the islands of Torres and Banks, the lookout at the masthead finally reported a land “so vast that it cannot be an island”. Quiros, convinced that this must indeed be the Great Southern Continent, named it “Terra Australia Del Espiritu Santo”, to which the island of Espiritu Santo owes its name.

The joys and dreams of Quiros knew no bounds. With all flags flying, the expedition approached the land, then went ashore to take possession of this new land in the name of the Pope and their Catholic King. The members of the expedition then installed themselves in the splendid surroundings lying near the shores of the large bay at the northern end of the island. Quiros named this bay the “Bay of Saint-Philippe and Saint-James”, and its river, which he described as being “as wide as the Guadalquivir at Seville”, became the “Jordan”.



Portrait of a Tannese woman by a companion of James Cook, 18th century.

An official ceremony was held to mark the conquest of the island and the site where this took place was named New Jerusalem, for it was here that Quiros planned to build the future capital of the island. Finally, a government, consisting of nineteen "ministers" was formed to administer this new territory.

However, the reign of the Spaniards lasted only a month. From the very beginning their contacts with the indigenous people caused many problems. The number of unpleasant incidents and disputes grew daily, and the Spaniards resorted to the use of weapons on several occasions. To add to all their troubles, most of the ships' crew members fell victim to the epidemic of ichthyotoxism – a severe form of fish poisoning.

In addition the Spaniards, of course, soon wearied of the megalomaniac behavior of Quiros, so taken up with his ambitious dreams, and, following several mutinies, the expedition split up. Torrès, captain of one of the ships, set sail towards the north-west to reach the Philippines, discovering en route the narrow straits which separate New Guinea, from the real, much-searched-for Southern Continent and which now bear his name – the Torres Straits.

As for Quiros – on reaching Acapulco after a long and difficult voyage, he found the Court of Spain indifferent to his discoveries. His colourful descriptions fell upon deaf ears, and Vanuatu, discovered by error, faded into oblivion.

One hundred and sixty years elapsed before Bougainville, during his famous round-the-world voyage of exploration, visited the "Terra Australia del Espiritu Santo" and ascertained that it was in fact just an island. To the archipelago as a whole, he gave the rather poetic name of Grandes Cyclades. Bougainville also discovered the islands of Aurore (Maewo), Pentecôte (Raga), Aoba (Ombre). He landed in the latter island, where he buried a plaque of oak on which was inscribed the actual taking of possession of the group of islands. Seeing the tattooed bodies of the local people, he mistakenly named the isle the Island of Lepers.

Later came the British ships of discovery, and thus began the systematic exploration of the region.

During his second voyage to the Southern Seas, Captain James Cook went ashore at Port Sandwich on the island of Malakula, and later at Erromango in the bay which today bears his name. The respective welcomes given him by the natives were very different: whereas at Malakula they were particularly friendly, at Erromango Cook and his party narrowly escaped being massacred. The celebrated naviga-



"The origin of these people of Oceania remains a mystery which, ever since the arrival of the First European discoverers, has intrigued many".

José Garanger

Whalers, sandalwood merchants and missionaries

tor also recognized the islands of Tanna, Banks and Sheperds, and he made the first marine chart of the area. It was Cook who gave the name of Vanuatu to the archipelago.

After this brief interlude of discovery, a veil of silence once again shrouded the archipelago. The next visitors from the outside world were the whalers of the early nineteenth century who often visited these tropical islands during the Antarctic winters.

In 1826, the explorer trader, Peter Dillon, discovered at Erromango rich forests of sandalwood, a product which was in great demand at the time, particularly by the Chinese, who burned it with incense during religious and other ceremonies. The British had been importing enormous quantities of tea since the possibility of exploiting a product which could help to rectify their balance of payments with that country. It was particularly opportune that this new source of sandalwood should be found just at the time when other reserves in the Fiji islands were almost completely exhausted. Other important deposits of sandalwood were later



discovered on several other islands, including Santo, Tanna and Anatom.

The first sandalwood traders and adventurers came chiefly from Australia. Since the Melanesian islands were mostly explored, these were the first Europeans to have real and prolonged contacts with the indigenous tribes. These contacts, however, were not without frequent misunderstandings and some bloody and tragic incidents that cost many lives. This earned Vanuatu a sinister reputation for, together with the unhealthy climate and many diseases prevailing there, the reputed widespread ferocity and cannibalism of the natives made the sandalwood trade a very risky and arduous affair. Sailors and adventurers in search of this precious wood were in constant danger, even whilst exercising prudence and courage. Their task was further complicated by the absence of powerful tribal chiefs, the large number of dialects, and especially the inter-tribal rivalries and divisions. Thus traders who made an alliance with a certain tribe, necessarily provoked the jealousy and hostility of other tribes. George Bennet, a naturalist who sailed as surgeon with an expedition of sandalwood merchants in 1829 wrote that "frequently a group of natives asked us to forbid members of other tribes to come aboard. In fact, they often pointed at our cannon and begged us to fire upon their foes". (cited by D. Shineberg in "They Came For Sandalwood.")

The traffic in this perfumed wood nevertheless continued until 1865, and it served above all to bring the Melanesians into contact with Europeans and their civilization, whilst enabling them to trade their wood for such sought-after items as tobacco, guns and iron tools like knives, swords, nails and fish hooks.

The first missionaries followed the trail blazed by these intrepid merchants and adventurers, and also had their share of mishaps in the early days. The Reverend John William of the London Missionary Society was killed in 1839 when he disembarked on the island of Erromango, but his murder in no way discouraged the evangelists. Anatom, in the very south of the Archipelago, became the principal centre for the Presbyterian mission. With the aid of Samoan teachers, this mission spread throughout the southern islands and from 1853, also on the island of Efaté. Soon after this, the Anglican mission, which became known as the Melanesian Mission, took over most of the islands in the north. The first Catholic missionaries were the Marists who arrived in 1887; today some 15% of the population are Catholics.

From the very first contacts with white civilization, the inhabitants of the Group acquired a reputation for savagery and widespread cannibalism. The truth of the matter is that Europeans failed to understand the essence of Melanesian culture and its ultimate significance. Cannibalism, for instance, was a custom only very rarely practised. It occurred mostly in times of war, when the bodies of slain warriors were cut up and distributed among the allies of the victorious group, who then ritually consumed them. Even so, only a few groups enjoyed the "privilege", and even this ritualized form of cannibalism was entirely unknown in some islands.

Beginning of colonization

The sandalwood traders were soon followed by other new adventurers whose goal was not the perfumed wood but the recruitment of workers for the cotton and sugar cane plantations which were developing in Queensland, Australia and in Fiji. The traffic in these workers reached its height during the American Civil War and became known as "blackbirding", whilst gaining a notorious reputation, mostly due to the inhuman methods employed by some of the recruiters. The work contracts were ostensibly for a period of three years but were not always adhered to. News of the many injustices soon reached the islands, creating much ill-feeling and causing some bloody reprisals against other white blackbirders who risked going ashore in search of their human merchandise. Thus the savage reputation of the islanders grew even more. An estimated total of nearly 40,000 Vanuatans were involved in the labour trade between 1865 and 1906. About one in four never returned from the great journey.

The first attempts at colonizing the region were made during the American Civil War when the fall in cotton production incited several Australian colonials to settle on the islands of Vate and Epi, where they hoped to begin cotton farming. Though the soil and climate seemed ideal for this new industry, the fall in the world prices of cotton after the Civil War put an end to their hopes. They then transferred their efforts into the planting of coconut palms and the production of coprah.

Whale hunters, sandalwood merchants and blackbirders were the first Europeans to explore these islands, but there was always a mutual distrust between these adventurers and the indigenous people. Nobody went unarmed, and there were frequent bloody fights in the early days.



These first few settlers were soon followed by others from New Caledonia in about 1870, and included a certain John Higginson, an Irish Catholic by birth who had emigrated to New Caledonia and whose aim was to see Vanuatu truly united with France. In 1882, Higginson founded the Compagnie Calédonienne des Nouvelles-Hébrides and bought more than half a million acres of land from British merchants and indigenous tribes. He then divided this land into plots and offered them to French settlers, whose numbers soon grew at Vaté, where they founded the township of Franceville in 1884, and later at Malakula, Santo and Aoré. The era of the “coprah-makers” had begun.

A land where each man made and enforced his own rules and where the strongest and fittest were those who reigned, Vanuatu remained isolated from the Great Power interests and conflicts for many years, even while it was more or less recognized as a French colony. It was essentially a land of sailors, adventurers and missionaries, each one a law-maker unto himself and those he controlled.

That was the beginning of a de facto colonization. Higginson’s operation created a diplomatic impasse in the forefront of the British and French colonial expansion. While both governments remained politically inactive, public opinion in Australia and New Caledonia pushed for annexation. In the New Hebrides, tensions between European settlers and the Melanesian population ran high. Melanesians accepted and even encouraged the presence of European traders but opposed the colonists who occupied and cultivated their land, which led to frequent violent and bloody clashes.

The coexistence of both French and British settlers on the same remote island was not without frequent quarrels and conflicts. The rivalry between Catholic and Protestant missions was often very heated and conflict between European settlers and Melanesian on one side, and among the Europeans on the other, gave way to increased lawlessness and anarchy.

An imbroglio developed in France and Great Britain at last engaged in new negotiations leading to the official establishment of the Condominium of the New Hebrides in 1906. This intense political dialogue was also spurred on by a formidable German presence in neighbouring Samoa, North Solomons and New Guinea. The fear of a German takeover created an unlikely solidarity between London and Paris.

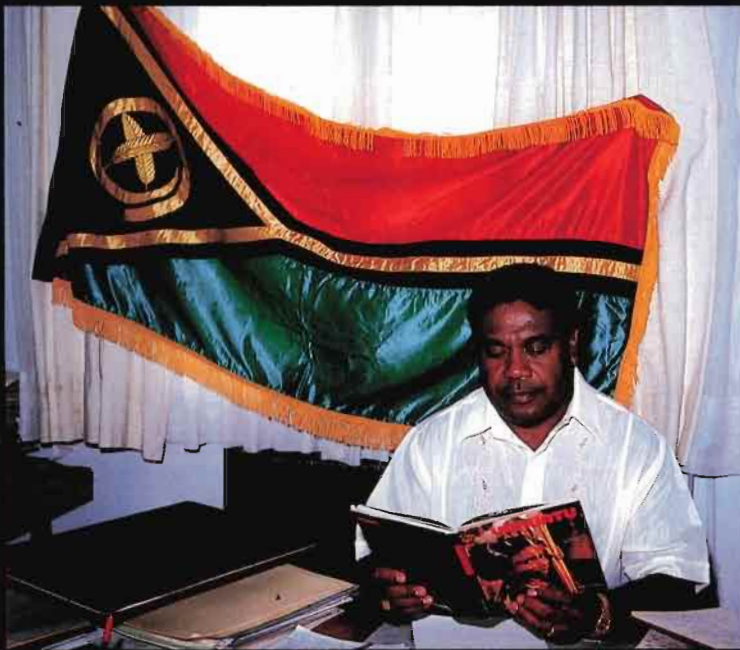


vanuatu

The island group formerly known as the New Hebrides became independent on 30th July 1980. To herald the birth of their new nation, the inhabitants chose a new name, Vanuatu, which comes from a Melanesian word meaning "our land". To reach that point, however, they had had a long road to travel.

Unable to agree on the status the islands should be given, the British and French decided to govern them jointly in 1906. They set up the rather strange Condominium, a sort of two-headed colonial state in which they enjoyed equal rights of sovereignty. This system – the only one of its kind in the world – functioned after a fashion in a continual sort of mutual imitation and rivalry. Since politically they saw eye to eye on almost nothing, the French and the English agreed principally to do nothing that might alter the status quo. Independence came in 1980 in the midst of discord and in difficult and dangerous circumstances which, in some islands, led to tragedy.

The historical existence of the Condominium did, however, prevent a political division of the archipelago between the two Powers, and Melanesian communities proved very skilful in taking advantage of Anglo-French rivalry so as to create areas of freedom and autonomy for themselves. Not



*The President of the Republic of Vanuatu, Ati George Sokomanu bears the prestigious name of a Melanesian chief from Mele village, near Port Vila, on the island of Efate. On the wall the national flag which was adopted at Independence. In the left hand corner note two traditional symbols: the curved pig tusk, symbol of chieftainship, and the namwele leaves (*Cordyline* sp.), symbol of peace.*

The emblem of the President of the Republic of Vanuatu: a traditional man represented in front of a full-circled pig tusk, is raised every day on the Residency lawn overlooking Port Vila bay. (photo opposite)

only that, but the various historical and cultural influences of both France and Britain contributed, in the long run, to cultural and human enrichment, and so were more than just a source of division.

Today's Republic of Vanuatu is a member of both the British Commonwealth and the Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique (an association of francophone countries). It has a President, elected every five years; the current President is George Sokomanu. Executive power is in the hands of a Prime Minister and a council of 10 ministers, all of whom are accountable to a parliament elected by universal suffrage. Father Walter Lini, an Anglican priest who once led the nationalist movement, is now Prime Minister.

The National Council of Chiefs is composed of Custom Chiefs from throughout the islands who are elected by their peers. It discusses all matters related to tradition and custom. Vanuatu, both modern and traditional, tries to keep its own identity in today's uncertain times.





During the colonial period, the French and British administrations maintained discreet legal systems and established a joint tribunal. At the time of independence, the young nation of Vanuatu had to construct its own modern legal system. On the left is judge Cook who has functioned since independence.



port vila

Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, stands on the shores of a large and very beautiful bay on the south side of the island of Efate. The old colonial trading centre has grown into a modern town in recent years. In 1920, settlers were still galloping along the grass-grown streets on horseback; their brightly-painted wooden houses had overhanging eaves and gutter-pipes leading to essential rainwater tanks, and were surrounded by wide, cool verandahs. Stores, hotels, sheds and warehouses were strung out along the sea front facing the harbour, on both sides of the main shopping street.

Two historic neighbourhoods gradually grew up on the hills behind with their shady mango and banyan trees, one to the north, the "French quarter", around the Catholic Church and the former French Residency (now the seat of government), the other to the south and centred on the Presbyterian

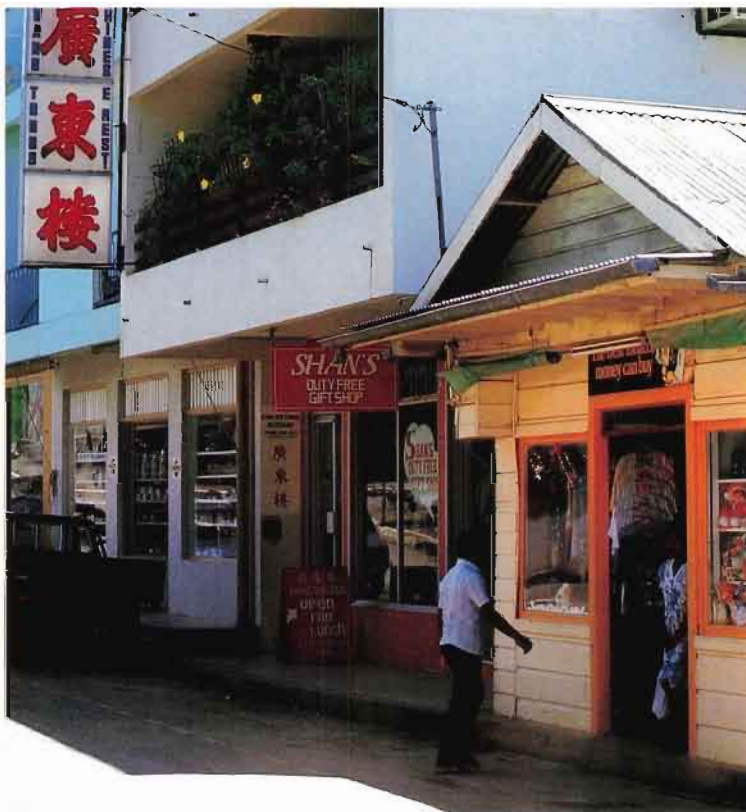


Aerial view of Port Vila. This former colonial trading centre is now the capital of Vanuatu, and is a town in continual expansion. In the centre of the photograph are the sea front and the town centre; on the left the well-marked areas of Numbatu and Numbatri; on the right the Malapoa peninsula with its housing subdivision. In the middle of the bay is Iririki Island where the British Resident Commissioner, perhaps out of an inborn preference for islands, used to live, and further out is Fila Island where there is still a large Melanesian village.

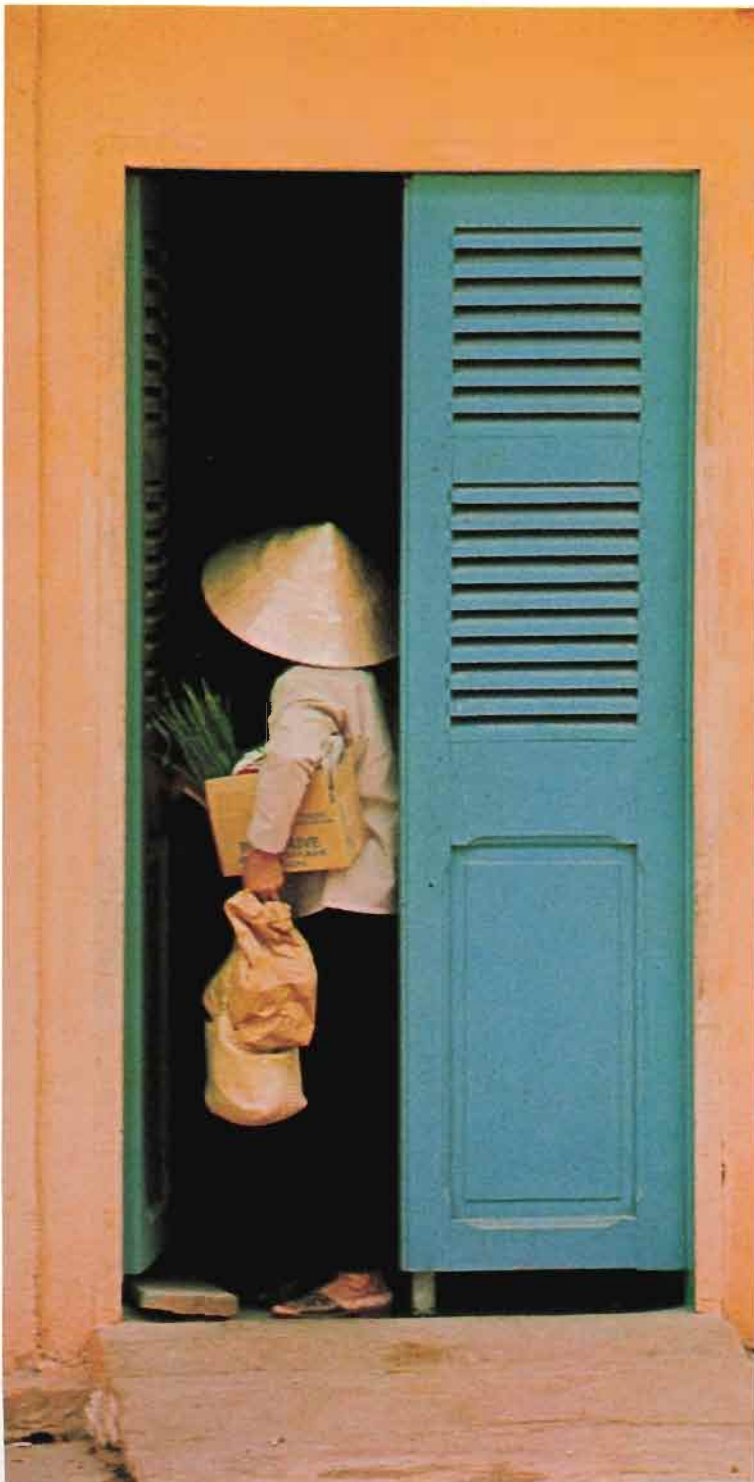
Church, the old British Residency and the "British Paddock", a broad grass-covered area which has since become Independence Park.

The place only really began to look like a town during the Second World War when, in a matter of months, the U.S. Army laid down the large-scale infrastructure it needed for its camps: a road network, a water supply, bridges over the rivers, an airfield, and so on.

Since then, Vila has never stopped growing. New buildings three or four storeys high now stand on the sea front to accommodate modern boutiques, banks, or government Ministries. Not far from the Bank of Indosuez, the longest-established of all those in the country, is the small cosmopolitan quarter of Chinese and Vietnamese merchants. Their shops are huddled together, all look alike, and deal in a variety of products of which they always have a plentiful stock and which are mostly made in China or Hong Kong. Their principal customers are the Melanesians living in the town. You can find practically anything here, from watches and cigarettes to brightly printed materials for pareos, china



Behind the seafront road lies the animated and colourful Chinese quarter; well patronised shops and restaurants stand in close order side by side over a short distance.



A unusual sight: some Tonkinese in their traditional costume. Several thousand of these people were recruited for work on the plantations before the war. Most of them were repatriated, at their request, in 1963. Those who chose to stay, mostly at Vila, now form a lively and dynamic community.

ware, vegetables, rice, and often kava roots too.

New residential areas have sprung up on the northern and southern outskirts of the town – Numbatu and Numbatri, Tagabe, Freshwater, Seaside and Malapoa ... Vila had 7,738 inhabitants in 1967, 12,700 in 1972, and 14,598 at the time of the 1979 census. This figure includes the people of the three peri-urban villages of Mele, Fila and Erakor. Many of the town's inhabitants are temporary migrants from other islands, who have come for a few months or years to find work in town. They often have to make do with somewhat precarious housing conditions.

Port Vila is also the centre of an inter-island communication network which covers the whole archipelago.

Awkward-looking boats constantly transport coprah, merchandise and people. The harbour, one of the most beautiful in the Pacific, is alive with a continual coming and going of craft. Island life follows its rhythm.

The most commonly used language in Vanuatu is bislama, one of the three official languages with English and French. This language is what is known as a pidgin, and it has a long history. It probably originated with beachcombers at the time of earliest contact between Europeans and Melanesians. Little by little it built itself up, on Queensland plantations and on island shores. Most words in this language of inter-ethnic



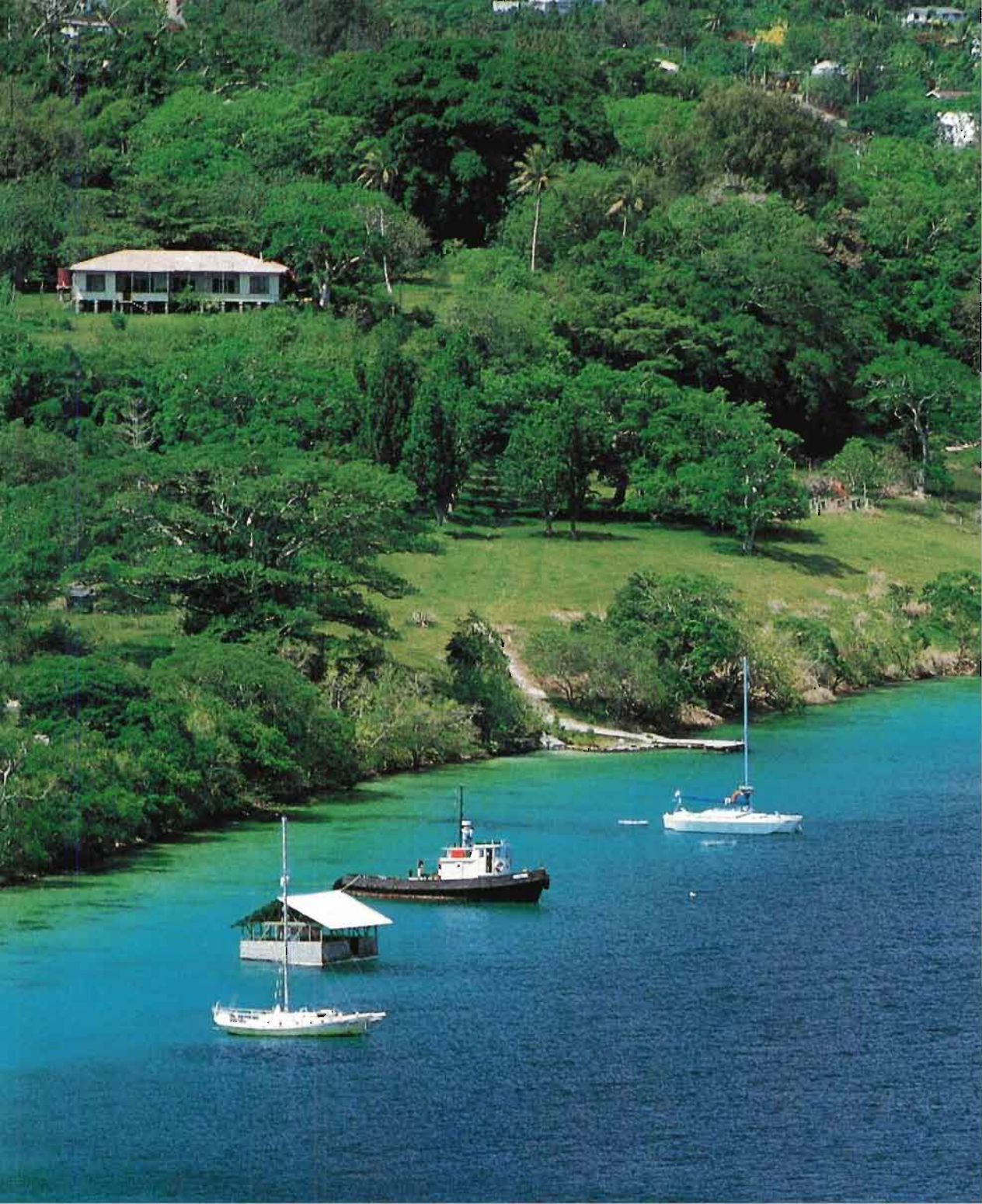
communication are of English origin, but the syntax is Melanesian. Some bislama expressions have a most agreeable ring to them. Melanesians like to speak bislama among themselves, use it with skill and subtlety, and know how to make the most of its many resources. Bislama is now the mother-tongue of many children born in the capital.

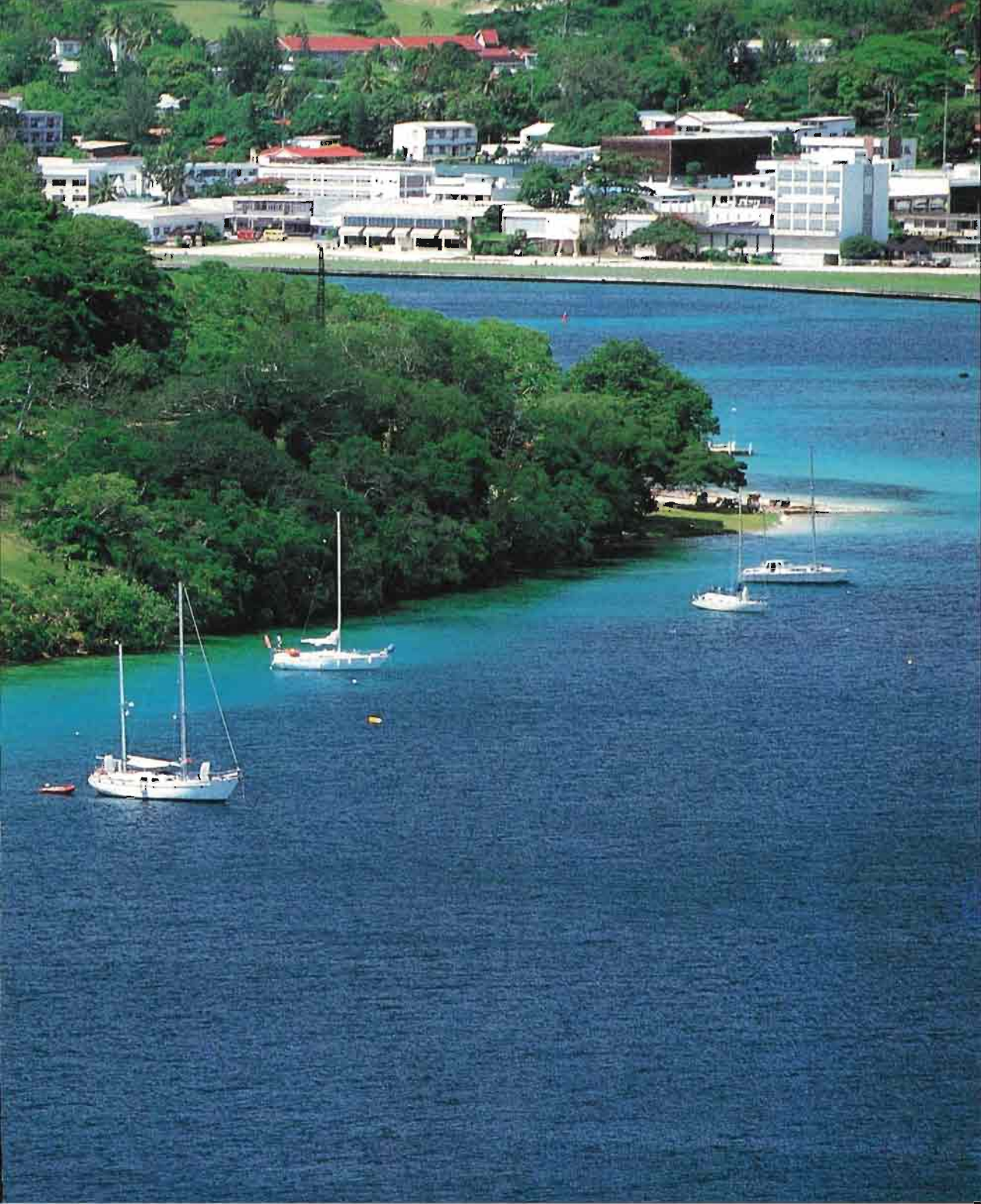
Port Vila has become a Melanesian capital, yet retained much of its former colonial flair and French charm, which makes it quite unique compared to most other Pacific towns and cities. Its beauty, its bi-cultural character and the gentle nature of its inhabitants is reflected in the recent increase of tourism. Several international hotels have been built on the outskirts of town, particularly alongside the lagoon. Gone are the old days when Port Vila's social centre was identified with the historic "Hôtel Rossi".

A few kilometres out of town are the villages of Mele, Pango, Erakor and Fila island which have retained their traditional and rural character despite the increased in-

Coprah, made from dried coconut kernel, has been the principal export of these islands for nearly a century. Rammed into old jute sacks, smoke dried coprah is collected throughout the archipelago, from where it is despatched to far-off European ports to supply long-established soap factories. Year in, year out the archipelago exports nearby 40,000 tons of coprah.







In the foreground, Iririki Island, in Port Vila Bay. During the colonial period it housed the British Resident Commissioner's residence and the Paton Memorial Hospital, built at the start of the century by the Presbyterian Church. In the background can be seen the centre of town of Port Vila; on the right is the Bank of Indosuez and Indochina building and on the left the Cultural Centre. Above these, the red corrugated-iron roofs are those of the Catholic Mission buildings. Port Vila is without doubt one of the most lively and attractive towns in the Pacific. (preceding pages)

volvement of their inhabitants in the urban economy. Today most households have at least one member employed in Port Vila. These four villages were among the first to come in contact with the European world in the second half of the nineteenth century, and rapidly adopted Christianity under the influence of Presbyterian missions. Village life is centred around the church, referred to as "skul", meaning school in Bislama.

The island of Efate is predominantly Presbyterian. Its inhabitants live in large and mainly coastal settlements while the island's interior is virtually uninhabited today. This is in stark contrast to pre-contact days, where the latter area consisted of a dense network of small hamlets.



Old and new: sellers of traditional Melanesian garden produce who hold almost daily markets on the foot-paths of Port Vila sit side by side with fast-food outlets which have recently made their appearance.



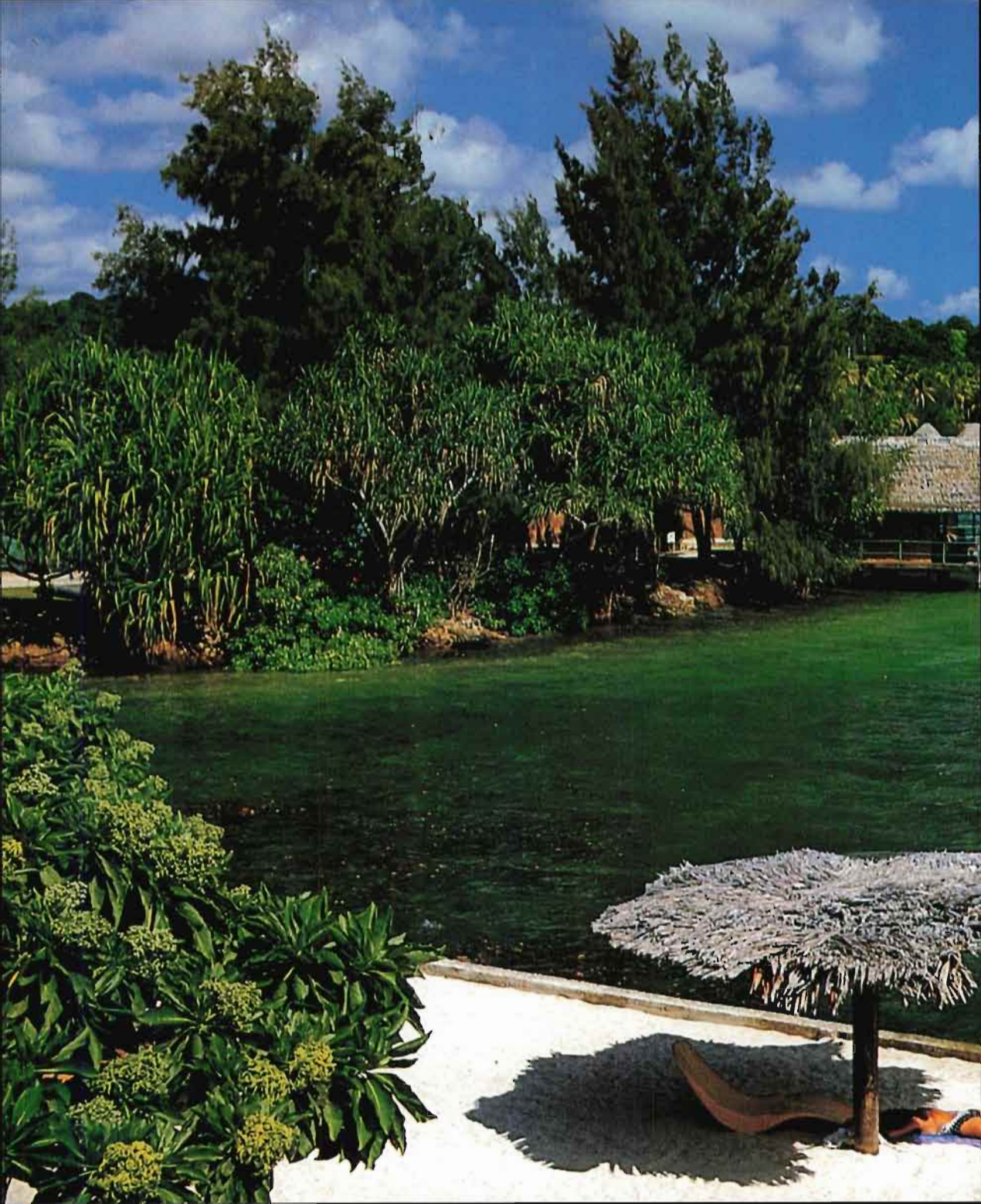




Port-Vila: a multi-racial capital. The market place is the meeting ground for people of all ethnic origins.

View of Hotel LeLagon (following pages).







The population of the archipelago is about 95 percent Melanesian. The people have maintained their own cultural heritage, their taste for colourful clothes, and a love of music and dancing.

Several kilometres from Port-Vila, the Presbyterian church at the large village of Mélé is one of the oldest religious centres of the archipelago. The Melanesians have retained their love of music and dancing, and their multi-pitched choirs sing beautiful hymns of Scottish origin, either in their native language or in bichelamar.







the art

The art of Vanuatu is certainly one of the richest and most varied of all the Pacific islands.

By far the most spectacular objects are the enormous carved wooden drums from Ambrym. Their resonant sounds are used to send messages, as well as to beat out the rhythm of songs and dances during ritual ceremonies. There are two principal kinds of drums: those from the west and south of the island are topped with several exaggeratedly oval faces, with disproportionately large eyes, while those from the north have a single head "placed on the drum rather like a head on the human body" (J. Guiart). The height of these unusual drums sometimes reaches as much as five or six metres.

The ceremonial costumes and adornments, particularly the masks, from the north and centre of the archipelago, also bear witness to an original art, closely allied to the rituals of secret societies and traditional festivities. The masks from Pentecôte are made of unadorned hardwood, while those from Ambrym, Maewo and the south of Malakula are usually carved from the trunks of tree-ferns, boldly painted in bright colours and decorated with plumes and pigs' tusks. The art of the tribe known as the "Small Nambas", in the south of Malakula, plays an



The dancing grounds of the traditional villages on the island of Ambrym are ornamented with monumental drums carved from wood, which stand several metres high. These drums are the work of professional sculptors whose craft is passed on from father to son. In the south of Malakula, the technique of making model skulls is directly related to ancestor worship and to the ritual funeral ceremonies. The modelled head of the dead chief is decorated with traditional paints and placed on top of the funeral statue.

The dancing masks and ceremonial headdresses play an important part in ritual celebrations held in the south of Malakolo, Ambrym, Aoba and Maewo. They may only be worn by men of a high rank. Some of these masks are carved from the trunks of tree ferns, while others are made from a mixture of clay and coconut fibres plastered on to a bamboo framework.





The mats which are made in the north of the island of Pentecôte and in Aoba, are woven from the fibres of pandanus leaves. Their red motifs are printed with a block carved from the trunk of a banana plant. These mats are used as barter for ritual transactions. The curved boar's tooth is the result of a long and patient process which may take several years. The upper canine teeth of the pig are split when the animal is young; its lower tusks then tend to grow in the desired circular form. There are terms to describe each stage in the development of the tusks, and fixed values for those of each stage. Traditionally, these tusker pigs and shell necklaces served as currency, and, according to the amount they owned, signified the exact wealth of each of the principal dignitaries.

essential role during funeral rites. One of the most spectacular forms of this art is the "rambaramb", an effigy of the deceased made from local materials, representing the departed one throughout the ceremonies which are held to mark the end of the period of mourning, eight months after his death. Another form of art illustrates traditional myths: thus the "nevimbur", a kind of puppet show whose figures represent the principal characters in the legends.

Among other famous artifacts of the Vanuatu are the often quite enormous hardwood bowls used for pounding food, sometimes carved in the stylized shapes of fish, or in the form of birds, as in the Shepherd Islands. Curiously-shaped carved clubs used for killing pigs, the wooden staffs carried by some tribal chiefs and the varied traditional weapons, plus numerous objects sculpted from fern trunks, are also genuine collectors' items; many of these also act as symbols of hierarchy in this most carefully structured society.

Pottery is rarely found, except at Wousi on the west coast of Santo.





pentecost

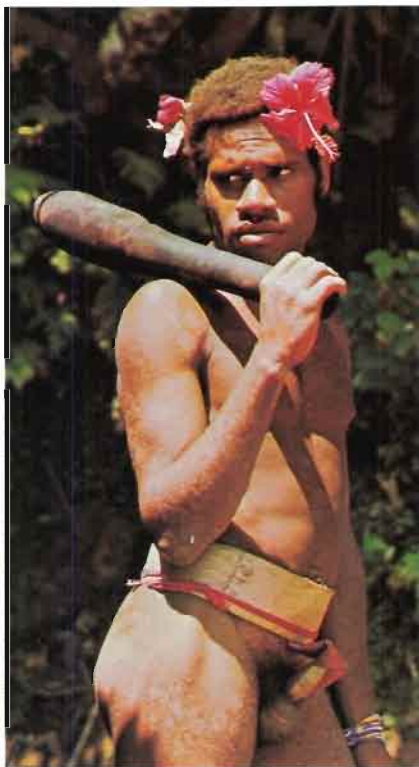
On the high island of Pentecost, the villages seem to cling to the steep sides of a chain of mountains which extends from north to south over about sixty kilometres of its length. Situated on the southern point of the island, the village of Bunlap is a living museum of local customs. People from other parts of the island regard those of Bunlap as the guardians of tradition or "boss bilong custom", as they say in pidgin.

The village, extending along either side of a road which runs the length of a steep slope, is renowned for its

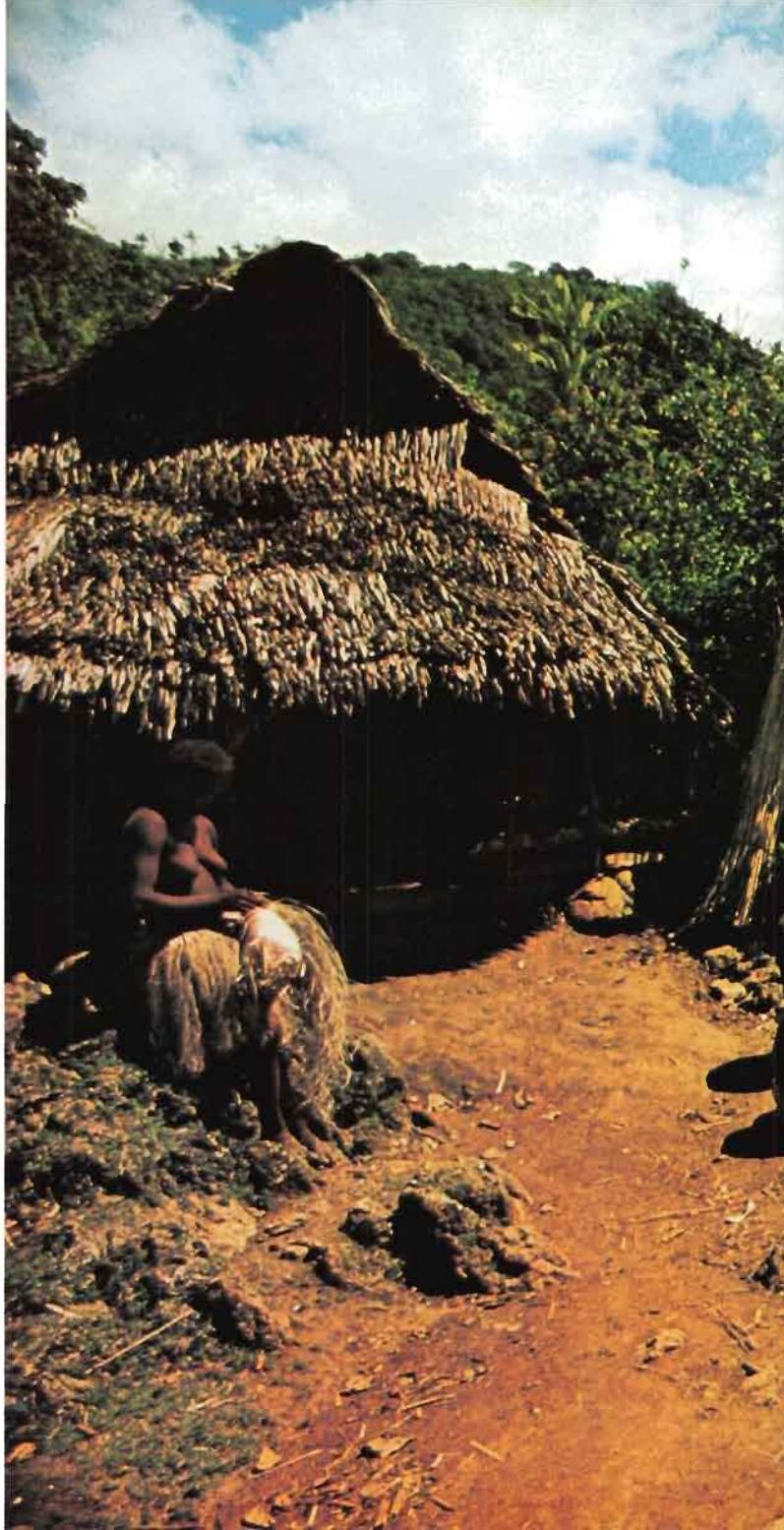


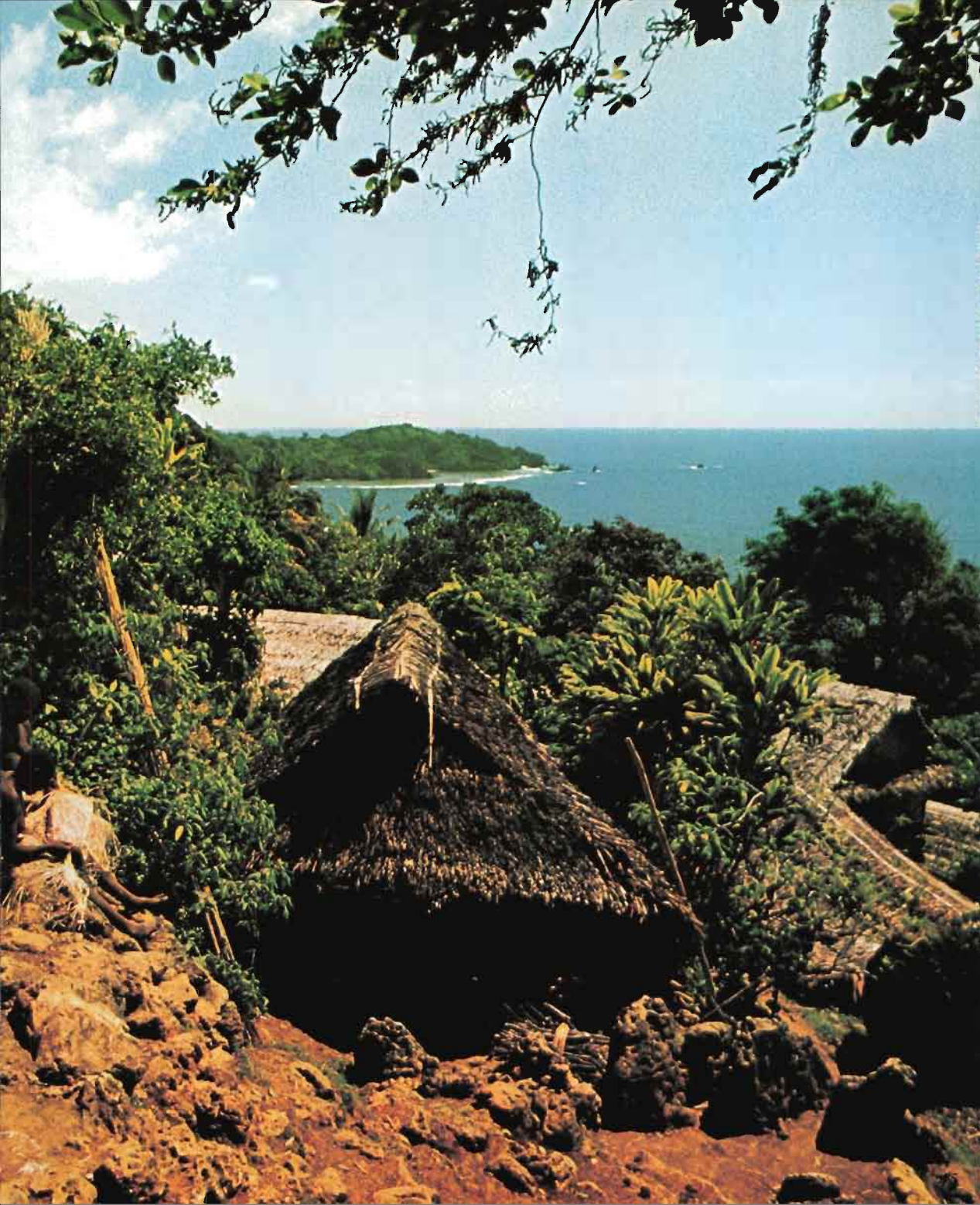
*Full of incertitude, fables and risks
Floats the archipelago
Disunited and in a void
Each island drifting at its whim
Some in the distant past
Others at the threshold
of the White world
As in a fairy-tale, or mechanized
And yet others in their blind quest
For a cause...*

*The Song of Kawa
Roger Durand*



The traditional huts in the pagan village of Bunlap are low, built with walls of bamboo or split reeds, and covered with leaves that reach almost to the ground. They cling to the mountainside, on narrow man-made ledges. The women wear the traditional grass skirts, the men a simple penis sheath—the namba.





nakamal – the mens' hut which is strictly forbidden to women, and its two dance places or *nassarah*, which are levelled-out pieces of land surrounded by stone walls.

At Bunlap the social organization of the village is founded upon the hierarchy of grades, *namangui* in Bichelamar. Chieftainship is not hereditary, but during the course of their lives, the men pass through different "grades"; those who attain the highest rungs of the social ladder have the greatest power and prestige.

In order to pass from one grade to another, one must make a gift of a given number of pigs, all killed on the same day, plus a certain quantity of woven mats, taros and yams. The number and value of the pigs are proportional to the importance of the grade. Also, the rites of passage from grade to grade become more and more complex as

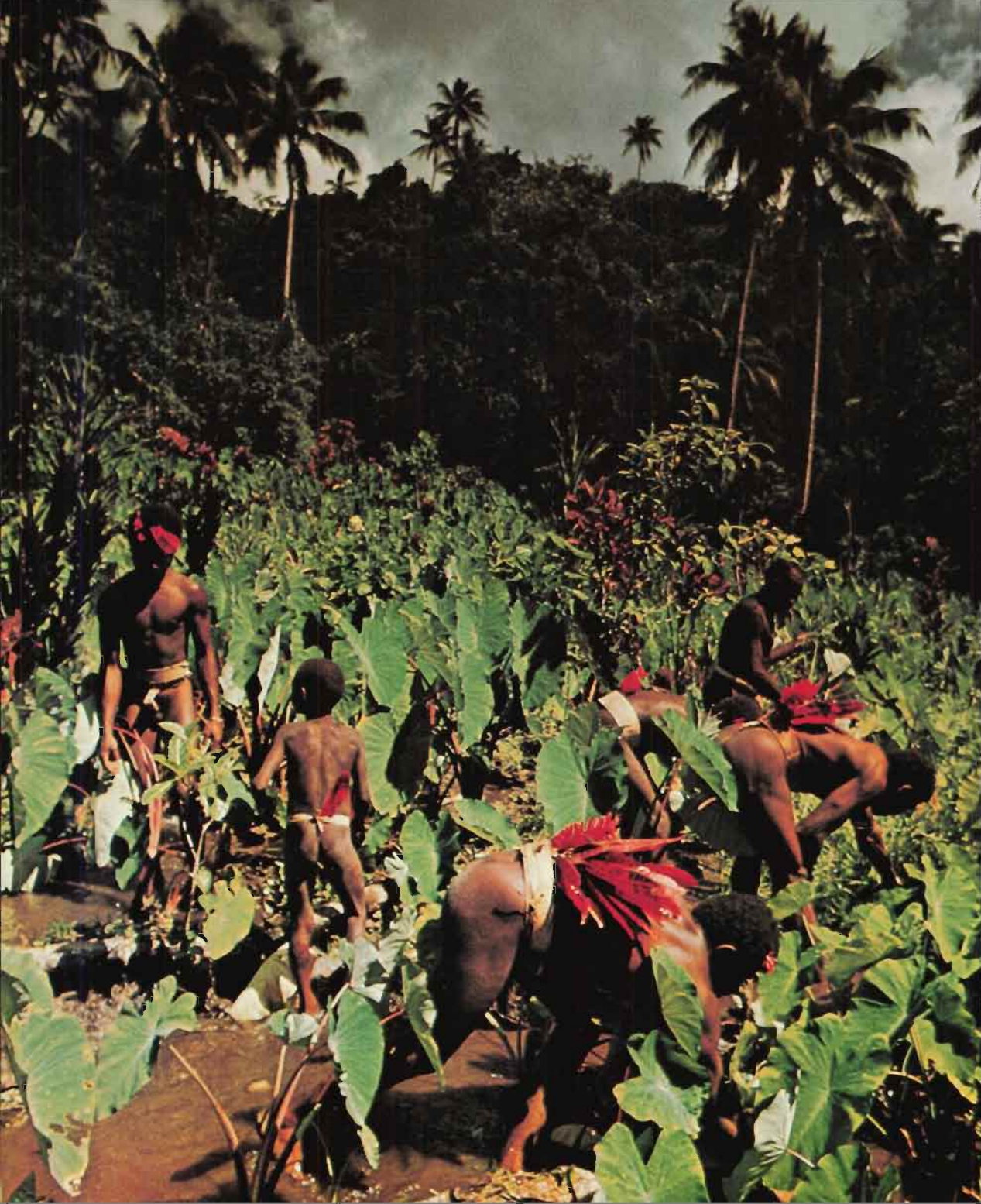
Bound to its traditional customs, but nevertheless very much alive, Bunlap is undoubtedly a "happy village".

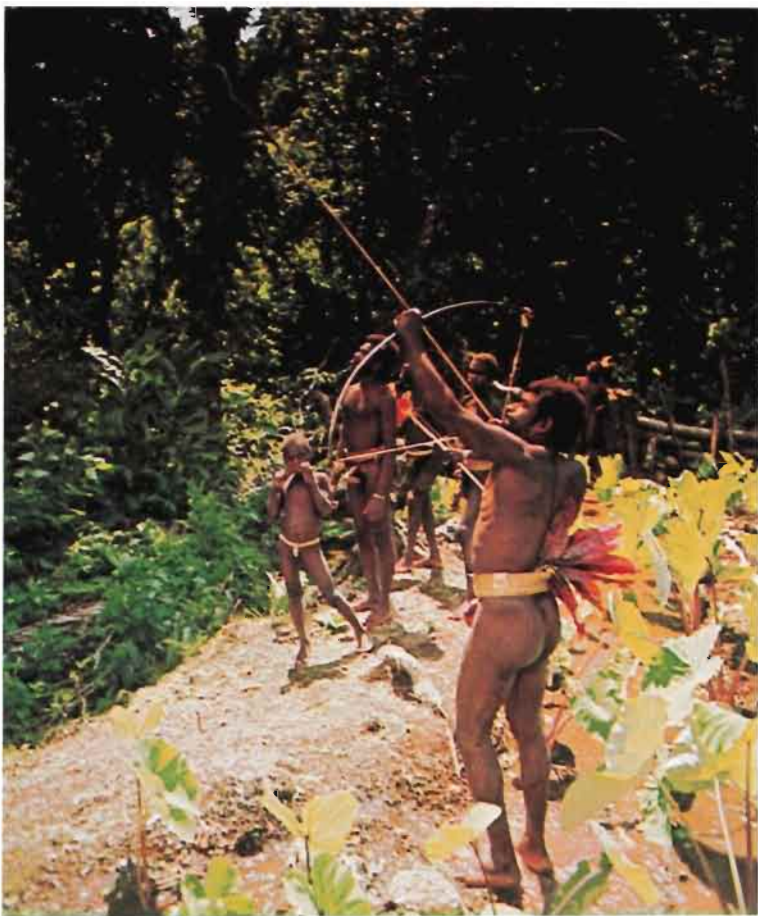
Children and adults live in the comfortable security of a long established way of life.

Below: a paste made from yams is spread on leaves; opposite: a group of children on the dance ground.





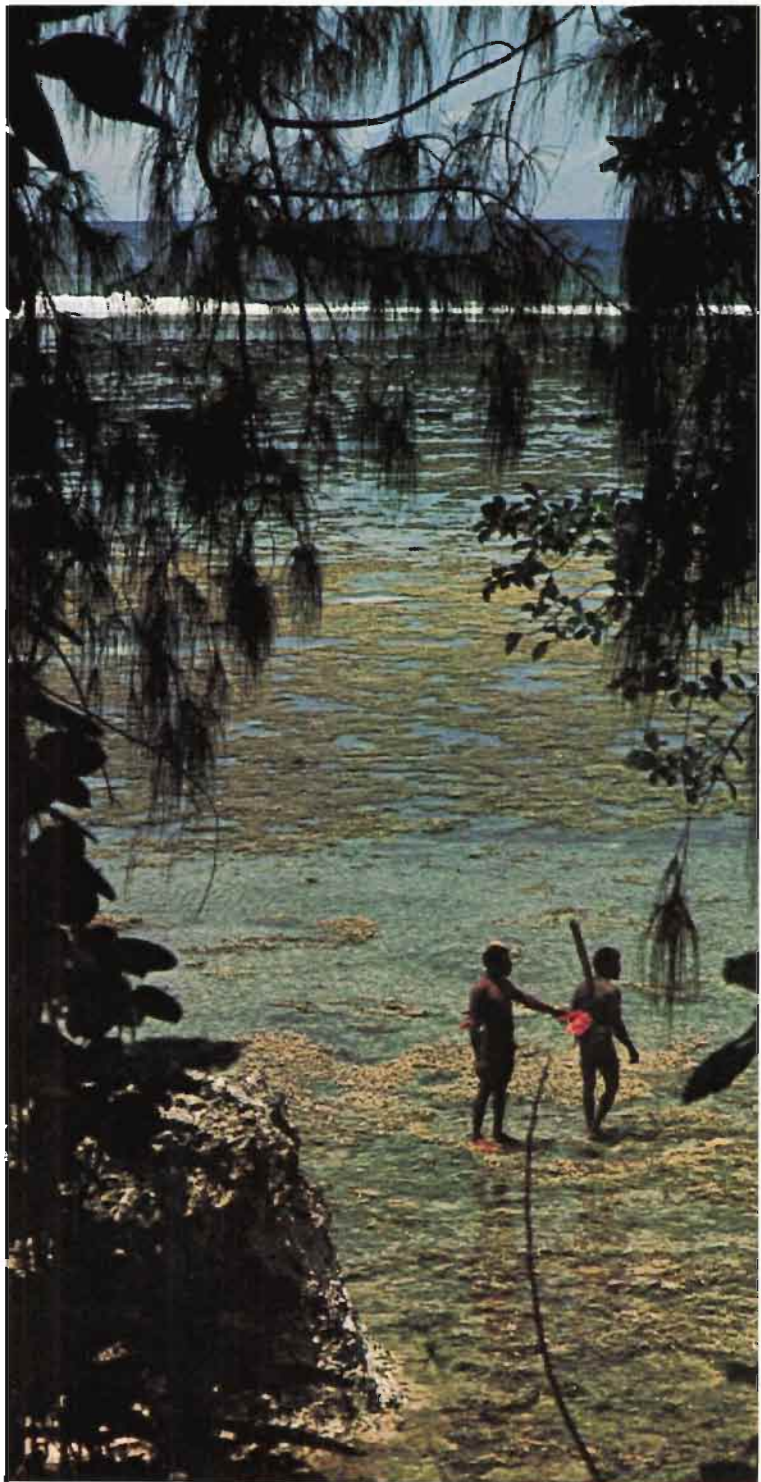




Their habits and daily work have remained unchanged since early times—the cultivation of taros on irrigated terraces in the valley; pigeon shooting with bows and arrows. Several times a day, the womenfolk fetch fresh water in tall bamboo containers.







The sea has an important role at Bunlap. On the uncovered reef at low tide, amidst the spray of the waves, the men fish with bows and arrows or spears.

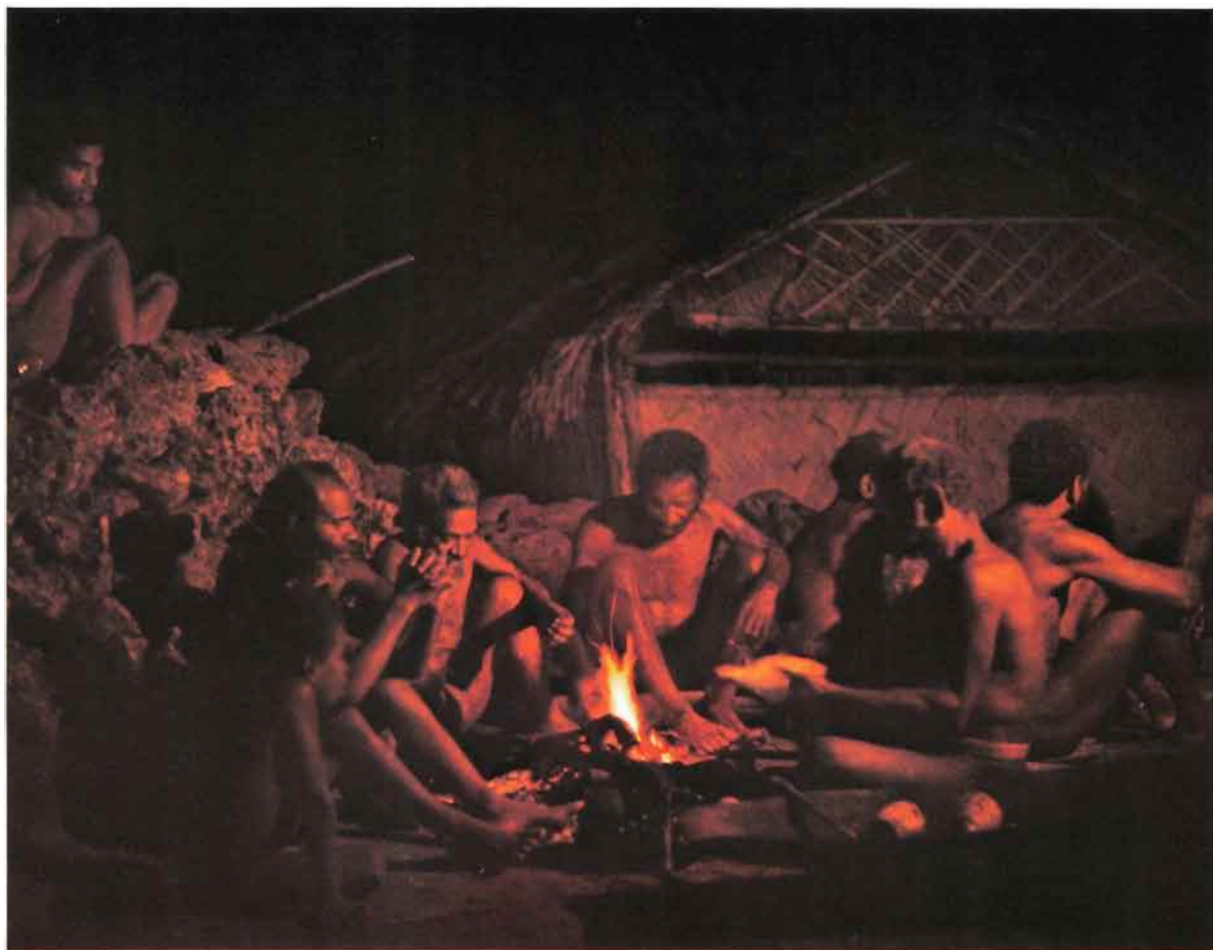
one reaches the higher echelons. To attain the uppermost grades, the chiefs must sometimes kill more than a hundred pigs on the same day.

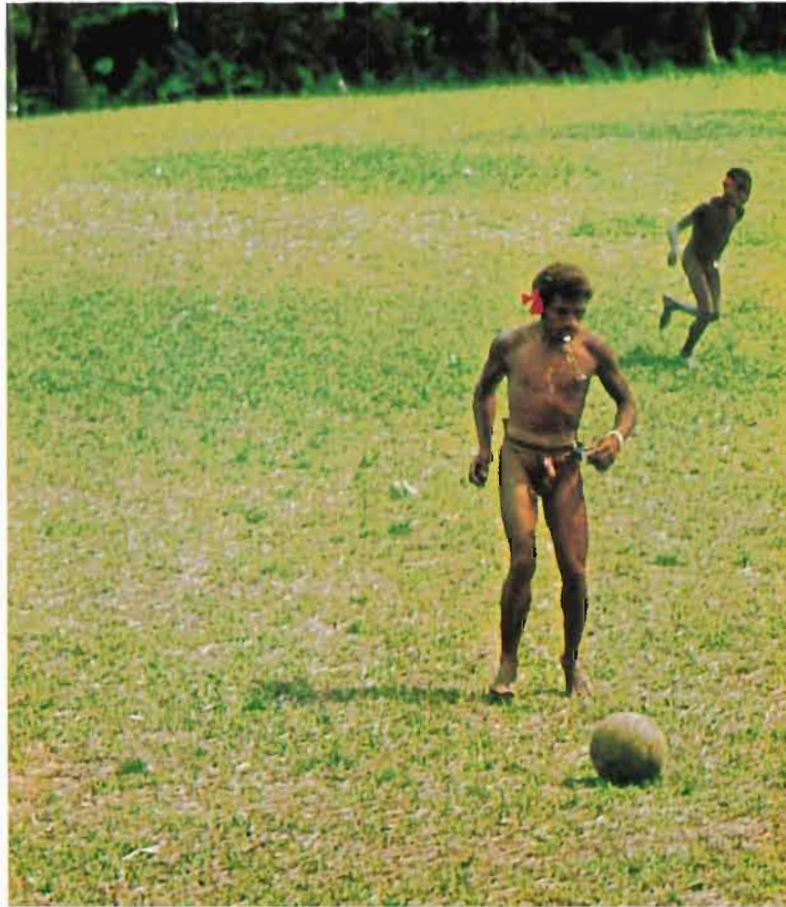
These rituals ensure that only the very richest or most capable men actually reach the most senior positions. At the same time, the relative grades assure each member of the tribe his rightful place in the hierarchy, and it is at the *nakamal* that he prepares and partakes of his meals with the other tribesmen of equal rank.

Though these customs remain very much alive, they are gradually changing and evolving. Certain outside practices are penetrating more and more into the daily life of the village; these, however, are always re-interpreted and then assimilated by the inhabitants. Even the common game of football takes on a special significance for the pagans of Bunlap.

*« La nuit collait aux palissades de
la préhistoire
Sous les voûtes pesantes de fumée,
des troncs
Noeux et de pailles centenaires,
les torches brûlaient... »*

*Roger Durand
Le Chant du Kawa*

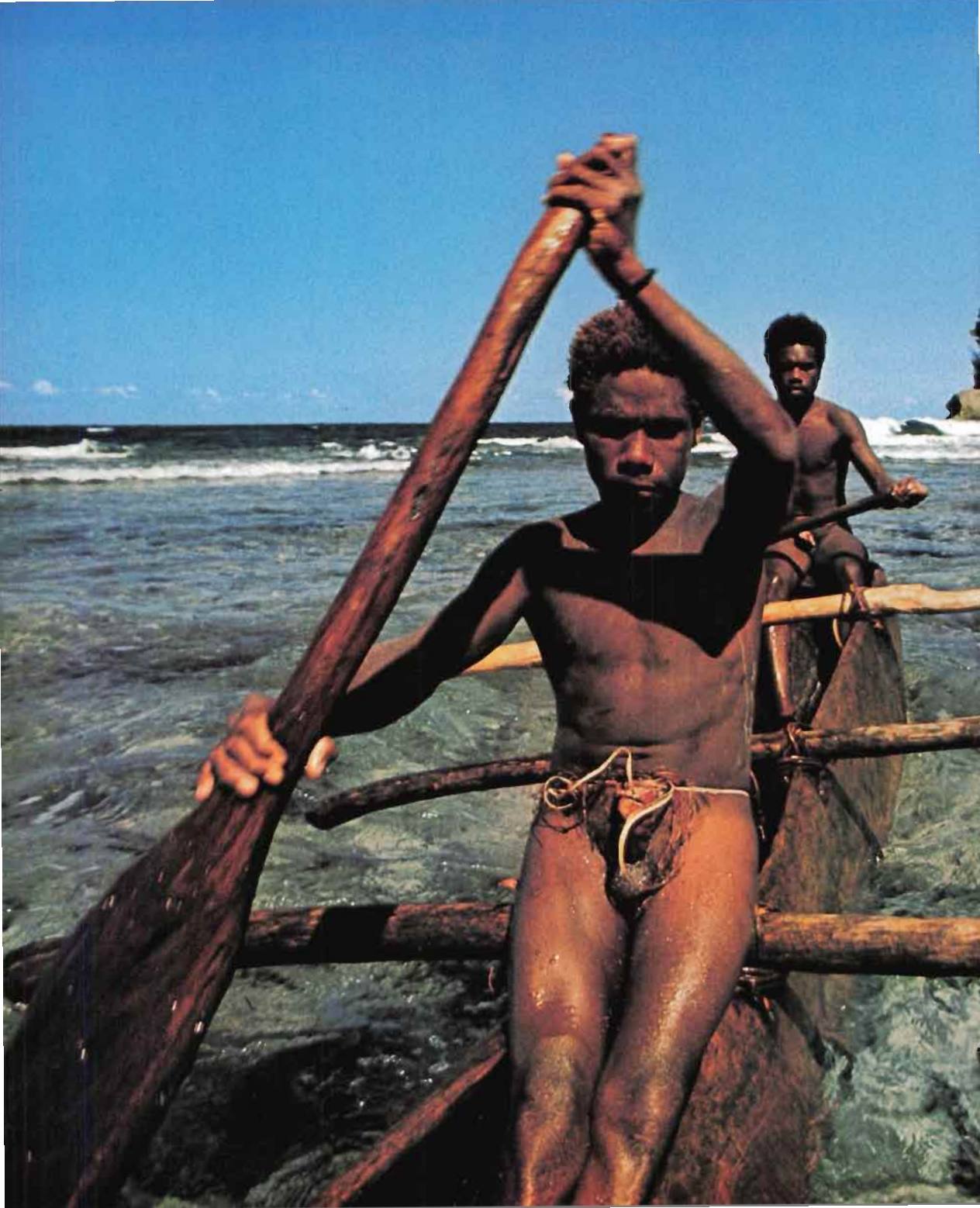




*There is a harmonious combination
of the traditional way of life and
modern ideas at Bunlap.*



Outside influence are not necessarily rejected by the local people; rather, they are adapted to suit their own way of life. Thus the football matches with the players dressed only in nambas and hibiscus leaves.





In former times, outrigger canoes were used for voyaging between the different islands. Although few Melanesians are seafarers, certain tribes living on the coastal strip—“man salt water”—had mastered the art of navigation in the open sea. These tribesmen served as intermediaries between the various tribal groups, and also controlled the inter-island commerce.

Tower jumping

During the months of May and June, soon after the yam harvest, when the lianas have attained their maximum solidity, the men of Bunlap build an immense tower of lianas and wood around a large tree; these towers are often twenty or even twenty-five metres in height. At the base of the tower, which is built on a specially selected site where the ground slopes gently downwards, the soil is cleared of all plants and then

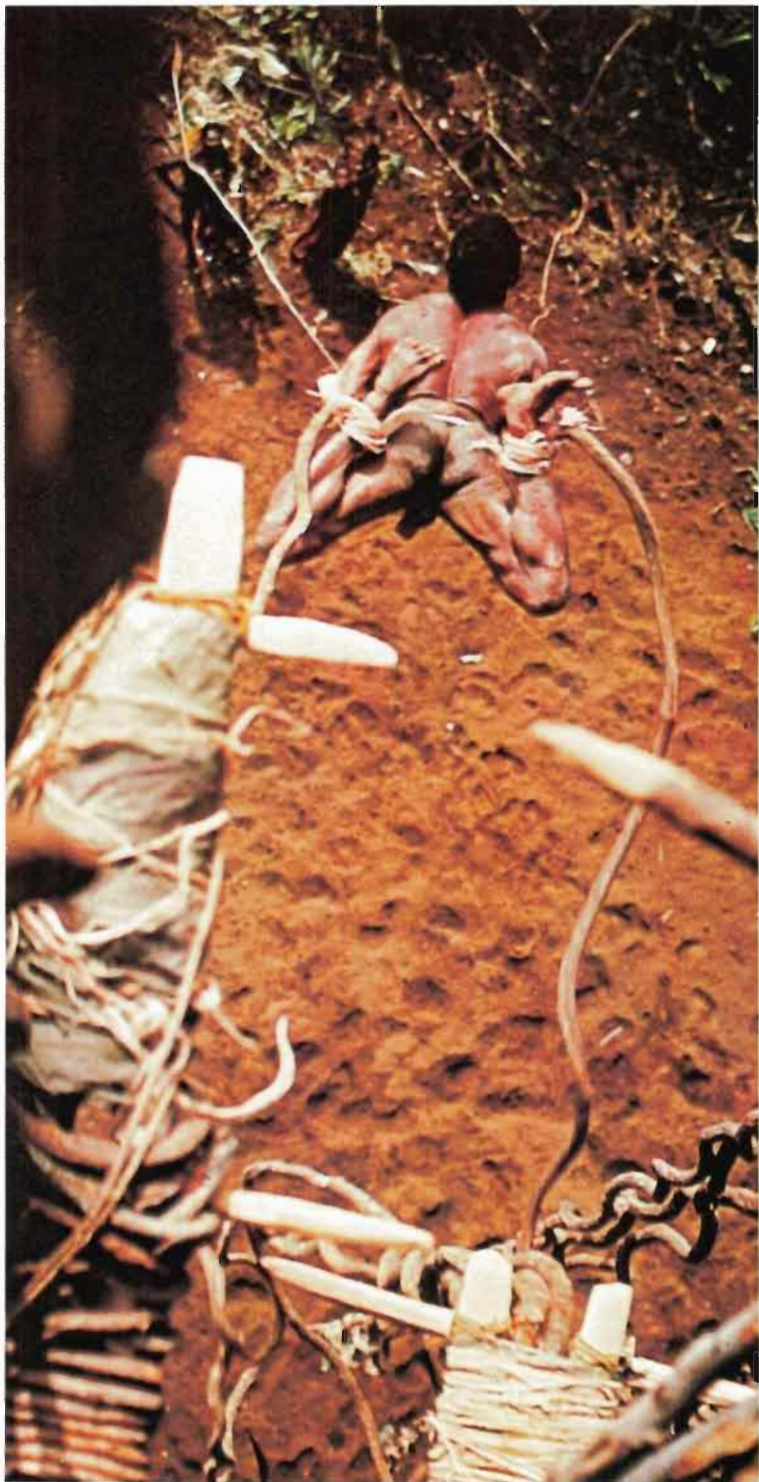




*"The gigantic tower
From which before our eyes leaped
The fuzzy-haired knights."*

*Roger Durand
The Song of Kawa*

*Each leap from the tower is a
dramatic feat in an aura of excitement
as the crowd dance around shouting
and whistling encouragement to the
courageous sky-diver.*



Each diver has built himself the platform from which he will leap into space, his ankles tied to a rope of liana.

carefully prepared; into the tower itself are incorporated dozens of platforms at different heights.

Local tradition has it that tower jumping is indispensable for ensuring a satisfactory yam harvest the following year. It is also said that the first ever leap was made by a woman trying to escape from her husband, who was pursuing her. Just as he was about to grab hold of her, she hurled herself from the top of a banyan tree, having first tied some lianas around her ankles. Whereas her husband fell to his death, she thus managed to escape unhurt.

Since then only the menfolk have had the right to leap. The length of the liana is calculated so that the head of the jumper only just brushes the surface when he reaches the ground. As it stretches out, the liana snaps off the thin branches supporting the platform and thus breaks the shock of the fall. This spectacular sport calls for great technical skill in both constructing the tower and selecting the lianas. As he dives downwards into space, each participant must control his fall so as to land safely. Right from a very early age, the children of Bunlap begin to practice jumping from the lowest platforms of the tower.

The man "dives", his back arched and his arms folded to his chest. His safe descent meets with wild acclaim: the men rush forward to untie the lianas and present him to the members of the tribe, who applaud his audacity and dance in his honour.





santo

The largest island in Vanuatu is Espiritu Santo, which was discovered by Quiros. It is about 4,000 square km in area and in this world of small islands, is like a miniature continent. The population today is over 15000, and a large number of people continue to live in the island's interior, clinging to their almost inaccessible mountain fastnesses in the solitude and the clammy mists found at those altitudes.

The town of Luganville, second largest in Vanuatu, is the offshoot of a French colonial centre which grew up on the Segond Channel early this century. It takes its name from the first captain – Captain Lugan – of the Messageries Maritimes vessel which pioneered a regular service to hitherto isolated



Luganville – also known as Santo, or “the Canal” – is first of all a port and secondly a long, broad street; the town’s layout still follows the plan of the old American camp. The port of Santo is the scene of considerable economic activity. Chinese (usually Cantonese) businessmen play a large part in the import-export trade, and in inter-island shipping.

plantations on the island.

Up until the Second World War the colonial trading centre consisted of little more than a few administrative and religious buildings west of the Sarakata River (St Michel). It has since been rebuilt on the infrastructure laid down by the U.S. Army at the time of the battle for the Solomon Islands. Here too there was an American camp which led a brief but bustling life – there were up to 200,000 men here at one time.

The port of Luganville seems destined by nature to be the vital heart of the northern islands' economy. It exports almost two-thirds of the country's entire coprah production. The last few years have seen considerable growth in cattlebreeding too; over 60,000 out of the country's total of 110,000 head of cattle are to be found in Santo. An international-standard abattoir was built in Luganville in 1977, as well as an oil mill. Finally, the fishery southwest of the town set up in 1957 by a Japanese company, makes an

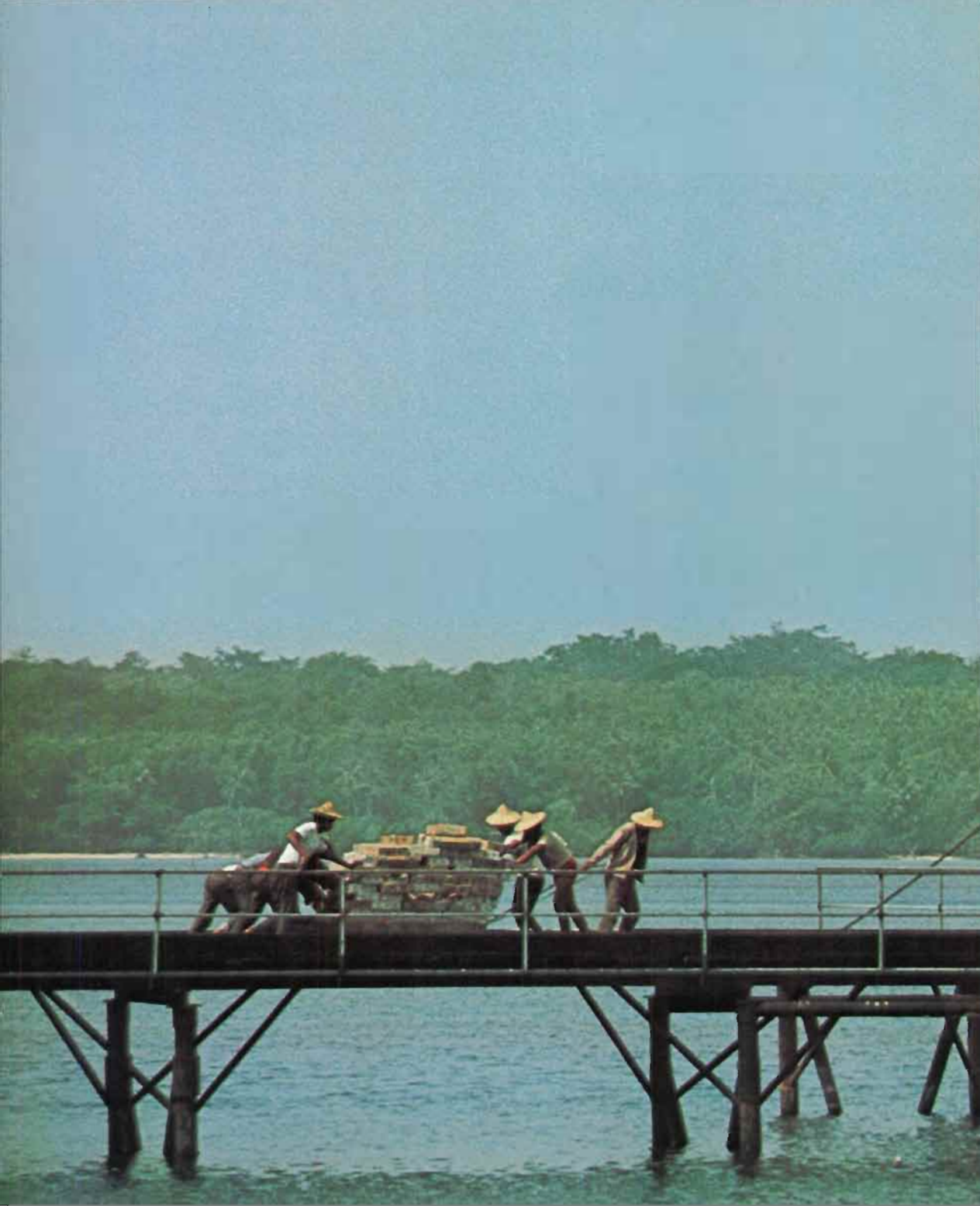
Along Santo's main street crowd Chinese stores, bars, a few hotels and commercial warehouses. Many buildings still consist of the Quonset huts left behind by the American Army.

For example, the old Comptoirs Français des Nouvelles Hébrides store can be seen here on the left; this company was the main French import-export trader (Ballande). Santo's – and

Vanuatu's – principal economic resources derive from exports of coprah (see photo opposite).









important contribution in the form of import duties, to the country's revenues. Santo's potential for economic development is great. The soil is rich and there is plenty of space. The varied landscape is still largely untouched by man and could attract large numbers of tourists in the future. Despite the dramatic political events of 1980, which to some extent brought Santo's expansion to a halt, the economic future of this large island ought to be a bright one.

The entire population of Santo according to the 1979 census was 15,478 and the population density amounted to 4 persons per square kilometre. The vast and fertile plain of Big Bay, where Quiros landed in 1606, is now virtually deserted. Most of the former inhabitants have either disappeared with the last century's epidemics or have moved to Port Olry village. Many agricultural schemes centre on Santo, especially in Big Bay, such as a rice-cultivation project similar to that existing in Guadal-canal.





A few kilometers from the "canal" on the peninsula of Palikolo is the base of the Japanese fishing fleet, which operates in the open seas for tuna and bonito. The higher grade posts in the company are held by Japanese, while the boat's crews are mostly Koreans and Formosans. The cannery workers are from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, or local people. On busy days in the port, Palikolo looks for all the world like a meeting place for exotic Chinese junks







malakula

Malakula is the second largest island in the Group. In 1774 Cook discovered the best natural harbour in the country here in Lamap Bay (Port Sandwich). The climate, however, was favourable to malaria and prevented the development of a real urban centre. On the fertile eastern coastal plain, European plantations were at one time numerous and had their times of glory – and of decline.

On the tiny northern islands of Vao, Wala, Rano, Atchin, Uripiv and others, the large and active Melanesian population became involved very early in plantation agriculture of which coprah is the principal product. Many businessmen have since emerged from these coastal communities. Having mastered the business of making and selling coprah, some of them have taken over the inter-island transport network with their Toyota taxis and small motorboats, speedboats or coastal trading launches – and have gradually taken the place of the European planters.

European colonization has “gone with the wind”, and nothing now remains but the old Plantations Réunies des Nouvelles Hébrides at Norsup. This is probably one of the largest economic enterprises Vanuatu has seen. An immense plateau of some 1,500 hectares (about 3,500 acres) is planted with coconut palms and cocoa trees. The labour force, which for many years was exclusively Tonkinese, is now made up mostly of Melanesians who live

Norsup



A tribal woman from the interior of Malakula. Until ten years ago, the Big and the Small Nambas had only very limited contact with the outside world.

in villages around the periphery of the plantation. Some workers from the Wallis and Gilbert and Ellice Islands are also indentured under contract. As at Santo, the raising of cattle, which were first introduced to keep down the grass between the coconut, palms, could well become a very profitable industry in the near future.

Herds of several thousand cattle are rotated between the different fields, each fenced with barbed wire. "Stockmen" (a word originally coined in Australia) care for and handle the beasts. Working on horseback, they drive the cattle into paddocks between lines of swaying coconut palms.

A small village is slowly evolving on the outskirts of the Norsup plantation and its aerodrome. The administrative centre and the school have been enlarged; the hospital was recently rebuilt. Thus Norsup is taking the place of Lamap, the main town of the central and northern islands.

In the interior of the island, living quite apart from this modern world which they observe in awed silence, live the tribes known as the Big Nambas and the Small Nambas: they constitute the other face of Malakula – a rather tragic one, hidden away from the rest of civilization.

The island's east coast and its small offshore islands are well populated. Many large coconut and cacao plantation can be found there. On the other hand, the interior of Malakula was until recent years isolated from the outside world and its original population has consistently decreased. The west coast, which is sometimes inaccessible, is sparsely populated, and most of its population came down from the interior during the past twenty years. South West Bay has become a centre for this area, especially since the opening of a small airfield.



There has been increasing development at Norsup and the airfield there has flights from the principal islands of the archipelago. Norsup is now a major centre, one of the three "towns" of Vanuatu, as the locals say.



The women of the Big Namba tribe are the only ones in the entire archipelago who wear a headdress made from red fibres and pulled down over the forehead, somewhat like the Chimbos and other mountain people of New Guinea.



The Big Nambas

This is the name given by Europeans to the tribesmen who live on the plateau to the north-east of the island, and who are the only indigenes of Vanuatu to wear a large penis sheath made of pandanus fibres, dyed red.

Since early times, these people have lived in virtual isolation, in a permanent state of warring with their near neighbours, the Diraks. This latter tribe lost so many of its members in battles with the Big Nambas that they were obliged to flee the plateau and seek refuge in the mission stations near the coast.

Before the Second World War, the reputation of the Big Nambas was so fearsome that very few foreigners ever dared venture into their territory, nor even upon the paths which led to their villages. The Big Nambas staked out their domain with bunches of knotted grass that warned off any would-be trespassers with the penalty of death.

Nowadays, most of the Big Nambas have abandoned their mountainous homelands to settle on the coastal plain, where many have been converted to Christianity and have begun practising agriculture. Several new villages have been formed, the most important of these being Tenmaru, Leviamp, Brennwe and Unmet. There are not more

Viriambat (centre) is the big custom chief of Amok, on the Big Nambas plateau. He is seen here, surrounded by his children, talking to another traditional chief, Bong of South Pentecost, who has since died.

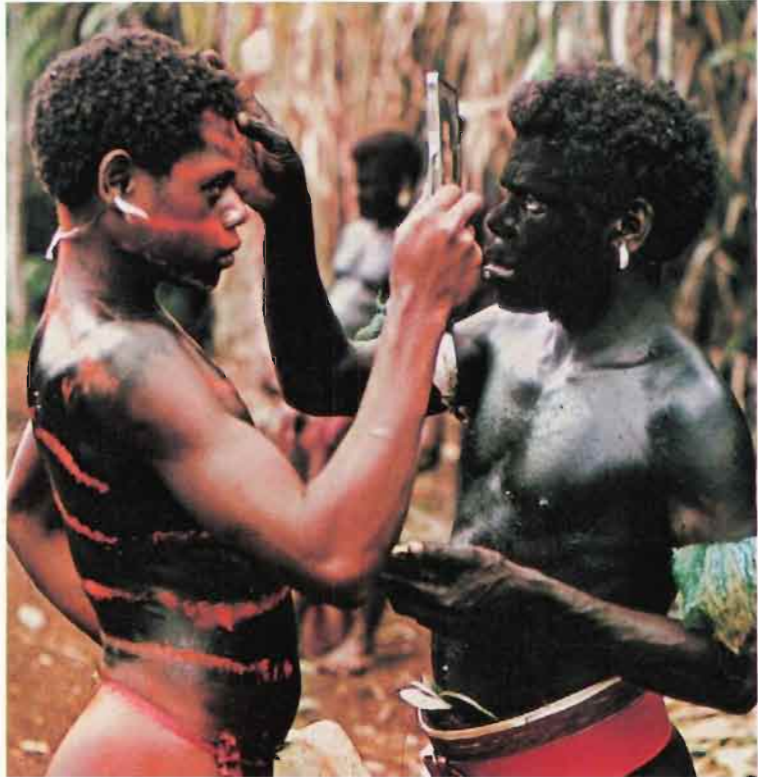


than a hundred Big Nambas left on their high mountain plateau, living around the *nakamal* of Amok under the leadership of their chief, Viriambat.

The only way to reach Amok is by a narrow footpath, some eight hours' walk from Norsup. The remaining tribesmen still cling to their traditional architecture—the huge *nakamals* with their steep roofs crowned with carved wooden arrows, which are found only in this region of Malinkolo. High fences of bamboo or reeds encircle the women's huts, with half-starved dogs and tame pigs roaming in between them. There is also a traditional dance ground with huge drums where the important ceremonies and pig-slaughtering take place.

Apart from their tribal feuds, the daily life of these Big Nambas remains almost untouched by the twentieth century. The only things that have reached them from the outside world are some swords, old-fashioned rifles and acrid stick tobacco, which they smoke in clay pipes.

The power and influence of their pagan chief, Viriambat, extends not only over Amok, but also over the semi-Christianized villages near the coast. He is the heir,



Every important event in the community and family life is marked by a specified ritual, as well as by dances and various ceremonies. The men and women of the tribe paint their faces and bodies for such occasions.

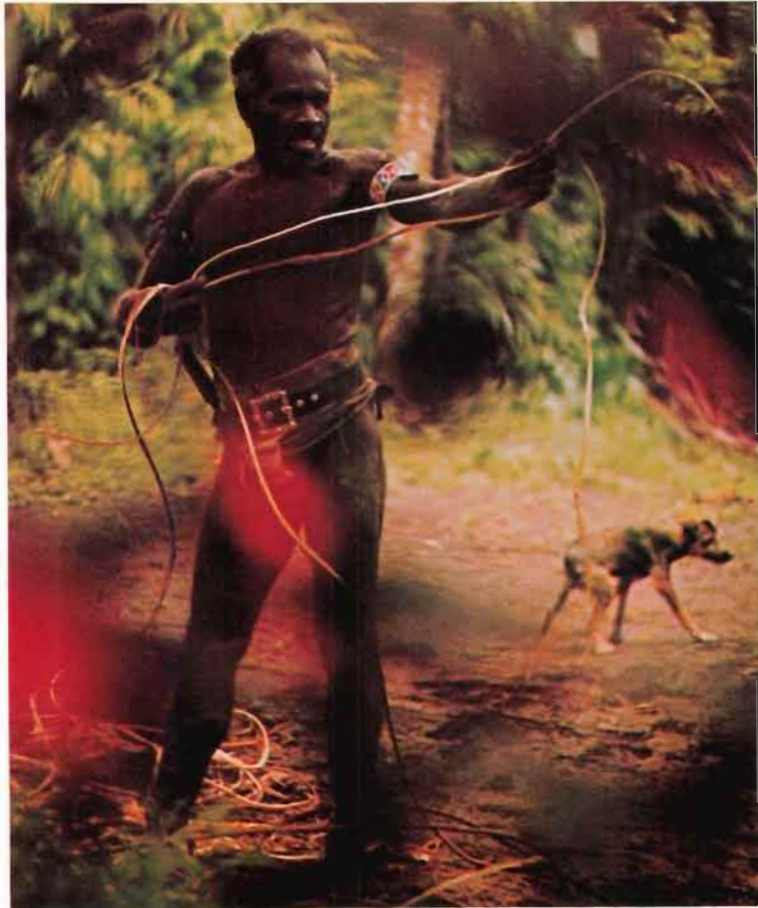


nowadays a peaceful one, of a long line of fierce and war-mongering chieftains whose absolute and autocratic power has been handed down from father to son since earliest times.

Although Amok remains isolated from Western civilization, the outside world holds ever-growing fascination for the last of the Big Nambas. Money has inevitably found its way into the village, and the "skul" (a Bislama word which usually refers to the missions) is an increasing attraction. It seems unlikely that the small and picturesque enclave of Amok can be sheltered for much longer from the process of evolution which steadily encroaches upon the traditional lives of most Melanesian tribes.

On the high peaks, or clinging to the inaccessible steep slopes of the central mountain chain, the Small Nambas are dispersed in groups of thirty or forty people.

The Small Nambas



The last villages of the Small Nambas in the south of Malinkolo are even more isolated. Without a guide one could never find their hamlets, situated some two days' walk from South West Bay, and which are the last remnants of a civilization which once extended over the whole south of the island.

On the summits or the steep slopes of the central mountain chain, the Small Nambas are dispersed in groups of 30 or 40 people.



As he passes through the hierarchy of the grades (*namangui*), each male firmly believes that he is nearing the world inhabited by his deceased ancestors. The old chief is already seen as an ancestor and as such, his power is absolute. He eats alone and must never be interrupted by noise or the sight of other living beings. Thus, his solitude is that of the gods.

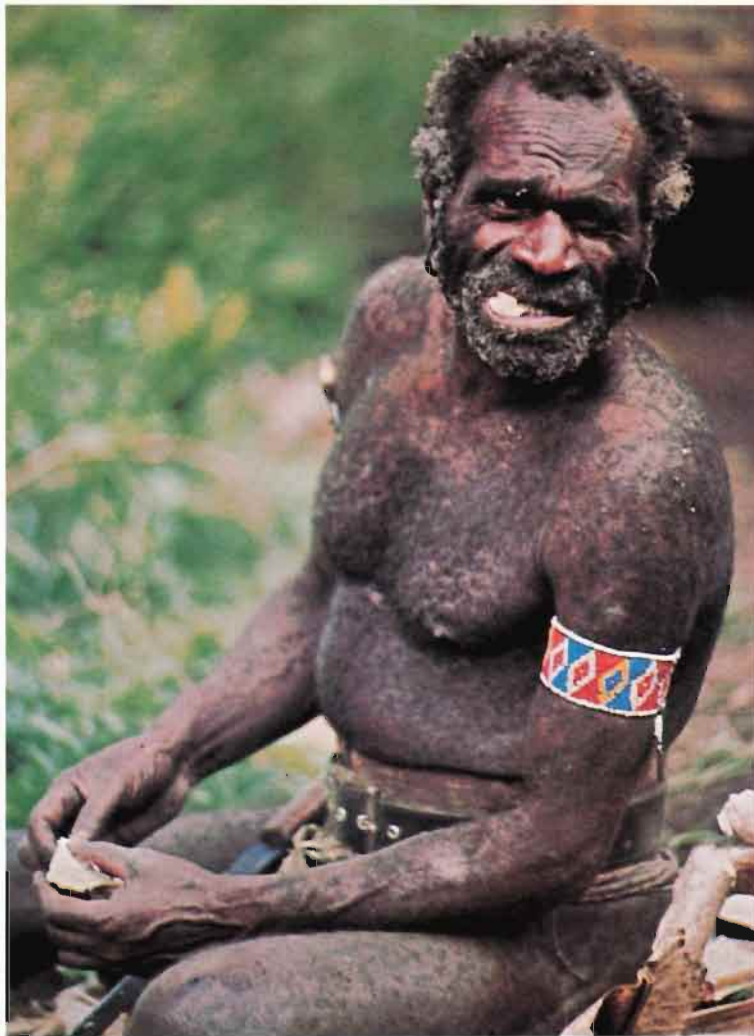
The men and women live in strictly separate communities, the former with their *nakamals* and even their own foot-paths, while the women stay together in their huts, forbidden to walk on the paths of their menfolk. The role and duties of the women are well-defined and include such tasks as the weaving of mats and work in the fields.



The art of the Small Nambas still flourishes and is astonishingly productive. It is directly related to competition in the system of grades, and also to ancestor worship, which constitutes the spiritual basis of their society. Opposite: an old chief wearing bracelets of pigs' tusks which signify the grades he has achieved during his lifetime.

They also have their own system of grades and special celebrations, the latter conducted with great enthusiasm and care for the traditions.

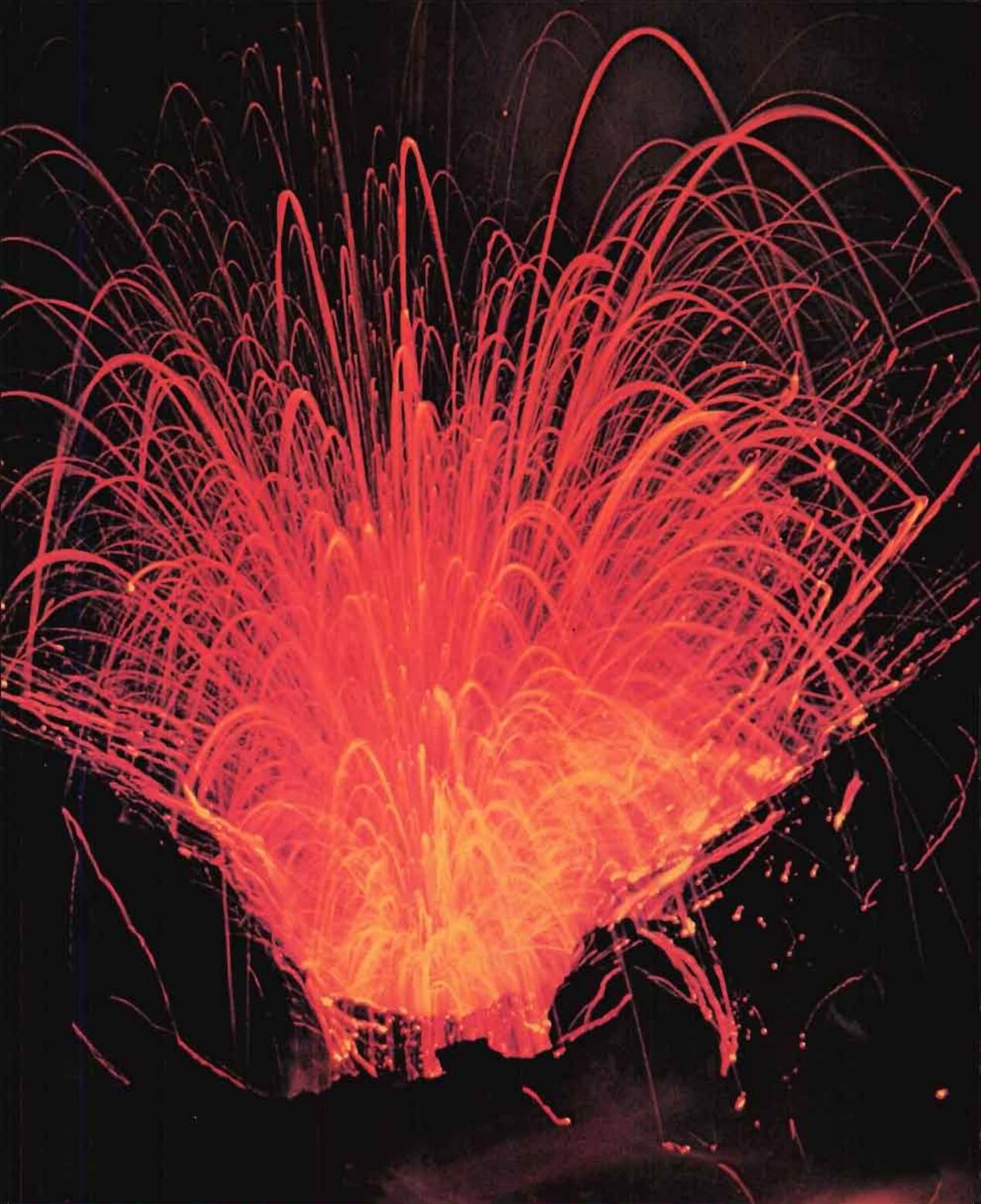
In 1920, a young English ethnologist from Oxford University, A.B. Deacon, made the first serious study of tribal society in Vanuatu. Having lived alone among the Small Nambas for one year, he then fell ill with blackwater fever and died at South West Bay while waiting for a ship to take him to Port Vila. The book edited from his field notes which he wrote each day, was published posthumously under the title of "Vanishing People of Vanuatu", and is still acknowledged as being the most authoritative guide to the civilization of the Small Nambas.



Until quite recent times, disease, internal strife and the monopolizing of many women by the old tribal chiefs, caused many people to predict the demise of these bushmen. However, the tribes seem nowadays to be regaining their vitality: children are thriving and once again numerous, while the sale of masks and carvings to collectors is beginning to develop into a lucrative activity. Certainly, as long as the present tribal chiefs live, the traditional values and proud indifferences of the Small Nambas to attractions of the outside world, will be maintained.







tanna

Tanna's distinctiveness has to do first of all with its distinctive landscapes. Within this one island can be found virtually all the varieties of scenery the Group has to offer, bathed in a special light which, in the middle of the South Seas, reminds one of the Mediterranean. Moist tropical forest, characterized here by an abundance of tree-ferns, alternates with more open woods and grasslands such as the Whitegrass plain, the result of bush-fires lit by man. On the island's eastern slopes, the continually active volcano Yasur, produces a violent eruption regularly every 10 or 15 minutes, accompanied each time by smoke and a shower of ash.

At the foot of Yasur lies the village of Sulphur Bay, or Ipeukel. The people of this village have become the leaders of a strange composite religion based on the message of a mythical hero called John Frum. This prophet appeared in the south of the island shortly before the Second World War. Tanna was then nominally Christian, and was held up by the Presbyterian Mission as an example of particularly successful evangelization. John Frum destroyed this little "kingdom", preaching a return to "Custom" and making millenarian prophesies. The islanders took him for the son or the messenger of Karapanemum, the black god of Tannese tradition, whose seat is at the summit of Mount Tukosmera. The early Presbyterians considered Karapeneum an incarnation of the Devil.

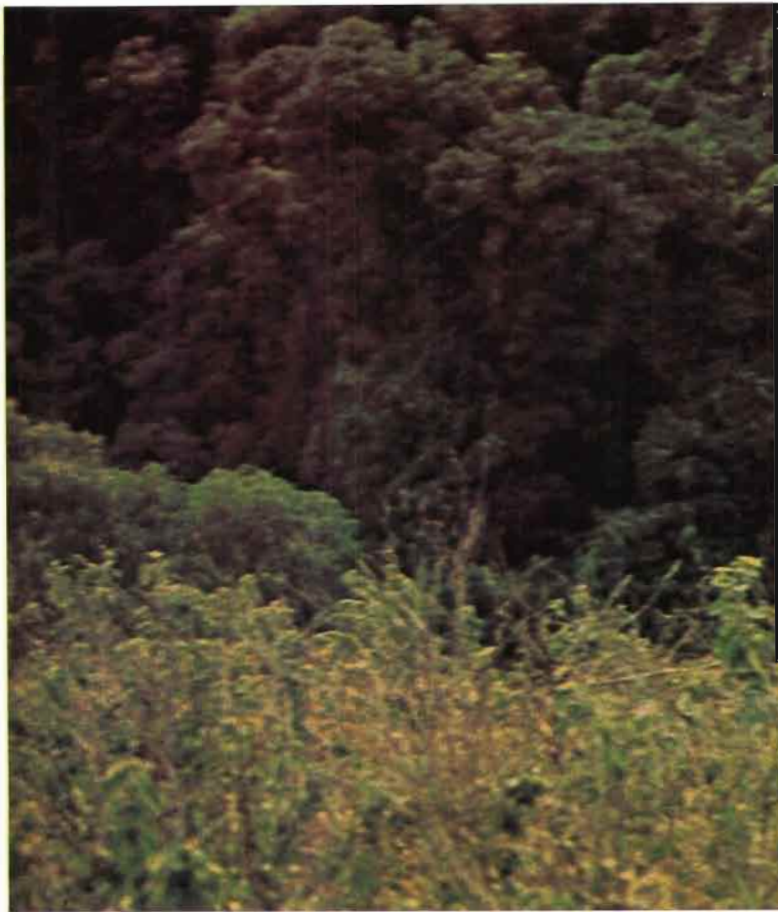
By 1940 the population of the large Christian Tannese



The island of Tanna is marked by the fire and the intermittent rumblings of Yasur volcano. The volcano plays an essential role in the thinking and in the Custom of Tanna. To the people of eastern slopes, it represents the magic place from which sprang the sacred stones, or kapiel, which explain the creation of the world and still continue to give it life.

villages which had gone over to John Frum had begun to dwindle as one large group after another went back to their former village sites. They learned again the Custom of their ancestors, and sometimes they even reinvented it, having forgotten it in the past half century. They began once again to practice all the things the missionaries had prohibited, all the traditional songs, dances and rituals. Ritual kava-drinking, in particular, became in itself a symbol of this return to tradition. At this time a curtain of mistrust fell across Tanna isolating representatives of the administration and religious officials from the rest of the population. Rather than being simply a rebellion on the part of John Frum's followers, it was more a total refusal to cooperate with white authority.

Repression by the Condominium Government was severe, and continued for 17 years. The leaders and visionaries, who kept the movement constantly fed with accounts of their

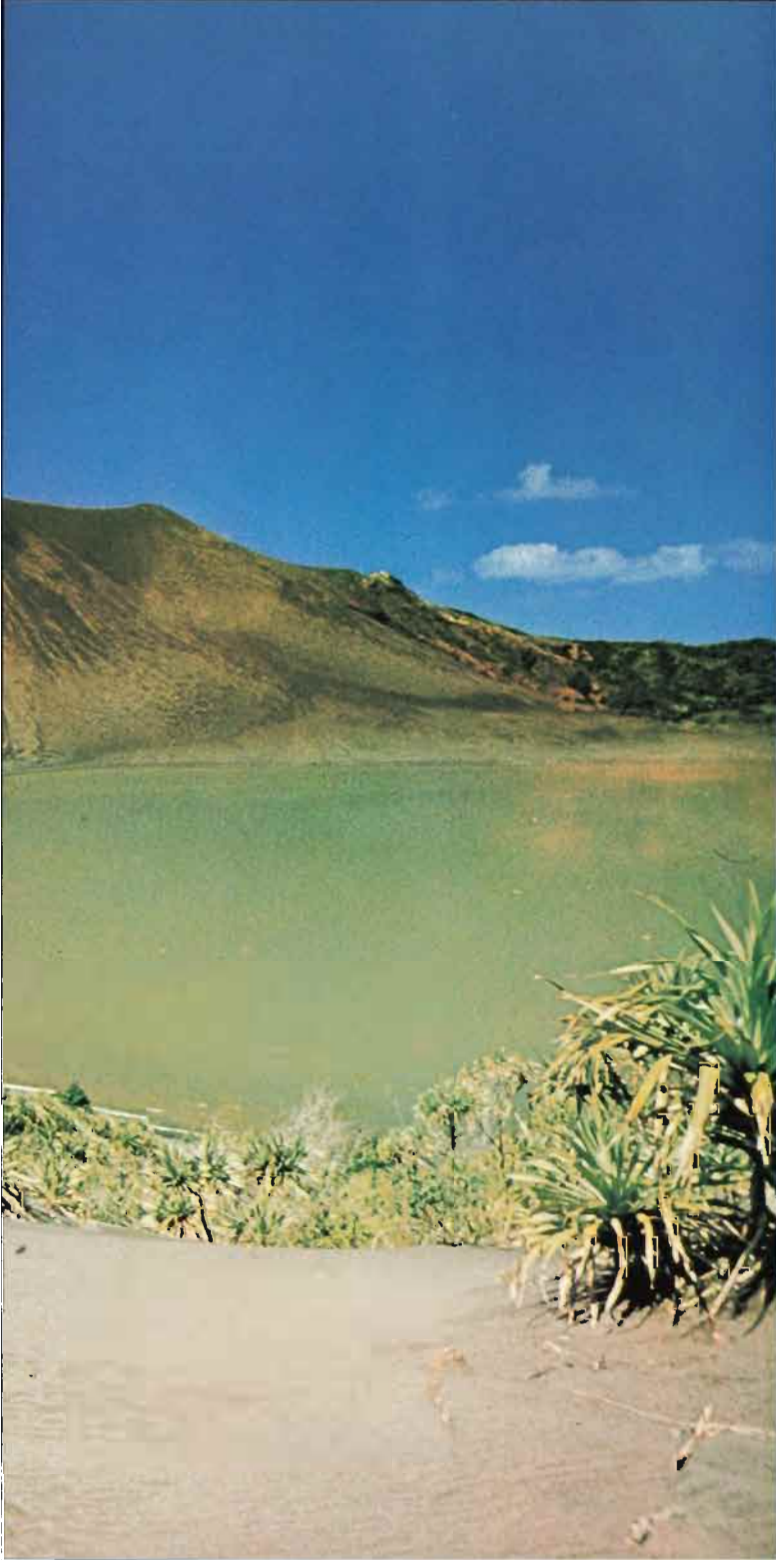


A type of small and very hardy fern which turns white during the dry season and is known locally as "white grass" grows on a deserted plateau to the north of Lénakel.

This region has become the refuge of several hundred wild horses which live in herds, and are now a major attraction for visitors to Tanna and amateur photographers or films makers, who enjoy following the herds in Land Rovers.



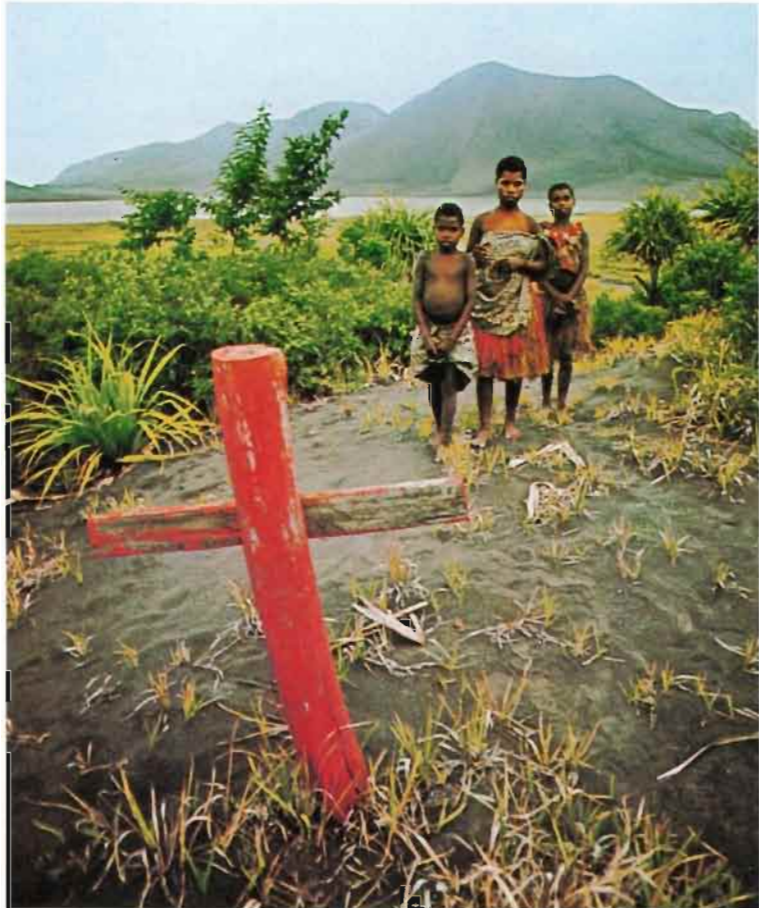




At the East point of the island, the cone of the Yasür volcano, 300 metres in height, dominates a plain of ashes with scenery like a moonscape. At the foot of the crater, a lake with ever-changing contours and dotted here and there with hardy pandanus, adds to the strangeness of this denuded ochre landscape which constantly exudes the overpowering odour of sulphur.

dreams, were arrested and sentenced to deportation from their island. The John Frum movement did not, however, disappear; on the contrary, it appears to have been continually strengthened rather than disarmed by repression. What, after all, can a police force do against an insurrection of the imagination, against those who follow the path of dreams in their search for freedom?

Out of this story there emerged a new doctrine, a new world-view, a new identity. The John Frum movement is probably wrongly described as a cargo cult. Essentially what the people of Tanna sought to create was a new religion, unimpeded by their guardian Presbyterian pastors. This religion is based on a marriage between the great creation myths of Tanna and the myths of the Bible. John's disciples see it as a new road of alliance which will enable them to enter into a direct relationship with the United States, that vast and powerful country whose lost brothers they consider



The red cross is the John Frum movement's symbol. Its colour represents the unity of all men, black and white, through blood, and its form represents continuity with the Christian message brought by the missionaries.

themselves to be. Even today, parts of Tanna still follow the word of John Frum.

The identification of John Frum with America occurred during the last World War, when many Tannese worked at the American bases on Efate. There, they discovered the fantastic material wealth of the U.S. Army and concluded that John Frum had American origins. The same superhuman magical strength could effectively provide an extraordinary wealth, the U.S. Army, and a powerful mystic message. So John became a messenger from America, the source of magic power, and a "road" for a new alliance. Because of this Tannese regard Americans as brothers. Yet Tannese in fact are not just "small brothers": thanks to their customs, they are equal. While the Americans know the secrets of Science and Technology, the Tannese know the secrets of nature.

One aspect of the John Frum cult is the revival of

The red cross of John Frum stands in the middle of Ipeukel village. According to the inhabitants, John lived with them before appearing to a wider public in the southern part of the island. Every Friday night, people from the other John Frum villages go, or send representatives, to Ipeukel for a night of dancing to the sound of guitars in honour of John Frum. This village has always been assigned a key role in Tanna's traditional creation myth.



Lap-Lap



customs. The cultists share this revival not just with those who have remained pagan, but also with Tannese Christians. The old customs are effectively still alive in Tanna island, and the preparation of lap-lap, the drinking of kava, the feasts of circumcision and the toka rituals are living symbols of this revival.

Throughout Vanuatu, the principal meal of the day is eaten in the evening when the womenfolk return from working in the fields, their baskets heavily laden with taros, yams and dry wood to make the fire. The food is served on fresh banana leaves or in wooden bowls.

The traditional dish of Vanuatu is *lap-lap* and no occasion, be it a simple evening meal or a celebration feast, is too insignificant or too important for it to be served.

Lap-lap is prepared from taros or yams, the two most widely cultivated vegetables of the region. These are first grated and pulverized, then mixed with coconut milk and flavoured with the aromatic leaves of local trees. The mixture is then carefully wrapped in banana leaves to make sealed parcels which are then wrapped in banana leaves to make sealed parcels which are then cooked in an earth oven.

A wood fire is kindled in a hole in the ground and covered with volcanic stones. When the stones are very hot, the packages of *lap-lap* are placed upon them, and the oven covered with leaves and earth to extinguish the fire. After several hours, the oven is opened and the cooked food taken out ready to be served.

On special occasions, pieces of chicken or pork are mixed with the *lap-lap*: during ceremonial feasts, the *lap-lap* is carefully divided between the guests in a way which symbolizes the rank of each person in the hierarchy of the tribe.



Lap-lap is the traditional Vanuatan dish. The different varieties of taros and yams provide subtle changes in flavour.





Kava

In some islands of the archipelago, in particular Tanna, but also Aoba, Pentecôte, Maewo and Tongoa, the communal drinking of *kava* plays an essential role in the lives of the people.

Kava, often referred to locally as “native beer”, is made from the roots of *Piper methysticum*—a plant belonging to the pepper family. Although it is not a drug in the real sense of the word, *kava* provokes a sense of euphoria and a general numbness, particularly around the mouth. It is rarely addictive. The taste varies according to the age of the plant from which the *kava* has been made and also the variety of the plant, but it is generally bitter and pungent, and the uninitiated are seldom able to appreciate their first taste of it.

At Tanna, it seems that the consumption of *kava* has increased as a kind of reaction to the prohibitions proscribed by the missionaries. Almost every evening finds the entire male population gathered together to partake of copious quantities of this brew.

In the evenings, the men of the village gather at the dance ground to drink kava, the preparation of which is a ritual laid down by long-standing tradition. It also plays an essential role in the life of the community; to drink kava with someone is a sign of both alliance and friendship.



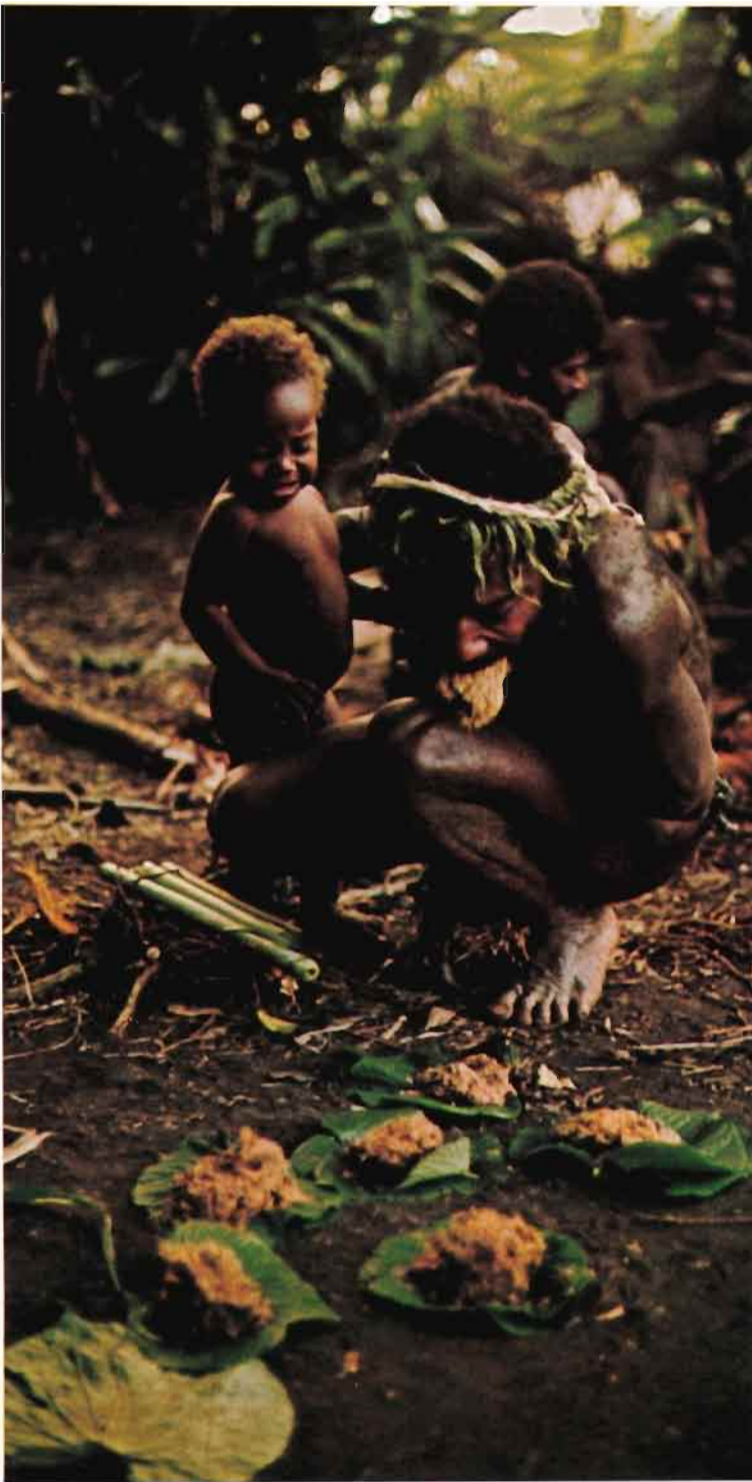
The roots are brought to the *nakamal* each afternoon by the youths of the village who then prepare the beverage for those of a superior age. Whenever there are visitors present, the host himself, as a sign of friendship, prepares the *kava*. If two friends of equal rank wish to celebrate their brotherhood, each one prepares the *kava* of the other.

Methods of preparing *kava* vary according to the region: the roots are grated in the northern islands, while at Tanna they are chewed well before being spat out on to leaves. Water is then poured over the grated or chewed *kava* which is filtered through coconut fibres into a bowl made from an empty half coconut shell.

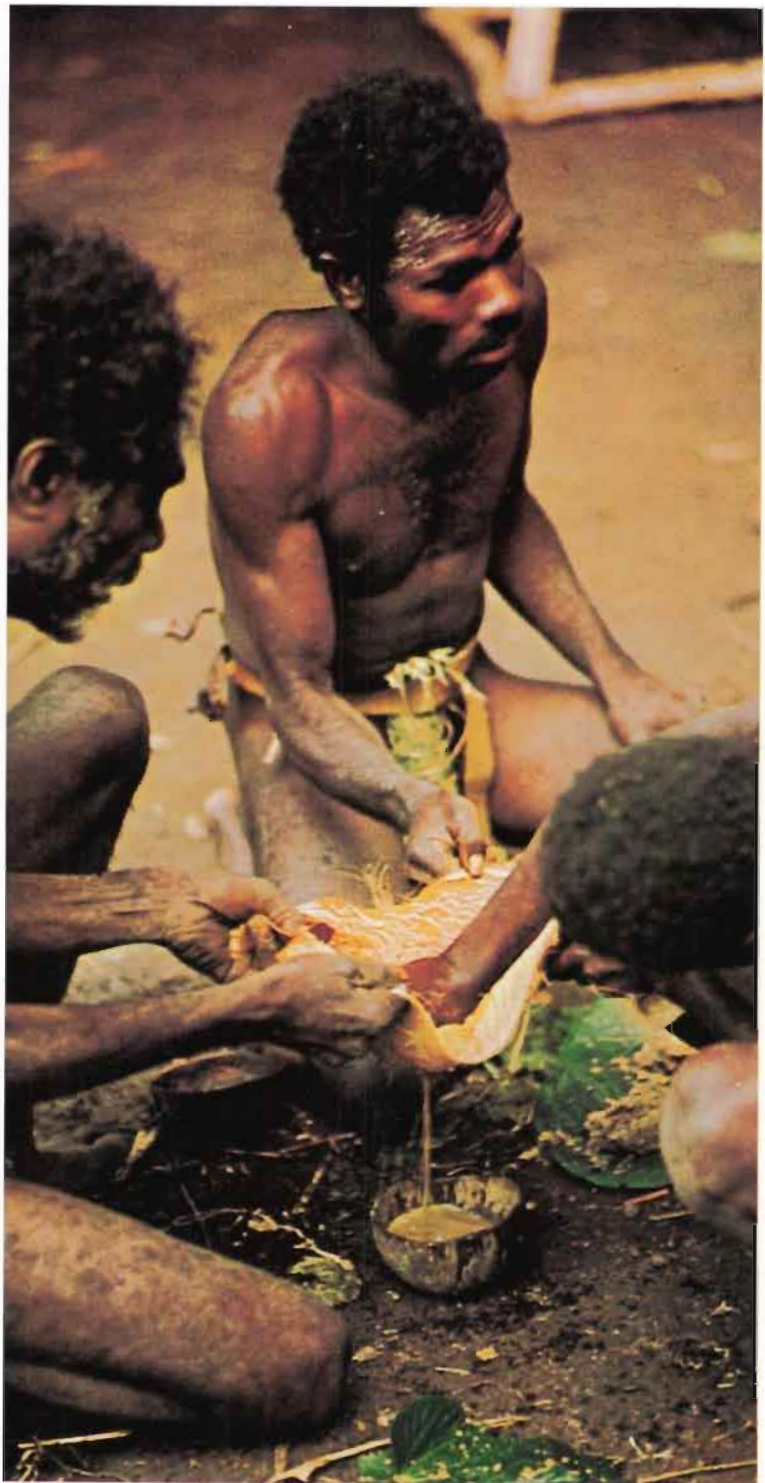
According to local etiquette, the *kava* must be drunk in a single draught and amid complete silence. It is then perfectly acceptable for the drinker to spit as much as he wishes. Should the first draught not produce the

*Each man chew kava for his neighbour.
It would be a serious breach of the
traditional code of courtesy not to take
part in this social exchange system.*





Each "leaf" of kava chewed is a single dose. The first is the strongest, the one which makes you drunk, but the effects can be prolonged by drinking the makas, a Bislama term meaning chewed kava steeped in water a second time.



The kava is steeped in water using a wad of coconut fibre as a filter. A half coconut shell or a banana leaf serves as a container. On Tanna, as soon as the first man has drunk his kava and the effects of the sought-after drunkenness begin to make themselves felt, complete silence gradually falls on the dance ground. Each man then withdraws into himself, and listens to the song of the kava deep within him as he sits by a glowing fire.

desired effect, it is almost certain that the following two or three will rapidly do so. The Vanuatans swear that as a sleeping draught, or to help one relax after a hard day's toil, there is nothing so effective as a goodly quantity of strong *kava*.



*"And thus by the roots of kava
Each evening abandon this world
The men of ashes and shadows
To return to the depths of ancient
times".*

*Roger Durand
(The Song of Kava)*

the toka

With the return to Custom that accompanied the rise of the John Frum movement, Tanna's most important rituals reappeared. The *Toka* is the biggest of these; what it is, in fact, is a traditional dance representing the high point in a ritual exchange cycle between two alliance networks. This far-reaching exchange cycle is called the *nekowiar*.

Formerly, the *nekowiar* brought periods of warfare to a close with rites involving the exchange of pigs and traditional root vegetables, and ceremonial dances. These days it tends to be a renewal of long-standing alliances. Social harmony depends in part on its periodic celebration.



This man, with his son on his shoulders, has placed a small kweriya on his head. This plume shows that he is a member of the local kweriya "aristocracy". Only Tanna's honorary chiefs are entitled to wear it (Transpose the two photos on pages 102 and 103, if possible).

Festivities begin on the eve of the *toka* itself. As evening falls, hundreds of men and women – neighbours or allies of the groups involved – arrive to crowd onto the dance ground belonging to the group which has issued the invitation. For the coming night the women of the group will reign supreme over the dance ground. Until dawn breaks they will dance the *napën-napën* and beat time on their small baskets of plaited pandanus fibre. Allies and guests will whirl around them, dancing to the rhythm of the women's song. This is the *kahwüa*. The *kahwüa* circles and snakes around the *napën-napën* dancers like a long, singing caterpillar, covering the whole dance ground. On this night men and women mingle in the dance. Traditionally a certain freedom is tolerated during these Custom night dances.



The *Kweriya* is a ceremonial plume about two metres high, constructed on a bundle of reeds around which cock's feathers and white chicken feathers are interwoven and topped by black feathers from a sparrowhawk. The *kweriya* or sparrowhawk is the symbol of chieftdom on Tanna. It is brought in shortly before the *toka* dance, when the two alliance networks are about to begin the exchange of dances and gifts which make up the *nekowiari*. The honour of the *kweriya* is heightened by the beauty of the *nekowiari*.

The night dances become more frenzied as dawn approaches; the frantic rhythm intensifies until the moment when it stops dead as dawn abruptly breaks. In the silence which suddenly floods the dance ground, everyone awaits the men's dance – the *toka*.

The guests appear, preceded by a group of men wearing the big *kweriya*, a sort of ceremonial plume about two metres tall. The *kweriya*, or sparrowhawk, lord of the skies, is the symbol of Tannese Custom. The dancers, men and women, wear one or more plumes stuck in their hair, according to their honorific rank. All these decorations are replicas of the big ceremonial plume which is at the heart of the *nekowiar*.

In order to prepare themselves to dance the *toka*, the men train for months in advance in a secret part of the forest, fasting, denying themselves all contact with women, and observing numerous prohibitions. Every *toka* dance has a connection with the tilling of the soil; its purpose is to increase the fecundity of Tanna's magical gardens. The men dance, and as they dance they give the rhythm with their



The men, women and children who are going to dance first rub themselves with coconut oil and scented leaves, and paint their faces with ritual patterns. On the eve of the ritual some will have bathed in a magical spring to purify and temper their bodies for the dancing to come. The beauty and strength of the dancers is one of the elements in the competitive ritual.









singing, their hand-clapping and the sound of their feet on the earth. They dance in a circle symbolizing the mound where the giant yam grows, and when from time to time a dancer burst at right angles out of the circle and runs for a considerable distance, he is representing the way the yam vine shoots upwards. In their hands the *toka* dancers hold a wooden stick, the white-painted extremity of which ends in a beak. Waving this stick throughout the dance, they imitate the gesture of drawing gifts towards them.

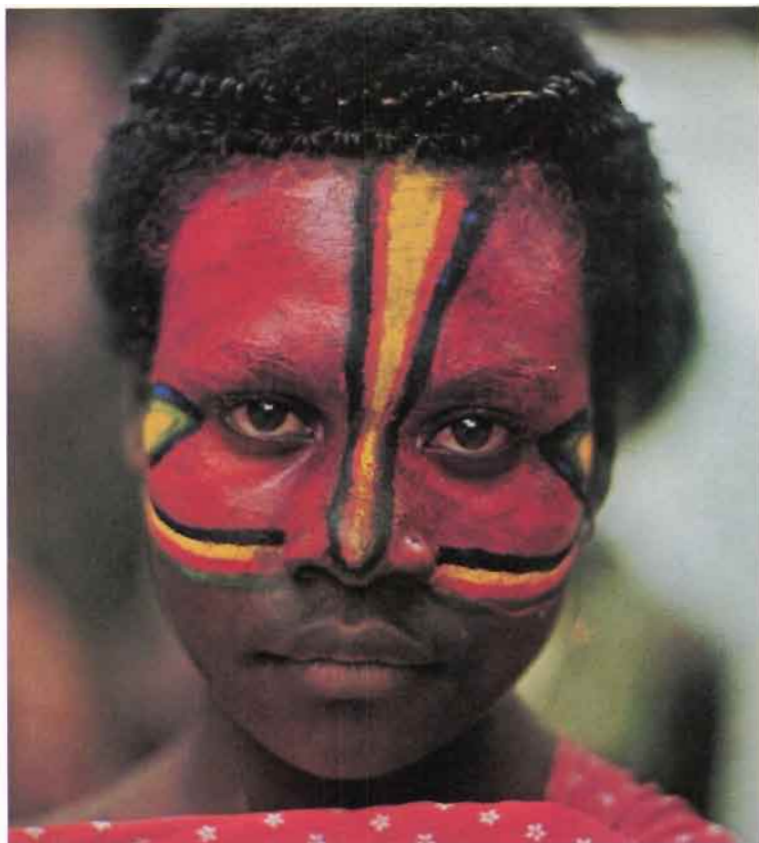
Then comes the *nao* in response to the *toka*. This dance is performed by the men of the host group and their allies. After exhibiting their own *kweriya*, the *nao* dancers strike the ground, as they dance, with long bunches of knotted reeds. This gesture refers to the piles of presents they will later be offering. All morning and late into the afternoon one dancing group will follow another, performing dances with many themes, imitating the gestures of everyday life (hunting scenes, fishing, agrarian themes), or of war.

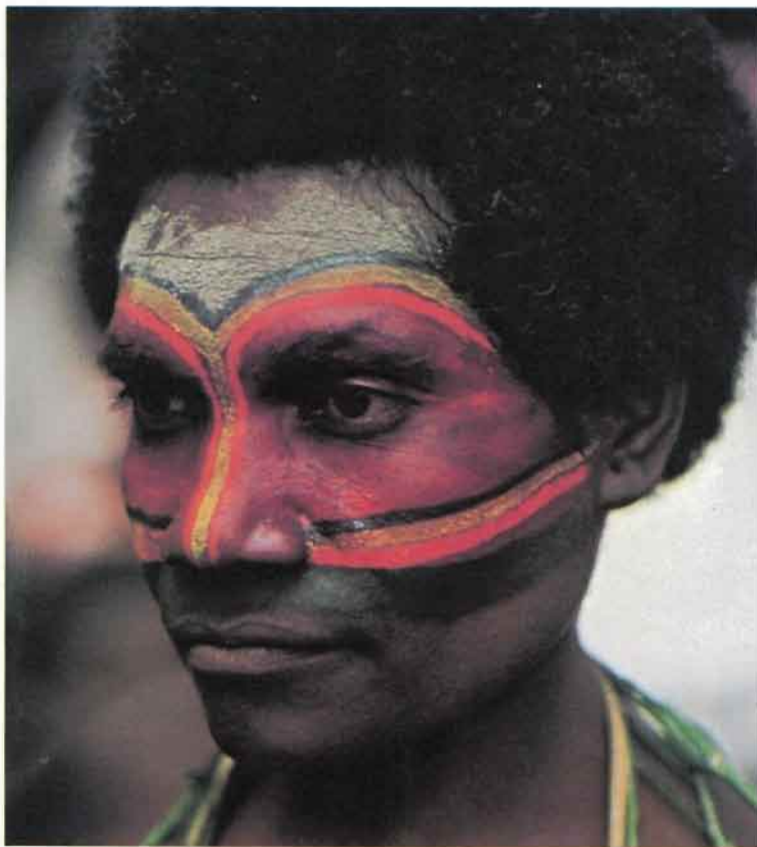
Towards the end of the afternoon, the *nao* people, which means the hosts of the *nekowiar*, "pay" their guests who have danced the *toka* on their dancing ground. Then, a sort of giant gift-giving ceremony takes place; dozens upon dozens of pigs, sometimes up to sixty, are presented and killed, and then lined up in the centre of the dancing ground. The two groups enter into a long and complicated activity which continues for the rest of the day. Each family belonging to the group which has sponsored the *nekowiar* joins in the presentation of the pig sacrifice. The pigs are tied to a long pole and carried towards the centre of the arena to the sound of songs which have been composed especially for this occasion. One or several children, with plumes in their hair, are often hoisted on the backs of the squealing beasts. On arrival at the appointed spot, the pigs are killed with a blow from the ceremonial club, and then hauled a short distance aside to make room for the next.

When all the pigs have been killed, a similar ceremony takes place to present the *kava* roots. These are carried on stage to the accompaniment of yet more new songs, and are placed in a line parallel to that of the dead pigs. All these ceremonial offerings are then presented by the people of the dancing place – the *nao* group – to their allies and guests – the *toka* group –.

Two or three weeks after this great event, the *toka* group returns an invitation to their former hosts. An equal number of pigs is offered and slaughtered, the fat and hairless pig being considered of the greatest value. This private

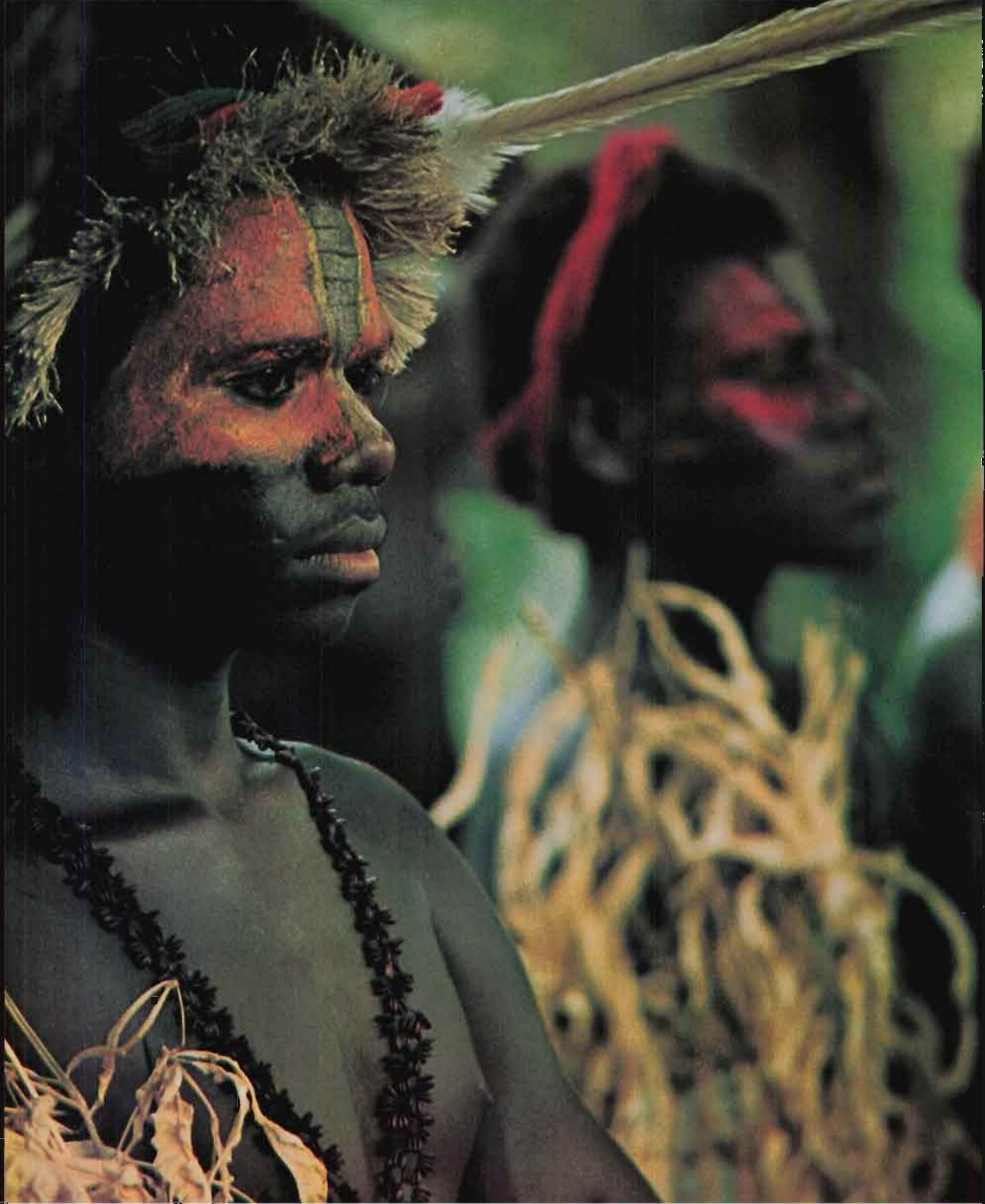
The night before the toka belongs to the women. With faces painted, heads ornamented with little plumes of feathers, and wearing grass skirts, they will dance the napën-napën the whole night through.





The napën-napën is a dance celebrating woman's fertility and honour. The dancers keep time with their songs by beating their fibre baskets with their hands.





ceremony called *menuk* takes place without dances or songs: the event has no festive character, but is merely a way to square the account. And so ends the *nekowiar's* cycle and its account-keeping. This sort of enormous "pot-latch", this vast complex of dancing, singing and gift-giving insures the continuance of the alliance and equality between different political groups. Later, marriage exchanges will be arranged and ritual alliance will become blood alliance. Many years later, another *toka* will be held to reaffirm the bonds between the two partners, but this time, the former hosts will be the guests and thus will have the honour of dancing the *toka*.

These ceremonies of the alliance are essential for the maintenance of balance and harmony in Custom society of Tanna. Only the great and prestigious groups which control the old dancing places created by the gods, have the right to take the initiative of the *toka*. Another important aspect of this ceremony is that it reveals traditional hierarchy, which ordinarily remains hidden. Several years are necessary for the preparation of this festival and the agreement of all men and groups situated on the "*toka* road" is required. The *toka* is the greatest event ever to occur in the traditional society of Tanna. The spirit, the values and the symbols of the *toka* imbue all the Custom of Tanna.

Nowadays, since periodic warfare has died out, there is a

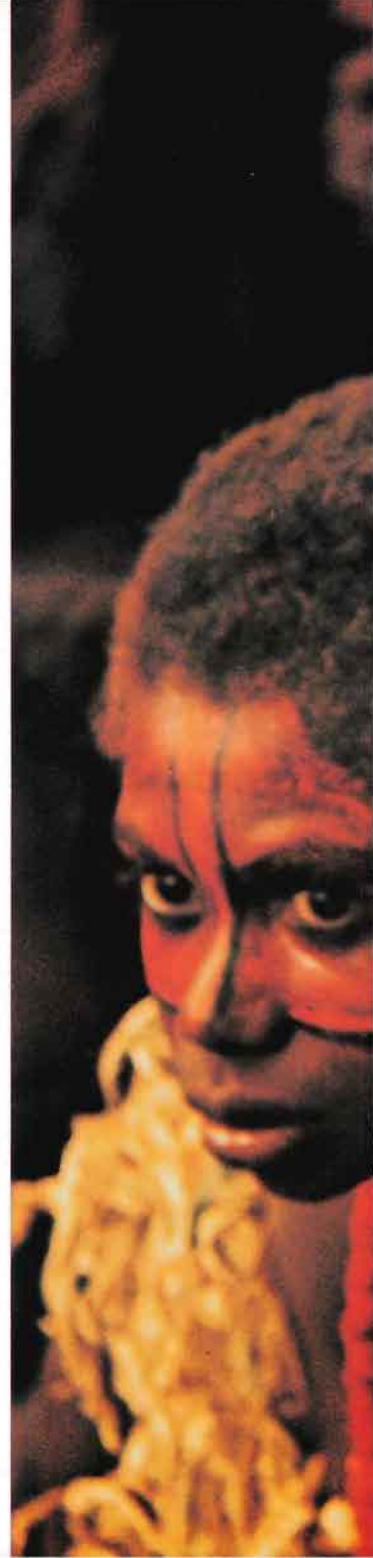


At daybreak, when the women have left the dance ground, total silence has once more descended, and everyone is holding his breath, the toka dancers emerge in single file from the surrounding cover, led by their elders and "big men". Each one carries on his shoulder a wooden cane with a white-painted "beak" tip, the only accessory which will be used in the dance.



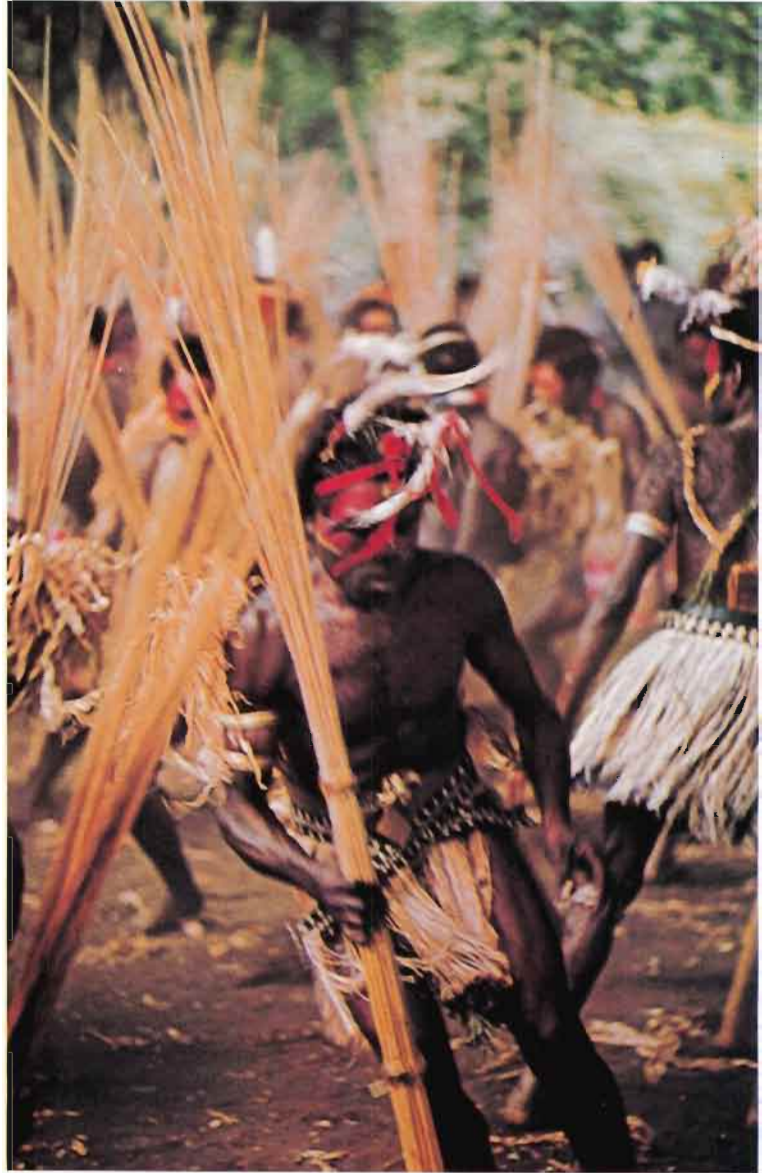
The toka dance celebrates political alliance between allied groups. Each dancer seems first to push something away and then to draw it towards him with his beaked stick. This gesture symbolizes the reciprocal gift-giving and receiving on which traditional alliances depend. Although the toka arises from deep-rooted custom, each year it provides the ground for new creativity and is embellished with new figures.







tendency to make each *nekowiar* into a competitive exchange. The group which has danced the *toka* often gives a return gift which consists not only of more pigs but of animals of greater value. The group which has danced the *nao* is then in debt and will have to return the increased number and value on the next ritual occasion, and will add a further supplement of its own, so that competition continues long after the *toka* itself is over, thus keeping going an exchange cycle which is, in fact, never really closed.



The dance of nao is given in reply to the toka. It is performed by the host group and their allies. The dancers beat out the rhythm with bunches of reeds which they tap on the ground as they dance.

During the ritual, the dancers from the two allied groups throw their tapa belts (*tut*) at each other. This gesture symbolizes the exchange of their powers, and their political equality. Tapa belts are symbolic of the powers of the men of Tanna. Men who wear these bark-cloth belts with a striped black and red pattern are the big *iremëra* in whose honour the *nekowiär* is held. Belts with simple black designs distinguish *iremëra* of lower or medium status whose authority does not extend beyond the purely local



A toka dancer with traditional hairstyle.

A festival of exchanges, alliance and pride, with repeated reminders and demonstrations of strength, the nekowiär, whose culminating events are the dances of toka and nao, revives the traditional rhythm of life for the islanders. For the men of Tanna and dance is much more than a physical expression; rather, it is a link between the living and their departed ancestors. It is also the quest for and affirmation of dignity.





arena. In ritual matters, they must give precedence to the big *iremëra*. Attached to each dancing ground in Tanna there is an *iremëra* of greater or lesser status, a *yani-niko*, which means "voice of the canoe", whose role is to speak on behalf of the *iremëra*, and finally a number of *naotupunus*, or agrarian magicians.

The origin of the festival is connected with Mwatiktiki, the founding "god" of food, whose mythical "canoe" nourishes all Tanna's "canoes". When they celebrate the *toka*, the *iremëra* aristocracy are expressing their filiation with the god of fecundity and gardens.

While the *toka* is unique to Tanna and fundamental to the social system of the island, initiation rites are common to all the traditional groups of the archipelago. In order to cross the threshold from childhood to the world of adults,



all children must submit to a period of initiation which entitles them to become fully-fledged members of the group. The intermediate stage of adolescence has no special status in Melanesian society. The severity of the tests varies or varied according to the island concerned: amongst members of the Small Nambas in Malakula, the trials last at least two months during which time the initiate must hide alone in the forest and hunt for his own food — wild plants and roots as well as any birds that he manages to snare in improvised traps. But in Tanna the tests are less severe. The boys are kept apart for two months while their circumcision cut heals. They remain isolated from the world of women and other children, and during this time it is the men of the group who bring them their food.



At the end of the afternoon, the ritual is brought to a close with the gift-giving ceremony. The host group presents its allies with the many pigs they are giving them. The animals are brought in with their legs tied, slung on slender tree-trunks carried by several men each, and then killed with a club. The bigger the pig, the less hair it has, the greater its value. The quality of a nekowiari, and the honour it reflects on the group which has organized it, is measured according to the number and value of the pigs given to the invited guests.

A road of peace

The purpose of the *nekowiar* is to exalt the alliance by celebrating the honour of all those participating. By so doing, it constitutes a "road of peace", and helps strengthen the cultural and political unity of the island. Each of the groups of allies which on the day of the festival enters into this competitive exchange in fact constitutes a real network, which, through the workings of the chain of alliances, in which each one extends the invitation to the one which comes next in line, can spread over great distances and go from one side of the island to the other, and in fact may take in whole regions. Those concerned in the ritual then number not merely the few hundred who, on an average, actually attend a classic *toka* festival, but more than a thousand, sometimes two thousand, which is a considerable number in proportion to the size of the island.

The ritual is never immutably fixed. With each new ceremony the songs and dances have to be recreated. They are the work of specialized magicians who find their inspiration in the sacred springs and trees where blows the spirit of another of Tanna's gods, Mwatiktiki. In addition to being an exchange of gifts and dances, the *nekowiar* is also an aesthetic competition.

Preceded by their tribal chiefs, the toka dancers slowly make a tour of the lines of offerings, taking possession of the pigs and the kava roots which have been presented to them.





Kastom i no save tet

Tannese custom, like that of the whole of Vanuatu, is basically a meditation on alliance. In this sense it is immortal, because it is the necessary link which enables each local group to forge bonds with others to form an entity.

It has often been predicted, to my mind somewhat prematurely, that the traditional Melanesian universe, sometimes described as archaic or as under sentence of death as a result of modern development, is on the verge of extinction. There is no denying that society is changing and evolving more and more rapidly in Vanuatu, but there are astonishing instances of revival. "Kastom i no save tet" (Custom cannot die) say the men of traditional society. The most astonishing thing of all is Melanesian society's ability, in Vanuatu, to rebuild itself in its own likeness, despite the multiple changes which have affected it throughout its history. Perhaps in years to come it will retain this ability. If so, it will be able to preserve what has been the core of its identity from time immemorial.

As in all traditional Vanuatu societies, initiation rites are common on Tanna, especially the circumcision of young boys.

After the operation, boys remain isolated for nearly two months in a special hut, and no contact with women is allowed. A great feast called kawür takes place at the end of their isolation when they rejoin their families: on this day they are the heroes of the Custom.





VANUATU



Photo credit: the photographs of page 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 26, 27, 28-29, 30, 34-35, 36 (top), 74 are by Gerry de Saint-Martin; the photography of page 58 is by Th. Neville; the photographs of page 59, 60, 61 are by Kal Muller. Special thanks to Kal Muller for his help during the photo coverage in Tanna and Pentecost islands.

Third edition
Printed in Singapore in April 1986
Publisher's number: 281



Les Editions du Pacifique founded in Tahiti, first sponsored books describing the local islands: this naturally led to publishing other books on sister islands in the South Pacific, and ultimately to books about islands which, by their size, characteristics or other features, bear some resemblance to, or allow us to make comparisons with those of the South Pacific. The object of the series is to allow readers who have never been able to visit such islands to nevertheless discover some of the most enchanting spots on earth. To those who have had the good fortune to live in and to learn to love these privileged places, the books make a splendid souvenir which help to keep precious memories fresh in the mind. The books attempt to cover, however briefly, all aspects of each island. The texts give precise facts on the geography, the history and the economics etc... which complete the tale told by the photographs and their captions about the scenery, the customs and the people, the soul of the island, its charm, its personality. Objective text, subjective photography: together they depict the reality and the wondrous beauty of these islands.

In the same series:

tahiti and its islands, moorea, bora bora, marquesas, tuamotu, hawaiï, new caledonia, phuket, penang, macau, singapore, new zealand

VANUATU

What will become of the tribal customs and social organization of Vanuatu? The disappearance of such civilizations, which are frequently termed primitive or archaic, has often been predicted. While it is true that the Vanuatu is developing very rapidly, now and again there are signs of an astonishing return to the traditional values and way of life.

“Customs, i no save die’ (our customs will never die out), vow the people of Bunlap. Between the beliefs and practices of the cultural world of the Melanesians and the often depressingly uniform development of modern societies, will Vanuatu find some acceptable solution, a kind of evolution which will enable them to maintain some of the most original customs and traditions?