Eighteen Americans clamber down off a tourist yacht (the *Congoola*) into a flotilla of small canoes. One or two fall into the water but they are hoisted aboard again and helpful natives paddle everyone toward the beach. As the Americans step ashore in shallow waters, groups of painted, leafy men in grass skirts run toward them yelling and shaking spears. A rather hefty “chief” appears to welcome the group to Vanuatu, or rather to *Survivor Vanuatu: Islands of Fire*, the ninth edition of Mark Burnett’s popular “reality” television series. The reality, here, was Vanuatu—its flora, its fauna, and its people (ni-Vanuatu)—which served as stage and background for another round of competition to be the “final survivor” and win a million US dollars (figure 1).

Although broadcast in various countries, the show’s principal audience is in the United States and its producers stage and edit “reality” in large part to speak to American cultural themes and social fissions. These include tensions between individual and society, self and family, authority and democracy, loyalty and honor, self-discovery and self-transformation, public service and laziness, and—cutting through all these—the American identity politics of race, class, age, disability, and gender.

Commentators have noted Burnett’s penchant for social Darwinesque hoopla. They find *Survivor’s* survival-of-the-fittest discourse no surprise given the current flush of neoconservativism in US politics. Savages, and all those who fall by the evolutionary wayside, occupy both the wilds and jungles where the survivors compete but also inhabit the American heartland itself: “Burnett’s social Darwinism implicitly valorizes the inequities of cultural imperialism and the rise of the corporate elite, a group to which he belongs” (Murray 2001, 44; see also Jervis and Jervis 2000; Miller 2000, 12). Keat Murray sniffs out plenty of this sort of special pleading

*Survivor Vanuatu: Myths of Matriarchy Revisited*

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in Burnett’s first book (2000) and, of course, in the show’s celebrated motto “Outwit, Outplay, Outlast” (figure 2). Its narrative structure, too, as weeks go by, evolves from the primitive communism of opposing tribes to the capitalist corporate individualism of all-against-all (Murray 2001, 45).

Others have criticized the show’s primitivism (see, eg, Miller 2000). It situates survivors in jungle, desert, and wilderness, punctuated by chant and jungle-drum music and spliced-in close-ups of animals, exotic plants, and the occasional native. Those ni-Vanuatu hired to meet the incoming cast of Survivor Vanuatu were tarted up in face and body paint, leaves, feathers, and grass skirts. Unknown to most viewers, Survivor Vanuatu’s tribal camps, on the beach south of Efate Island’s Samoa Point, were located less than an hour’s taxi ride away from several four-star tourist hotels in Port Vila. When the show filmed in the Marquesas, the producers bulldozed a local resident’s house, dock, and plumbing system “to make the valley look uninhabited” (Riley 2002, 6). Survivor’s tribal

Figure 1. Kranki Kona cartoon from Vanuatu Daily Post, July 2004. Reproduced with permission.
locales, thus, are “nostalgically constructed as anachronistic space, as places where one may remember this lost history of simple living. Where, in effect, time has stood still” (Delisle 2003, 44).

And in these spaces, made “authentic” by the removal of plumbing and the redecoration of the locals, the survivors occupy a world of tribes, ritual competitions, hunting-and-gathering, and raw nature. In Survivor Vanuatu, flying foxes hang from trees. Huge spiders spin webs. Sea snakes slither. And the producers constantly cut in shots of Tanna’s Yasur volcano (despite the fact that its eruptions are of the mild stromboli type of lava bombs that shoot up and then fall back into the crater and not the more dramatic blasts and pyroclastic flows of volcanoes elsewhere). They further magnified these with alternating shots of the mightier—though quiescent—Lopevi cone, some hundreds of miles north of Tanna. The show’s two opposing tribes were named after these volcanoes: Yasur and Lopevi. Promos and flashbacks returned regularly to serendipitous footage of a 5.8 magnitude earthquake that Survivor camera crews happily captured in July 2004.

Figure 2. The Yasur tribe flag waves during the first episode of the CBS television reality series Survivor Vanuatu: Islands of Fire, 5 May 2004. Reproduced with permission of CBS/Landov.
Survivors, to survive, must contend with Mother Nature. And if nature can be savage, so are the natives. *Survivor Vanuatu*’s logo, its lava-rock-and-coral tribal council set, and some of its competitions featured grinning human skulls (plastic or plaster?). In the introductory episode, host Jeff Probst likewise grinned earnestly about the islands’ cannibal past. He intoned: “It is a land with a fascinating history of cannibalism where rituals like sorcery and black magic are still a part of daily life. . . . At times you may find it beautiful, at times you may be repulsed” (episode 1). As might be expected, the show’s two immunity “idols,” its loser torch-snuffer shaped like pig-killing club, and its pig-tusk-decorated Malakula Island–style ballot box also struck primitivist notes as similar features have done in other editions of the show.

Despite the foregrounding of Tanna’s volcano and despite two episodes partially filmed on that island, the show (here I was disappointed) did not delve into Tanna’s John Frum movement and well-known cargo cultism (Lindstrom 1993). Although yet another sign of the premodern that *Survivor* might usefully have exploited, cargo culting perhaps would have hit too close to home: People engaged, somewhat forlornly, in bizarre ceremony and cultic competition in hopes of persuading the gods, ancestors, or television producers to bring home some cargo—say a million dollars. As *Survivor Vanuatu* runner-up Twila Tanner admitted, her secondary motivation for taking part in the competition was money because “she is determined to make a better life” for herself, and possibly ‘give her son a jump-start in life’” (cbs.com 2004). The producer-gods did indeed smile, here and there, as the show proceeded, and delivered shipments—or rather product placements—of cargo to those contestants who ritually succeeded. The cargo here was American junk food including chicken wings, cake, cookies, milk, coffee, hot dogs, beer, and also a new Pontiac G-6 car (see Montgomery 2004). As one critic has noted, like cargo cults, *Survivor* “rewards virtue in this life with financial heaven in the afterlife of post-show existence” (Ryan 2001).

However, *Survivor Vanuatu* eschewed cargo cult to play up gender. *Survivor*’s producers typically attempt a twist or revision of the show’s format in order to maintain audience interest. (Promos for *Survivor 10*, for example, filmed in Palau, featured the tickler, “From the beginning, the game will be changed in a dramatic way; everything the Survivors have come to expect will be wiped out in the first 10 minutes” [Survivorskills.com 2005]). As reality shows go, *Survivor* “takes the formula as close as it can go toward the scripted pole without becoming a fully acted TV
movie” (Ryan 2001), and Survivor Vanuatu’s script was one of male/female competition. Its twist was gender war—the women versus the men. (Survivor 6: The Amazon had also used this device.) The introduction saw the contestants divided into two same-sex tribes, Yasur (the women, in yellow) and Lopevi (the men, in red).

This gender device, according to contestant Scout Cloud Lee, had been planned well in advance and had influenced contestant recruitment. Survivor Vanuatu featured nine strong, outspoken, and capable women, including two lesbians: Lee and barista Ami Cusack (and some Internet reports suggested that a third contestant, Twila Tanner, is bisexual). In counterpoint, the show featured a larger than usual number of dopey, older, out-of-shape, and—in one case—one-footed men. Lee had not told producers about her long-term relationship with partner Carol Ann Washburn when she interviewed unsuccessfully for an earlier edition of Survivor (Pearl Islands). When she reapplied for Survivor Vanuatu at the urging of producers, Lee sensed that her sexuality would not be an issue (pers comm, Jan 2005). Survivor’s first edition, in fact, had stimulated a variety of gender commentary. Who has the innate advantage—women, natural networkers who see the whole picture but bubble with indirect aggression? or men, who shine at focused, face-to-face competition? In the end, the first Final Survivor was Richard Hatch, a gay corporate consultant, who, according to Roger Lancaster, American bio-pop culture might conclude to be “an intermediary type who combines the worst elements of both sexes: male competitiveness with female underhandedness” (2003, 170).

American gender nervousness was to be the show’s hook once again and here, too, Vanuatu provided reality background. Producers clearly had acquired enough knowledge of Vanuatu custom to reflect Survivor Vanuatu’s gender war against island male/female roles, particularly in the introductory episode. The contestants wading ashore from those canoes ran into Chief Joel Kalkot Mormor of Mangaliliu village, who immediately separated the men from the women (Ballard 2004). Host Probst narrated: “Chief Mormor will preside over all of this. He is a real chief” (episode 1). The chief drove the women toward the camera’s periphery where they were forced to squat and watch. The men, in contrast, sat comfortably on log benches near the center of action. Local island arenas, where men typically take charge, also exhibit this sort of gendered space: Male is to center as woman is to periphery.
The camera dwelt on the American women, reduced to observers, as well as on local ni-Vanuatu women and children who also watched and laughed at men-in-action. The chief offered the nine male survivors kava to drink from a large carved bowl. The kava bearers smartly stopped one survivor (Travis Sampson), who presumed that he had been offered a murky finger bowl, from washing his hands in the sacred drink. Chief Mormor’s dancing troops then clubbed a small pig and the chief rubbed its blood onto the foreheads of the American men. Probst intoned: “You are now a warrior in Vanuatu.” Mormor selected one man (Brady Finta) to climb a greased pole to attempt to retrieve a “spiritual stone” placed at the top. He succeeded and a tropical downpour began.

Probst’s narration then introduced gender competition as the show’s structuring motif. Standing in the rain, he declared, “As you have seen, men and women are treated very differently.” The show’s editors also cut in contestant backchat. Ami Cusack complained, “I’m not used to be put second behind men,” and Lisa Keiffer—eyeing the unfortunate pig—concluded, “Apparently the Vanuatu people really honor pigs. Pigs are, I think, sometimes better than women.” The women also eyeballed one another, foreshadowing the subsequent split between older and younger that would cut through both camps, male and female. Twila Tanner, inspecting her younger, lazier, more buxom teammates, snarled, “I call all these sorority girls ‘bow heads.’” The women, perhaps no surprise, won the first immunity challenge, sending the men that evening to Tribal Council, where they would have to vote one of their own “off the island.” The beaten men commiserated: “Losing to the women is tough!” and “You never underestimate a woman.”

Subsequent programs developed the competition between the female and male tribes. Scout Lee had planned from the beginning to bring an all female “final four” into the program’s finale (pers comm, Jan 2005), and the editors played with whether this feminist ideal might indeed be achievable. “No women’s alliance has ever held in Survivor” (episode 7), someone noted. This became the show’s persistent theme: Can a group of women cooperate, hang together, and win? There were ups and downs. The cameras played up disputes among the Yasur tribe, particularly between older contestants (who were there to work and win), and some of the younger women (who, the show’s editors suggested, were there to enjoy a vacation on the beach): “Bitch!” “Catty girls!” “Your volcano erupts more than I like!” (episode 3).
During episode 5, two American “chiefs”—older contestants Scout Lee and Lea (Sarge) Masters—received the chance to reshuffle the tribes, and two women left to join the men in the Lopevi tribe while two men joined the women in Yasur. Rory Freeman, one of these outlier men, immediately began a campaign of complaint: “I am so tired of having female conversation”; “I am the victim of a gender war” (episode 8); and, the women are “estrogen city” (episode 9). However, when the two tribes merged, the four remaining men found themselves at the mercy of the remaining six women, who picked them off one-by-one until only Chris Daugherty remained.

The women’s alliance, however, ultimately crumbled. Mark Burnett has claimed that no Survivor competitor alliance has ever held in the face of individual interest (Murray 2001, 50) but Survivor Vanuatu editors particularly played up the vigor and then the final collapse of this all-female coalition. The alliance, in the end, foundered on rivalry between the tribe’s two lesbians, Lee and Cusack. Their sexuality was mostly a subtext throughout the series. Although both their partners flew to Vanuatu in order to participate in the “family reward challenge,” the show did not air the two couples’ kisses. Both women had influence over their tribe. But during episode 11, Cusack created a new prospective final four, replacing Lee and Tanner with younger players Leann Slaby and Julie Berry. In response, Lee and Tanner killed the alliance and recruited Chris Daugherty and Eliza Orlins to join them instead. This move saved Daugherty, the last man standing, and the other three women (Slaby, Cusack, and Berry) were subsequently voted “off the island” by the new alliance.

Competition between Lee and Cusack, the show’s lesbian matriarchs, thus extinguished women’s social power, and Daugherty, the remaining male player, although outnumbered six to one, won the million dollars as Final Survivor. Survivor Vanuatu concluded as a retelling of a classic myth of matriarchy—a demonstration of the futility and abnormality of female authority. Some years ago, Joan Bamberger noted that widespread tales of a mythic past when women ruled rather perversely serve as social charters for contemporary male authority (1974). Women once had their chance at power and they blew it. Vanuatu provides similar tales. On Tanna, for example, men tell kava origin myths that admit that women were the first to discover, plant, and enjoy the drug. Due to female misuse, however, men were obliged to step in and wrest control of the plant, forever forbidding its use to women.
The show’s Vanuatu setting framed a mythic climax of futile female solidarity and authority. Ni-Vanuatu featured in several episodes, but all these locals were men. After the introduction’s ritual welcome featuring Chief Mormor, his crowd of extras, and male control of sacred stones, a subsequent program introduced another local walk-on, whom the show named Dah. The Yasur tribe won Dah’s assistance in a reward challenge and he taught the women how to find local foods. They had camped out, it seems, in a garden plantation, and manioc and island cabbage (*Hibiscus manihot*) were growing unnoticed and underfoot. Dah—his footprints visible on the beach—played Friday to the women’s Robinson Crusoes, offering local, and male, knowledge to improve female tribal society. One Internet wit, in fact, noted the phonetic resemblance of Yasur and “Yes Sir,” suggesting that the women’s tribal name evocatively encoded their natural submissiveness.

Six survivors also flew south to Tanna on two separate trips. Four of these Americans visited “custom” people living south of Lenakel to feast on undercooked pig and to dance *nupu*—that island’s typical circle dance—with a crowd of painted Tannese folk. The other two visited Yasur volcano, guided by yet another young ni-Vanuatu man identified with the more likely name Joe Ture. Ni-Vanuatu women played no such guiding roles, only appearing, mute, in cultural background shots. However, an all-woman string band did serenade two survivors who had won a meal at a north Efate beach resort in a reward challenge.

*Survivor Vanuatu*’s concluding episode featured the story of the mythic chief, Roi Mata. French archaeologist José Garanger excavated his gravesite on Eretoka (Hat) Island in 1967. This discovery resulted from a celebrated convergence of archaeology and oral history—the archaeologist guided by local accounts of the gravesite of this early seventeenth century leader and his retinue (Ballard 2004). Eretoka Island hung visible on the horizon of many of the show’s episodes and the final three survivors (Daugherty, Lee, and Tanner) paddled over to “the most sacred spot in Vanuatu” (program finale) to honor their departed comrades, and also to honor this chief who had once ruled the land. Probst rehearsed Garanger’s interpretation of the excavation: Roi Mata had been buried in the midst of at least fifty followers who—unlike him—had been interred alive (figure 3). Arranged mostly in male/female couples, male bones lay in neat prone positions while female limbs were wildly akimbo. Following Garanger, Probst suggested that men had been buried while numbed and
calmed with kava denied to their less fortunate wives. The Roi Mata story asserts the natural hierarchy of central male chief, a second rank of subchiefs, and a third rank of less-willing, less-powerful, peripheral women. The story also featured as the immunity challenge in episode 13. Contestants had to puzzle together bits of wood that revealed the epic of Roi Mata.³

Viewer response to *Survivor Vanuatu*, much of which was carried on the Internet, indicated that many Americans responded to its theme of gender war. Some celebrated the ultimate male triumph; some despaired over the abortive women’s alliance. The jury, after all, comprised two men and five women, but no new jural women’s alliance formed. The vote went to Daugherty, only two women voting for Tanner. (Cusack admitted she

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**Figure 3.** Roi Mata’s grave, adapted from José Garanger 1972. Reproduced with permission of Garanger and La Société des Océanistes.
voted for Daugherty because she had appreciated his girlfriend’s struggles during the “family reunion” challenge.) On Survivor as on Eretoka, once again the men buried the women.

Despite local participation in the series, and local product placements featuring Vanuatu’s cultural attractions and touristic infrastructure, the show seems not to have had much lasting local impact. Survivor has many critics and its producers, in partial defense of the show, have argued that it introduces distant areas of the world to large television audiences and thus benefits national economies by boosting tourism. Local tourist entrepreneurs did indeed attempt to capture a Survivor market. For example, the Benjor Beach Club (on Mele Bay) advertised a “Survivor Special” on its Web site (2004). This included a “tribal council style beach BBQ” and a tour of the Cascades waterfall that was featured on the show. Other Vanuatu tourist guides added the tribal camp locations to their itineraries of Efate’s cultural hot spots (see, eg, Sailaway Cruises Vanuatu 2006).

To strike while the iron was hot, the Vanuatu Tourism Office hired the richly tattooed, previous survivor Lex van den Berghe to write publicity about the country, flying him in for a visit in October 2004. Van den Berghe gushed to the local press: “The American audience is virtually untapped at this point as before Survivors started nobody and I mean virtually nobody had heard of Vanuatu except for perhaps a few divers with the Coolidge” (Neil-Jones 2004).4 But Survivor Vanuatu did not generate a tourist tsunami. The show played on American televisions during the last months of 2004 and, even though the show’s Web site offered a hyperlink to Vanuatu’s National Tourism Office (www.vanuatutourism.com), tourism statistics from the first nine months of 2005 did not indicate any notable increase in visitors from North America (222 arrivals, compared with 250 arrivals during the first nine months of 2004 [SPC 2006]).

Furthermore, the thirty-nine-day presence of Survivor’s competitors camped on the beaches of Samoa Point appears not to have had much immediate impact on local environs. Sympathetic neighbors from Mangaliliu, Chief Joel Kalkot Mormor’s village, did leave gifts of bananas near the survivor camps to help feed the hungry and feckless Americans (Chris Ballard, pers comm, Aug 2004). In return they reportedly benefited from terrified, runaway pigs that escaped one episode’s catch-the-muddy-pig reward challenge (Miriam Meyherhoff, pers comm, Sept 2004). Chief Mormor also built on his new American fame to acquire a Peace Corps volunteer-orientation contract for Mangaliliu village (Chris Ballard, pers comm, Dec 2004).5
The show had greater consequences, economic and otherwise, back in Port Vila, where up to three hundred members of the film crew camped out in several of the town’s hotels and where the props department was headquartered. Enjoying Port Vila’s restaurants and bars, intoxicated crew members once brawled in the street with taxi drivers who were infuriated that a thrown bottle had damaged one of their vehicles (Chris Ballard, pers comm, Aug 2004). On the other hand, the US show paid its ni-Vanuatu employees better than the subsequent French version of Survivor, *Les Aventuriers de Koh-Lanta*, which filmed in Vanuatu in early 2006 (Dick Eade, pers comm, March 2006). The French were not “the big free spenders that the US survivor team was” (*Vanuatu Daily Post* 2006). And when ni-Vanuatu themselves occasionally found the chance to watch the show, at least it could amuse. When English teachers at One-sua College on Efate showed their seventh graders tapes of *Survivor Vanuatu*, “the students laughed their heads off” (David McShane, pers comm, March 2006). They laughed, I’m guessing, at the *Survivor* women and the men.

Notes

1 During the reunion finale, host Jeff Probst asked Lee how her fellow Oklahomans had received her back home after being “outed” on the show. Lee explained that she had experienced nothing but friendliness and interest in Oklahoma. A large crowd of several hundred, for example, turned up and gave her a standing ovation when she spoke about her *Survivor* experiences at the Stillwater Public Library (Lee, pers comm, Jan 2005).

2 *Survivor Vanuatu* differed from some earlier editions, including *Survivor Marquesas*, which “erased the human component altogether” (Riley 2002, 6).

3 *Survivor Vanuatu* did not mention the probable matrilineality of seventeenth-century central Vanuatu cultures, which could have muddied the story. On the other hand, the American women who visited Tanna in episode 10 were served kava by their Tannese hosts.

4 The show also generated some Internet buzz. Yahoo groups such as Survivorvanuatu and Virtualvanuatu attracted hundreds of faithful fans. Marke Lowen found that his Vanuatu Internet sites had received thousands of hits in the twenty-four-hour period after *Survivor Vanuatu*’s debut: vanuatu.net.vu with 92,747 and vanuatu.news.vu with 40,248. Daily hits later climbed even higher, to 200,000 a day, compared with just 10,000 a day before the show aired (Cassidy 2004).
5 More worrying, perhaps, are online real estate ads that offer “Survivor Vanuatu film location double waterfront block for sale” (Alliance Realty Land Sales 2006).

6 The Vanuatu Daily Post reported of the French crew: “One member of the crew sent an urgent message to another who was up at the top of Yasur. A boy from a tour company ran 4 kilometres up the hill and top of Yasur and passed the message to the colleague who didn’t even thank him, paid him nothing and got back on his walkie talkie. The boy had to catch a ride back down with some Japanese as he wasn’t even offered a lift back down” (2006).

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