

KASTOM VERSUS CROSS: A BATTLE FOR CULTURAL HEGEMONY ON TANNA<sup>1</sup>

David J. Richardson

Highlighted by rebellion, punctuated by violence, the transition from the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides to the independent Republic of Vanuatu was complicated, turbulent and passionate. To understand the reasons for the deep divisions surfacing with Vanuatu's emergence in 1980, it is helpful to look to the past.

On the eve of independence, open rebellion threatened to undermine the integrity of the central government of the ruling Vanua'aku Party, an anglophone party led by Walter Lini, an Anglican Priest. On 28 May 1980, Jimmy Stevens, leader of the indigenous movement known as Nagriamel, proclaimed the establishment of the Vemarana Federation on Espiritu Santo, the largest island in the archipelago. This secessionist attempt was supported by settlers of French ancestry, the French Residency and a group of free-enterprise fanatics from the United States known as the Phoenix Foundation. The rebellion on Santo lasted until 31 August, put down by troops from Papua new Guinea at the request of the central government of Vanuatu, which became officially independent on 30 July 1980.

Elsewhere in the archipelago, on Tanna, another rebellion was staged. On 15 February 1980, during celebrations at Sulphur Bay, headquarters of the John Frum movement - a movement which began as a cargo cult and later became institutionalized as a church and political party - the flags of France and the United States were hoisted.

Also raised was the flag of the newly proclaimed TAFEA Federation, taking its name from the first letters of the islands making it up: Tanna, Aniwa,

Futuna, Erromanga, and Aneityam. On this day kastom gavman was declared, that is, government based on indigenous customary ways. This phase of rebellion on Tanna climaxed on the night of 10 June 1980 in a confrontation at the government station at Isangel in which 300 TAFEA supporters were routed by a British Mobile Force and supporters of the Vanau'aku Party.

While selected events related to Vanuatu's troubled transition to independence have received a great deal of attention, the origins of the problem have not. Moreover, while much has been made of the activities on Santo, located to the northwest in the archipelago, far less has been written about the dynamics of rebellion on the southern island of Tanna. This tendency is best illustrated by the use of the term "Santo Rebellion" under which all anti-government activity coinciding with independence is frequently lumped. This convenient, but inaccurate, characterization overlooks important dimensions of Vanuatu's history: at the time of independence and before.

A clear understanding of the reasons underlying the turmoil of the time is hindered by simplistic assumptions of outside manipulation. This is suggested by John Beasant's The Santo Rebellion, An Imperial Reckoning.<sup>2</sup> This book focuses on Santo and the role of outside influences in the process of decolonization. The Santo Rebellion is consistent with much of what has been written about the process of decolonization in Vanuatu in its approach and perspective, representing a trend which is both misleading and incomplete. This paper suggests that the process by which Vanuatu became independent was not an imperial reckoning: it was an indigenous reckoning.

Anti-government activity on Tanna has been largely overlooked, or dismissed as the result of a bizarre cargo cult having been duped by outsiders. This paper suggests that those who rebelled were not victims of

cunning sophisticates from abroad; rather, rebellion on Tanna was a by-product of conflicts with roots deep in the soil of the island's history. This paper examines Tanna as a battleground: between Christianity and traditional customary ways and between the rival European culture systems represented by the influence of the Condominium Government. It is naive to assume that outside influences did not play a significant role in rebellion in Vanuatu, or in the post-contact era of Vanuatu's history; however, by focusing on indigenous motives for rebellion on Tanna the active agency of those who resisted the government is clearly visible: indeed, it is not altogether clear just who was manipulating whom.

Vanuatu is an archipelago of over eighty islands covering 5,700 square miles. The people, known as ni-Vanuatu, speak over 100 different indigenous languages in addition to the languages of Britain and France. Bislama, or pidgin, is derived largely from English; it incorporates words from French and various ni-Vanuatu languages in a Melanesian syntax, providing a medium of communication comprehensible to all the indigenous inhabitants of the islands.<sup>3</sup> Vanuatu is typically melanesian in its cultural diversity. Indigenous political organization was characterized by decentralization: numerous, small, autonomous groupings - frequently, though perhaps not entirely accurately - described by Europeans as "tribes."<sup>4</sup>

Much of the archipelago was originally mistaken for a continent by the first Europeans to visit in 1606, when a Spanish expedition commanded by Pedro Fernandez de Quiros passed through the northerly Banks Islands and established the ill-fated colony of "New Jerusalem" on Espiritu Santo.<sup>5</sup> It was not until 1774, with the arrival of Captain James Cook, that Europeans would become familiar with the entire archipelago; under Cook the Islands were first

circumnavigated, charted and named the "New Hebrides." It was during this voyage that Ipari - as the island was known by people of neighboring islands - came to be known as Tanna, a term used by the island's inhabitants to mean "earth."<sup>6</sup>

Tanna is a volcanic island with very rich, fertile soil. It is well watered and well wooded. Most contact with the outside world did not occur until after 1840. Stands of sandalwood attracted traders in that commodity; the anchorage at Port Resolution attracted ships which stopped to resupply. Ron Adams notes in his monograph, In the Land of Strangers, the European willingness to exchange goods with the Tannese, whose social relations were characterized by reciprocity, placed European traders into a recognizable niche within the context of an indigenous ritual framework;<sup>7</sup> however, Europeans who came bearing what they called a message of salvation - rather than tobacco, muskets and other trade goods - were received less than graciously by a people apparently satisfied with their existing religious beliefs.

The first Protestant efforts on Tanna, however, appeared promising. The London Missionary Society left three Samoan teachers on the island on 18 November 1839. John Williams, the famed missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS), left Lalolangi, Mose and Salamea on Tanna along with a large quantity of fish-hooks, scissors and other items; the Tannese reciprocated with a gift of some pigs. Although the overall foray into the archipelago had tragic results - Williams and a companion were clubbed to death and most likely eaten on Erromanga the day after they left Tanna - the Samoans were relatively successful on Tanna: initially. They were joined by more Samoan teachers in the following year; however, malaria took the lives of several of

the teachers and caused a great deal of suffering among the survivors. Illness and death undermined the credibility of the Christian deity in the eyes of the Tannese as they watched the teachers suffer. More teachers were landed on Tanna in 1841; and in 1842 the LMS landed the missionaries George Turner and Henry Nisbet and their spouses on Tanna.<sup>8</sup> In spite of the promising indications with the first arrival of John Williams in 1839 on Tanna, Turner and Nisbet and their wives were only able to remain on the island for seven months. They were forced to flee for their lives, along with all the teachers, escaping on a passing whaling vessel. The only Christian presence in the archipelago was on Aneityam, south of Tanna, where some teachers were able to remain. All those left on the other islands were either killed or driven out.

It was from Aneityam that the next attempts to spread Christianity to Tanna would be launched. It was an island seen as well placed with respect to the other islands in the vicinity. The Reverend John Geddie of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Nova Scotia came to be known as the father of the Presbyterian Church of the New Hebrides. Geddie established a mission on Aneityam in 1848. Geddie's success is perhaps the result of his relatively rapid acquisition of the local language and his awareness of local taboos. By 1852 a church had been formed, and by 1856 a large percentage of the population of Aneityam was under Presbyterian instruction.<sup>9</sup>

From the strategically located island of Aneityam, the battle for the souls of the Tannese was launched in 1858. The Reverend John G. Paton, of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland, was appointed to set up a mission at Port Resolution; the Reverend J.W. Matheson, of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Nova Scotia, was to establish a mission at Kwamera (Umairarekar); Joseph Copeland, of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland, was to

shuttle between these two sites, providing assistance as needed.<sup>10</sup> Sites for houses at both locations were easily acquired; it appeared the missionaries would be made welcome. However, commenting on the initially favorable response they received, Paton observed:

"Perhaps it was with an eye to the axes, knives, fishhooks, blankets, and clothing, which they got in payment, or hoped for in plunder, rather than from any thirst for the Gospel, as they were all Savages and Cannibals."<sup>11</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that Paton's suspicions regarding the motives of these "savages and cannibals" were correct. The failure of Presbyterian efforts during this phase of contact (1858-1862) suggests that their presence was tolerated for reasons other than the appeal of their Christian message. This assessment is strengthened in light of Paton's further writings. In 1860, following one of many reported attempts on his life, the missionary noted that his flock had decided to kill him; however:

"If I would give up visiting the villages, and praying and talking with them about Jehovah, they intimidated that they would like me to stay and trade with them, as they liked the Traders but hated the Missionaries."<sup>12</sup>

The Tannese viewed Paton as a potential source of valuable trade items; however, their reasons for wanting him to quit preaching included the awkward situation his activities placed them with respect to their traditional beliefs. Adams notes:

"It would seem that the Tannese feared not to propitiate Jehovah and, at the same time, believed that his worship offended their customary dieties, who displayed their displeasure by causing illness and death..."<sup>13</sup>

Impacting on this difficult situation was the stand of Paton and Presbyterians on most of the traditional, customary ways - or, kastom in Bislama - of the Tannese. Kastom included practices such as pig killing, the strangling of widows and kava drinking. Most practices associated with kastom

were viewed with revulsion by the Presbyterian missionaries as inimical to the Christian message. The implications of this conflict ran deep; to appreciate how deep, it is useful to examine one aspect of kastom, kava drinking. Monty Lindstrom, a noted anthropologist who has worked a great deal on Tanna, highlights the importance of kava (*Piper Methysticum*) to Tannese society when he observes that "a useful means to gauge the significance of something in Tannese culture is to hold it up to the mirror of kava." Lindstrom notes that kava is an important element in dispute settlement, providing the principal exchange good by which harmonious relations are restored.<sup>14</sup>

Kava was important in terms of facilitating social harmony as noted above; however, its significance runs deeper. Lindstrom illustrates the importance of kava in terms of Tannese consciousness with his observations dealing with relative time conceptions. He observes that the waking day is divided into "ordinary time" and "kava time":

"Ordinary time consists of the everyday pull and tug of social relations, of disputes, of exchanges, of status competition and big men...

"A second sort of time, which might be called kava time, is one of male solidarity and commensality, the sharing of food and kava, personal introspection and contemplation and communication with one's ancestors."<sup>15</sup>

Another perspective of "kava time" is found in The New Hebrides South Sea Islands Quarterly Jottings of "The John G. Paton Mission Fund" for the Evangelization of the remaining Cannibals on these Islands in 1896:

"Every afternoon about four o'clock they assemble for kava drinking, and for hours after it they are in a sort of stupor. This custom is one great obstacle to the progress of the Gospel on Tanna."<sup>16</sup>

The incompatibility of much of kastom with attitudes of the Presbyterians cast Christianity and kastom into opposing camps. Opposition to kastom put prospective converts to Christianity in a dilemma; to attain eternal life

necessitated the rejection of the customary ways which had hitherto given life meaning. To reject kastom was to reject one's ancestors and therefore one's identity.<sup>17</sup> The lurid images of divine retribution for the recalcitrant served to intensify the pressure on the Tannese by missionaries in the Calvinistic tradition of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.

According to Paton, the withdrawal of the missionaries from Tanna in 1862, ending a trying period begun in 1858, was precipitated by militant opposition to the mission.<sup>18</sup> However, Paton and Geddie disagreed on this point. Geddie interpreted the turbulence at the time of withdrawal not as opposition to the mission, but as a result of internal rivalries involving supporters and opponents of the mission.<sup>19</sup>

Tanna ultimately became a battle ground on several levels: between western and indigenous cultures initially, then between indigenous Christians and those who rejected the Christian message as inimical to kastom; in the background an ongoing battle between rival European cultures went through various manifestations. It is to this dimension we now turn.

Late-nineteenth century imperial rivalry in the Pacific had far-reaching impact on the political future of the archipelago. Vanuatu's proximity to New Caledonia accentuated its value as a source of land and labor to colonial advocates in France. This proximity was not lost on the colonists of Australia, and some politicians used the fear of a flood of French convicts to strengthen their advocacy of British annexation. Roger Thompson illuminates the intricacies of the New Hebrides issue in Australian politics in his Australian Imperialism in the Pacific, The Expansionist Era, 1820-1920.<sup>20</sup> Inability to come to mutually agreeable terms on the future political status of the New Hebrides led to the establishment of the Anglo-French Joint Naval



Commission in 1888. This was a political expedient designed to protect lives and property of British and French citizens. Ongoing rivalry precluded either side from gaining political ascendancy in the archipelago. The Entente Cordiale of 1904, which recognized spheres of colonial influence between Britain and France, ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Anglo-French Condominium in 1906.<sup>21</sup>

The arrangement by which the New Hebrides became a region of joint influence represented a stalemate in the struggle for cultural and political hegemony in the Southwest Pacific between English and French speaking peoples. While facilitating political and diplomatic arrangements in other spheres, it left the archipelago with deep divisions resulting from the practical realities of dual administration by representatives of rival European cultures. While Britain and France were the principal negotiating entities, there were significant elements impinging on their positions, some more tangible than others. French motives in the group were influenced by a colonial ideology buttressed by perceived cultural obligations to spread the glories of French culture on a universal scale. The universalism of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution are reflected in the mission civilisatrice, a civilizing mission designed to extend and maintain French culture on a global scale.<sup>22</sup> This preoccupation has been called "one of the most deeply rooted traditions of the Quai d'Orsay since Louis XIV's policy of prestige and 'magnificence'."<sup>23</sup> Henri Brunswig has asserted that the quest for international prestige was the driving force of French imperialism from 1871 to 1914.<sup>24</sup> The grandeur that was tarnished by defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and diplomatic frustrations resulting from the Anglo-French agreements over Africa in 1890-1 served to increase French

appetites for the compensations of empire. Moral justifications included the idea that imperialism was essentially a humanitarian endeavor toward economic progress, peace and civilization.

This "humanitarian duty" was articulated via the doctrine of assimilation.<sup>25</sup> It is a doctrine variously interpreted; however, essentially the colony was to transcend vast distances and significant differences of race and cultural values to ultimately become an integral part of France. The people and the societies they lived in would reflect the image of the "mother country" to the degree possible. It was attractive to colonial apologists, accommodating egalitarianism, cultural imperialism and the uniform application of policy.<sup>26</sup> However, by the end of the 19th Century, the doctrine of assimilation fell into disrepute among theorists due to perceptions of excessive paternalism. The diversity of the French Empire by the early 20th Century stimulated a new colonial doctrine: association.<sup>27</sup>

The doctrine of association made allowances for indigenous institutions, providing a theoretical basis for their appreciation and preservation.<sup>28</sup> While it was adopted as the official colonial doctrine of France after World War I, it has been argued that the doctrine was merely an expedient: the creation of cultural replicas for eventual incorporation into the metropole continued to define the essence of the French colonial mission.<sup>29</sup> However, the rebellion on Tanna suggests a degree of legitimacy for the doctrine of association, but with some interesting twists, as will be shown.

In terms of geo-politics, official French interest in the islands was stimulated by economic arguments advanced by colonists in the neighboring colony of New Caledonia and by fears the colony would be encircled by appendages of the British Empire in the region.<sup>30</sup>

England's motives in the group were primarily generated by those same appendages of empire which gave France pause. Missionaries such as John Paton capitalized on existing sentiment in Australia with regard to the New Hebrides in pushing for British annexation. Paton personally lobbied hard, as did commercial interests in Australia.<sup>31</sup> Paton's vision of a new society in the South Pacific, sanctified by the blood of Christ, and characterized by a government ruling in His name may not have corresponded identically to Australian hopes for the group; however, in his advocacy of heading off French - and importantly for the Presbyterians, Catholic - designs on the region, Paton found an eager and sympathetic audience in Australia. Paton and other lobbyists played up the spectre of France casting long shadows on Australia's gleaming self-image in the future of the Pacific. That vision was expressed in 1871 by John Dunmore Lang, when he described a future Sydney as:

"...like the ancient city of Miletus in the flourishing period of Grecian colonization, another mother city of a whole series of flourishing colonies in New Guinea and in the numerous and beautiful islands of the Western Pacific."<sup>32</sup>

Gallic inroads in what might otherwise by Anglo-Saxon seas were not taken lightly by interests in Australia; they made their feelings known to a British Government which saw neither geo-political, nor economic advantage in annexing the New Hebrides. Britain nevertheless was willing to respond to Australian pressure. The identification of Presbyterian interests with the British Empire is an important factor to bear in mind in light of subsequent developments; it is an identification which associated Britain with a cultural mission in practice which has generally been regarded as the hallmark of French colonial doctrine: assimilation.

While Catholic missionaries had a history of complicity in French colonial activities - for example, Marist Fathers signed the treaty with local chiefs

in New Caledonia resulting in French annexation - by the time Franco-Anglo-Saxon rivalry came to the fore in the New Hebrides Catholic missionaries were no longer actively supported by the French Government.<sup>33</sup> Catholicism lagged far behind Presbyterianism in the archipelago: there was a shortage of priests and no indigenous priests were ordained until after World War II.<sup>34</sup> On Tanna, for many years Christianity and Presbyterianism were synonymous; the ascendancy of Presbyterianism, however, was a slow process.

Presbyterian missionaries continued to press their battle for indigenous hearts and minds on Tanna, although there were no converts until 1881. The influx of returning overseas laborers had a profound sociological impact on Tanna, polarizing indigenous sentiments both for and against Christianity. Exposure at Queensland missions and Christian schools had led some Tannese to be favorably disposed toward Christianity; others returned as opposed, or indifferent, to Christianity as when they left. Concerning recalcitrant returnees, MacMillan, stationed at Weasisi on Tanna's east coast, lamented in 1900 that:

"They have come back to teach their fellows worse evils than they knew in heathenism."<sup>35</sup>

Correspondence from the Rev. John Paton's son, Frank, now a missionary in his own right, discusses returnees from his post on Tanna's west coast:

"One of the big events of the last two months was the landing of twenty returned Kanakas from Queensland. Such a number has never been landed at one time within memory. Several of them were former members of our Candidates' Class, and I am glad to say they have been faithful. Four others were brought in while in Queensland, and they have joined the worship here. All the rest are now glorying in their return to naked heathenism."<sup>36</sup>

He goes on to say:

"We expect all our boys back soon now that the new Kanaka Bill has become law. Their return will be by no means an unmixed blessing, as our worst characters are returned Queenslanders."<sup>37</sup>

The bill Paton refers to was a legislative manifestation of the "White Australia" policy which resulted in an end to recruitment of laborers from the New Hebrides in 1904.<sup>38</sup> The "White Australia" policy resulted in the repatriation of approximately 6,000 islanders to the archipelago between 1902 and 1906.<sup>39</sup>

Presbyterian Missions began attracting converts who in turn became important in furthering Mission influence. One example of the individual Tannese who came to embrace Christianity was known as Tom Tanna, a name adopted during his Queensland sojourn as a laborer on a sugar plantation. Tom Tanna was recognized by the Presbyterian Missionaries as having "done all he could to influence his heathen brethren in favour of our Holy Religion."<sup>40</sup>

When he died in 1899, Tom Tanna was eulogized by the Reverend Frank Paton as "one of the Fathers of our Church on West Tanna."<sup>41</sup>

Increased mission influence can also be traced to the efforts of individual Tannese who did not necessarily go abroad. One example is provided by Numanian, who was a teacher and assistant to the mission at West Tanna. The process of his conversion also illustrates some of the factors which influenced some Tannese to embrace Christianity. Numanian first came to Rev. Frank Paton for medicine. He later started working for the mission. Paton wrote in 1899 that:

"He was a good worker but a determined heathen, and was always demanding higher wages."<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, Numanian relented when confronted with the mission's intractable position that attendance at the mission school was compulsory for those who could work at the mission.<sup>43</sup> When Numanian agreed to the missionarie's terms, they witnessed a change in him:

"From that day numanian took a deep interest in the Worship. He made rapid progress, and when we built our new Church he was one of our foremost helpers."<sup>44</sup>

It was noted that he showed an "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace," when he began wearing clothes.<sup>45</sup> His spiritual progress and cultural transformation were described thus:

"First he worked for a shirt and lava lava for himself, and then he worked for clothes for his wife and children. At the same time he gave up kava and other heathen customs."<sup>46</sup>

By 1896 there were four missionaries stationed on Tanna: Paton at Black Beach on the west coast, Macmillan at Weasisi on the east coast, with Gray succeeding Neilson at Port Resolution, and Watt at Kwamera. In the words of the June 1896 Quarterly Jottings: "Thus a combined attack from four points will be made upon Tanna."<sup>47</sup> The progress of the mission was becoming apparent. In 1895 Watt reported attendance at church services to be 300; there were six communicants, and eight teachers serving the 60 people attending classes in seven schools.<sup>48</sup>

During a visit by John Paton to his son's station at Black Beach in 1899, he reported 220 attended the first service, over 200 at the second that same day.<sup>49</sup> That same year, Macmillan reported that 37 were attending catechuman's class at Weasisi.<sup>50</sup> The missions continued to grow that same year. Frank Paton noted that the largest congregation assembled, 270, attended services on 24 December 1899. With at baptism of 29 converts, church membership increased to 63.<sup>51</sup> MacMillan reported that on 31 December he baptised 16 converts, "exactly twice the number there were last time."<sup>52</sup>

Despite these significant gains, there was little time for the missionaries to develop a smug attitude. Frank Paton reported in early 1900 that:

"In the north-east three men were shot, and two of the bodies fell into the hands of the enemy. These bodies were passed from village to village, and one of them was cooked and eaten..."<sup>53</sup>

Paton went on to say:

"Heathen attended from far and near, and pieces of the body were sent right through our district as a great delicacy."<sup>54</sup>

Paton managed to intervene, preventing the second body from being eaten. This resulted in fears of retribution by the people of Ikunala, where the feast was interrupted. Paton believed that they planned an ambush for three Aniwans visiting from Weasisi. Advising them to take a less hazardous route upon their return, Paton believed he had saved them from being murdered, a possibility far from remote. Paton's comments in the aftermath provide insight into the situation then existing:

"All this shows how bitter the heathen are just now, and how careful we have to be in going amongst them. It is because they now realise fully how utterly opposed the Gospel is to all their devilry, and that they must fight it to the death or yield. It is a healthy sign, and shows more than anything the hold the Gospel is getting in the district."<sup>55</sup>

The combative imagery and orientation of the Presbyterian Mission became a practical reality as their numbers increased. The theocratic ideal embraced by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland was realized in the early-twentieth century with the implementation of what became known as "Tanna Law." As there was no government agent on the island until 1912, the Presbyterian infrastructure became a powerful political force on Tanna. Converts became involved in the establishment and functioning of courts and a police force. Tanna Law became synonymous with repression; it attempted to subjugate non-believers and to spread Christian jurisdiction island-wide. Economic activities were controlled on land acquired by the mission, and practices deemed objectionable were prohibited. Kava drinking was attacked,

and those caught transporting it along roads and traditional exchange networks were heavily fined. Traditional dancing was attacked, and the custom of sexual initiation of young men by women was forbidden. Punishment was meted out in sentences of hard labor; excesses by converts, not likely to have been sanctioned by the missionaries themselves, included physical brutality and humiliation.<sup>56</sup> By the 1920s Presbyterian influence was at its zenith, with Christians outnumbering the unconverted by a 3:1 ratio.<sup>57</sup>

The plight of the non-Christians on Tanna was viewed sympathetically by the District Agent appointed to the island in 1912. The policies of Wilkes—an Englishman—which attempted to protect the rights of non-Christians, elicited efforts by the Presbyterians to have him removed; he was perceived as a threat to the progress of the mission. Wilkes, however, resigned to serve in the army in 1915. He was replaced by Nicol, another Britisher, who closely cooperated with the Christian theocracy on Tanna until he died in 1944.<sup>58</sup>

Non-Christians reacted optimistically to the appointment of a French District Agent to Tanna in 1925, many volunteering to help construct his house without compensation. However, the French District Agent and those who followed remained largely aloof from local politics until the conclusion of World War II: thus suggesting it was not what the French did during this era, but what they did not do which endeared them to the collective memory of kastom-oriented groups on Tanna.<sup>59</sup>

The consequences of Presbyterian domination on Tanna resulted in significant erosion of kastom. It was therefore surprising to missionaries and colonial authorities alike when Tannese in large numbers defected from Christian churches in 1940, embracing a return to kastom at the urging of a



prophet named John Frum. The movement had the millenarian trappings of a cargo cult, which included the promise of material wealth in great quantity and a new social order. Tannese built airstrips on the island in preparation for the arrival of the planes which would bear the cargo; traditional dancing was revived, as were other practices such as kava drinking. The movement is thought to have begun in the late-1930s, coming to the attention of the colonial authorities in late-1940. John Frum made his appearances in darkness, speaking in a falsetto voice. His message, which had wide appeal, was interpreted as a threat to the Christian and colonial leadership. Many of the leaders of the movement were jailed. While attempts at repression continued, the movement persisted, evolving into both a political party and organized church.<sup>60</sup>

Anthropologist Ron Brunton suggests that the John Frum movement was "a rather sophisticated, and generally successful, attempt by pagans to halt and reverse a process of progressive social disintegration."<sup>61</sup> Brunton cites the impact of Christian influence in undermining traditional marriage exchanges as the pivotal factor leading to the emergence of the movement. The organization of the Presbyterian Church put non-Christians at a distinct disadvantage on an island in which secular authority was rarely exerted on their behalf. The movement can thus be interpreted as a result of non-Christians adopting a strategy to advance their own interests. Some of the parallels related to the imagery and symbology of the the John Frum movement with Christianity can be seen as the application of "enemy" tactics for their own purposes.

A significant dimension of the John Frum movement is its relationship to the United States. As noted earlier, when kastom gavman was declared in opposition to the central government in 1980, an American Flag was raised. It

is important to note that some John Frum leaders jailed prior to the outbreak of World War II told of being visited in prison by John Frum, who came in spirit form and told the prisoners to watch for symbol. The arrival of the Americans in 1942 was seen as the fulfillment of that promise, as well as earlier prophecies relating to the coming of Americans. The arrival of the Americans resulted in the release of John Frum followers from prison in order to help in the construction of the numerous projects undertaken by the Americans.<sup>62</sup>

The American presence in the archipelago, based at Santo and Port Vila, was numerically as well as materially, impressive. The archipelago at that time was estimated to have 60,000 indigenous inhabitants; over 100,000 American servicemen were stationed in the islands, a significant number of whom were black. Over one half million American military personnel passed through the archipelago enroute other locations within the Pacific theater of operations.<sup>63</sup> One thousand Tannese are estimated to have been recruited to work for the Americans, and were impressed by the American wealth and generosity. They received high wages and were accorded a degree of respect as individuals previously denied under colonial rule. While the American period in the islands accommodated the earlier "cargo" orientation of the movement, the continuing use of American symbols, such as flags, appears to be a manifestation of nostalgia as well as a reminder of the link John Frum followers had with America and Americans in the war years. Allies in the war effort, America is still thought of as an ally;<sup>64</sup> the use of American symbols can be seen as fitting within the framework of indigenous use of alliance, despite the fact that the alliance since the war exists in symbols and memories rather than in more tangible terms for the John Frum movement.

However, symbols and memories are genuine sources of power for people of all societies. The John Frum movement recognized and utilized this power in pursuing its goals.

Reflecting on the dynamics of rebellion on Tanna, one is struck by the irony of the flags of the United States and France flying side by side at the headquarters of the John Frum movement in light of John Paton's vision of Anglo-Saxon unity described in a letter written in 1900:

"I hope the day will soon come when the Stars and Stripes and the old Union Jack will be united and firmly bound together for all definsive purposes... If these great nations were all firmly united in the interests of humanity, and for God's glory and honour, they could dictate peace to all nations, prevent oppression and cruelty among many, and give peace and prosperity to the world."<sup>65</sup>

Anglo-Saxon unity to Paton was generally advocated in opposition to France, a nation which embraced, in theory, a more developed and articulate expression of the same ideology, albeit with French culture at the forefront of the humane, civilizing mission envisioned by Paton.

The John Frum alliance with the French in opposition to the central government is in itself somewhat ironic. As partners in the colonial administration, the French actively sought to suppress the John Frum movement in the 1940s and 1950s, seeing it as a threat to colonial rule. However, the interests of the French and the John Frum movement converged in opposition to Anglo-Saxon elements in the 1970s.<sup>66</sup> Prior to the elections of 1979 the French Resident Commissioner, Jean-Jacques Robert, made a series of visits to Tanna during which he made gifts of rice, cigarettes, kerosene and other items to John Frum followers. His largesse included the gift of a 16-foot boat with two outboard motors to the people of Sulphur Bay.<sup>67</sup> The Tannese reciprocated, giving large quantities of manioc, taro and other produce to Tuk Nowau who acted as a liaison.<sup>68</sup> The French Resident Commissioner had been attending the

annual John Frum celebrations at Sulphur Bay since the mid-1970s; he was present at the 1980 celebrations in which kastom gavman was proclaimed in opposition to the anglophone central government.<sup>69</sup>

The central government, dominated by ni-Vanuatu Presbyterians, headed by an Anglican Priest, were seen as a threat to followers of John Frum. Historically antagonistic toward English-speaking mission activities for reasons of their own, the French came to be seen as allies against a common enemy. Covering the 1980 celebrations at Sulphur Bay, the Voice of the New Hebrides reported:

"Troubles with the Vanuaku Party originate at the beginning of the century when missionaries destroyed custom. Those who went along with the missionaries are the now Vanuaku Party members, the chief [Aissea of Sulphur Bay] said.

The missionaries and the British always caused problems, Voice of the New Hebrides was told. The French respected custom and custom was what John Frum wanted to preserve, the men told Voice of the New Hebrides."<sup>70</sup>

As a result of the activities of the Presbyterian Church on Tanna, Britain came to be perceived as assimilationist. The French doctrine of association, not taken seriously by critics, was perceived as a practical reality by a group struggling to retain its grip on traditional culture: a grip which memories suggested could be very tenuous. Followers of John Frum looked for allies; they found one in the French.

France, with its deeply rooted tradition of cultural imperialism would seem an odd ally for a group preoccupied with the protection and preservation of its own culture. Both groups were concerned with cultural continuity, and the prospects for French culture and Tannese kastom looked grim with the rise of the Presbyterian-dominated, anglophone Vanua'aku Party in control of the central government. John Frum followers allied with the French in fear of the

consequences of an independent Vanuatu ruled by their long-standing rivals, the Presbyterian politico-religious grouping. For France, the threat posed by the Vanua'aku Party had much broader implications. The Vanua'aku Party was an outspoken political foe in a position to undermine French interests in its territories of New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia. There were also significant strategic implications involved, for the ability to test nuclear weapons in French Polynesia has long been maintained to be crucial to French national interests, not to mention prestige. France was less concerned with preserving its cultural influence on Tanna—it had long been minimal—than it was to thwart the Vanua'aku Party as an enemy of French cultural and geo-political influences elsewhere; these included French interests on other islands in the archipelago, such as Santo and Efate, as well as their other Pacific territories. While French activities in the South Pacific continued to be guided by considerations of preserving and extending cultural imperialism had to be compromised. The theoretical framework was already in place, the doctrine of association had already been applied—intentionally or not—on Tanna.

The non-Christian Tannese found common cause with the French because they were enemies of their enemies. There is little to suggest that French culture held anymore appeal than its counterpart across the channel. The only visible concession the John Frum movement made was their use of the French Flag. This served John Frum purposes by suggesting affiliation with a powerful ally. Indigenous use of the French Flag was useful in suggesting a source of powerful support, while at the same time providing their ally with the illusion of influence and indigenous cultural identification. Both of the foreign flags raised by Tannese rebels—the Tricolor and Stars and

Stripes—were powerful symbols co-opted by indigenous people for use in a framework of indigenous rivalry.

Jean Guiart, the distinguished French anthropologist, has expressed the conceptual framework of indigenous Tannese society in which symbolism continues to play a role. This is illustrated by the use of "exchange roads" in maintaining the proper relationship between different groups. Guiart suggests that symbolic gestures may vary in manifestation:

"When someone wanted to avoid being absorbed by a neighbor who was a Protestant, he became a Catholic. After that he would accept a French school in his area and not an English one."<sup>71</sup>

The John Frum alliance with the French, and the emergence of the movement itself, represents an indigenous strategy in pursuit of indigenous goals. Metropolitan alignment in this context has tended to obscure the true nature of the conflict which surfaced with independence on Tanna: the longstanding battle between proponents of kastom and converts to Christianity. The nature of the conflict has changed overtime. The inroads of outside influences, secular as well as spiritual, have eroded kastom to the extent that its principal advocates, John Frum followers at Sulphur Bay, have been accused of deviating from kastom. Brunton suggests that one of the reasons the people of Sulphur Bay (Ipikil) have been so preoccupied with John Frum is because it was there that it was most difficult to revive kastom because so much knowledge of traditional ways had been lost.<sup>72</sup> Thus kastom continues to vary in interpretation, even among its most ardent advocates. It is perhaps appropriate, in that traditional customary societies on Tanna and elsewhere in Vanuatu, were characterized by cultural diversity.

The cultural diversity characterizing traditional Vanuatu, combined with the influence of a seventy-four year period of joint administration by rival European cultures, made the transition to independence a complicated and

turbulent affair. The troubles which surfaced were the result of groups grappling with their visions of the future and reconciling their interpretations of the past.

Sulphur Bay, the headquarters of the John Frum movement, is now quiet. The land remains lush. To one side of the village the sea murmurs; to the other, Yasur Volcano smokes; and regularly thunders with powerful abruptness. The people there cling to their symbols, to kastom—as they interpret it—and wait for a message from John Frum.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to the people staffing the Pacific Collection of the University of Hawaii, Manoa for their assistance in obtaining research materials, Ms. Renee Heyum, Curator, in particular. A special word of thanks is owed to Dr. Bob Kiste, Dr. Brij Lal, and Dr. David Hanlon for their advice, assistance and encouragement.
2. John Beasant, The Santo Rebellion, An Imperial Reckoning. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press: 1984).
3. Jeremy MacClancy, To Kill a Bird With Two Stones, A Short History of Vanuatu (Vila: Vanuatu Cultural Centre Publications, 1981), p. 63.
4. Ron Adams, In The Land of Strangers, A Century of European Contact With Tanna, 1774-1874. (Canberra: Australian National University Press: 1984). Adams notes what Europeans calls tribes are clusters of hamlets sharing common territorial names; the relative importance tribal affiliation played in Tannese society is unknown.
5. J.C. Beaglehole, The Exploration of the Pacific. (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 1966), p. 94.
6. Adams, In the Land of Strangers, p. 1.
7. Ibid, p. 3.
8. Ibid, p. 51.
9. W.P. Morrell, Britain in the Pacific Islands, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 93.
10. James Paton, Rev. (ed.), John G. Paton, D.D., Missionary to the New Hebrides, An Autobiography, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1894), p. 65.
11. Ibid, p. 66.
12. Ibid, p. 115.
13. Adams, In the Land of Strangers, p. 110.
14. Monty Lindstrom, "Speech and Kava on Tanna," Michael Allen, ed., Vanuatu: Politics, Economics and Ritual in Island Melanesia, (Sydney: Academic Press, 1981), p. 390.
15. Ibid., p. 382.
16. The New Hebrides South Sea Islands Quarterly Jottings of "The John G. Paton Mission Fund" for the Evangelization of the remaining Cannibals on These Islands, April 1896, no. 12, letter from Mrs. Wilson of Kew, Melbourne, p. 11.



17. Adams, In the Land of Strangers, p. 131.
18. Ibid., p. 148.
19. Ibid., p. 148.
20. Roger Thompson, Australian Imperialism in the Pacific: The Expansionist Era, 1820-1920. (Melbourne: Globe Press, 1980).
21. Christopher Andrew and A.S. Kanya-Forstner, The Climax of French Imperial Expansion, 1914-1924. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), p. 37.
22. Raymond Betts, Tricolore: The French Overseas Empire. (London and New York: Gordon and Cremonesi, 1978), p. 39.
23. Herbert Luethy and David Rodnick, French Motivations in the Suez Crisis, LLOYD A. FREE, ed., (Princeton: The Institute for International Social Research, 1956), p. 23.
24. See Henri Brunschwig, French Colonialism, 1871-1914, Myths and Realities. (London: Pall Mall, 1966).
25. Herbert Luethy and David Rodnick, French Foreign Policy Since the Second World War. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson) p. 186.
26. Raymond Betts, Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914. (New York: AMS Press, 1960).
27. Stuart Michael Persell, The French Colonial Lobby, 1889-1938. (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1983), p. 38.
28. Persell, The French Colonial Lobby, p. 39.
29. D.K. Fieldhouse, The Colonial Empires, A Comparative Survey from the 18th Century. (London: 1966)
30. D.K. Fieldhouse, Economics and Empire, 1830-1914, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 1973), p. 449. Fieldhouse illuminates the economic dimensions of French motives in the New Hebrides, as well as advancing the arguments suggesting metropolitan colonial expansion was to a degree in response to the sub-imperialist ambitions of their colonies.
31. See Roger Thompson, Australian Imperialism in the Pacific.
32. Humphrey McQueen, A New Britannia, (Ringwood: Pelican Books, 1970), p. 66.
33. C.W. Newbury, "Aspects of French Policy in the Pacific, 1853-1906," Pacific Historical Review, vol. XXVII, no. 1, (Feb, 1958), p. 47.

34. Lack of priests had been a problem of long-standing; MacClancy notes in Two Kill a Bird with Two Stones, that in 1914 there were only 28, and in 1933 only 18, most of which were over 50 years old; these numbers apply to priests resident in the entire archipelago, p. 103.
35. Letter from Rev. T. MacMillan, "Disturbed Times on Tanna," Quarterly Jottings, 28 February 1900, no. 37, p. 5.
36. "From our First Missionary," West Tanna, Lenakel News, no. 35, Quarterly Jottings, no. 37, July 1902, p. 5.
37. Ibid., p. 6.
38. John Beasant, The Santo Rebellion, p. 7. The legislation relating to the "White Australia" Policy began in 1901, although recruitment in the New Hebrides did not end until 1904. The act itself was the Pacific Islanders Labourers Act, which permitted a limited number of licences in 1902-3; however, departure from Australia was mandatory at the end of 1906.
39. Deryck Scarr, "Recruits and Recruiters, A Portrait of the Pacific Islands Labour Trade," Barrie MacDonald, ed., p. 283, Essays From the Journal of Pacific History, extracted from J.P.H., vol. 11.
40. Letter from Rev. James Lawrie to Rev. James Paton, printed in Quarterly Jottings, April 1897, no. 16, p. 2.
41. "Lenakel News," no. 23, 1 January 1900, Quarterly Jottings, April 1900, no. 28, p. 14.
42. "Lenakel News," no. 22, 31 October 1899, Quarterly Jottings, no. 28, April 1900, p. 8.
43. Ibid., p. 8.
44. Ibid., p. 8.
45. Ibid., p. 1.
46. Ibid., p. 8.
47. Quarterly Jottings, no. 13, June 1896, p. 2.
48. Ibid., p. 2.
49. Letter from John Paton from Aniwa, 3 March 1899, published in Quarterly Jottings, no. 25, July 1899, p. 4.
50. Quarterly Jottings, no. 26, October 1899, p. 27.
51. "Lenakel News," no. 23, 1 January 1900, Quarterly Jottings, no. 28, April 1900, p. 16.

52. "East Tanna Mission, Extracts from Rev. Thompson MacMillan's Letters," November 1899, Quarterly Jottings, no. 23, 1 January 1900, p. 24.
53. "Lenakel News," no. 24, 28 February 1900, Quarterly Jottings, no. 29, July 1900, p. 11.
54. Ibid., p. 11.
55. "Lenakel News," no. 25, 30 April 1900, Quarterly Jottings, no. 30, October 1900.
56. Ron Brunton, "The Origins of the John Frum Movement," Michael Allen, ed., Vanuatu: Politics, Economics and Ritual in Island Melanesia, (Sydney: Academic Press, 1981), p. 367. See also, Deryck Scarr, Fragments of Empire: A History of the Western Pacific High Commission, 1914-1924, (Stanford: University Press, 1981), p. 245; and Charles Foreman, The Island Churches of the South Pacific, Emergence in the Twentieth Century, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 46.
57. Brunton, "The Origins of the John Frum Movement," p. 370.
58. Ibid., p. 369.
59. Ibid., p. 370.
60. See Peter Worsley, The Trumpet Shall Sound, A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia, (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968), p. 153; and Robert J. Gregory and Janet E. Gregory, "John Frum: An Indigenous Strategy of Reaction to Mission Rule and the Colonial Order," Pacific Studies, vol. 17, no. 2, 1984, in addition to Brunton, "The Origins of the John Frum Movement."
61. Brunton, "The Origins of the John Frum Movement," p. 357.
62. Gregory, "John Frum: An Indigenous Strategy," p. 82. See also, Edward Rice, John Frum He Come, (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1974).
63. Monty Lindstrom, "Cult and Culture: American Dreams in Vanuatu," Pacific Studies, vol. IV, no. 2, Spring 1981; See also Y. Geslin, "Les Americains aux Nouvelles-Hebrides," Journal de la Societe des Oceanistes, vol. 12, 1956, p. 257.
64. Ibid. Lindstrom and others note the continuing affection for American symbols, such as flags and dogtags issued to laborers. In conversations with Isaac Wan at Sulphur Bay in August 1985, and other John Frum adherents, I was told that Man-Tanna and America had a "relationship," one which to the followers of John Frum, continues.
65. Excerpts from a letter written by John Paton, published in Quarterly Jottings, no. 29, July 1900, p. 4.

66. Lindstrom, "Cult and Culture," p. 108.
67. Ibid., See also Malcolm Salmon, "New Hebrides: High Hope are Haunted by High dangers," Pacific Islands Monthly, January 1980, p. 15.
68. Salmon, "High Hopes," p. 15; Salmon references an account by long-time resident of the islands, Bob Paul.
69. Lindstrom, "Cult and Culture," p. 108.
70. "Peace and Custom," Voice of the New Hebrides, no. 13, 23 February 1980, p. 5.
71. "New Hebrides: 'A Gross Mistake for Europeans to Interfere,'" Pacific Islands Monthly, April 1980, p. 10; this article is based on a transcript from an interview of Jean Guiart by Jean Massias of Nabanga.
72. Brunton, "The Origins of the John Frum Movement," p. 373.

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