

## **A Collection of Traditional and Contemporary Customs of Islands of Vanuatu- A Tribute to the Government and People of Vanuatu**

### **Introduction**

For some months, indeed years, I had been hankering to make a simple collection of customs of Vanuatu – something that was not an anthropological masterpiece, examining the customs of Vanuatu in minute and excruciating detail, nor something that compared and criticised these customs in the light of modern sociological thought and international standards of human rights. But something that was just a simple description of the main customs of Vanuatu as described by people of this country.

The opportunity presented itself at the end of last year, 1987, when a summer school that I was planning to teach was overtaken by the visit of an overseas expert, and so December 2017 and January 2018 opened up as times which I could devote to the empirical research that would be required for such a project.

A further opportunity was presented when 2018 was heralded as the Golden Jubilee of USP, and staff were encouraged to produce some special activity or contribution to mark the opening of the University in 1968. I decided that I would make a collection of customs and then have them printed as a small booklet which would be presented to the Government and People of Vanuatu as a token of gratitude from Emalus Campus for the years it has been hosted here first as a USP Centre, 1980-1989, then as a USP Complex, 1989-1996, and finally, as USP Emalus Campus 1996-present.

### **The Collection**

What I have endeavoured to do is to make a collection of the main customs relating to stages of life and to social governance based upon what I have been told by people who personally know of the customs that they are describing. Because of the role of the collection as a USP Golden Jubilee activity I have tried, as far as possible, to include as contributors who are staff and students, past and present, of Emalus Campus . But there have been some occasions when I have had to look further afield for contributors.

At the time of writing this paper, in mid-July 2018 I have now completed the collection of customs of islands of Vanuatu, and these oral and written contributions have been typewritten by me, and are now undergoing editing and design work ready for binding and printing. On Monday 23 July 2018, the Official Opening of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations on Emalus will be held, and that is where copies of these collections are to be presented to the Prime Minister of Vanuatu and to the Minister of Education as a token or sign of gratitude by USP Emalus Campus for the happy and fruitful relationship which has developed between the Government and People of Vanuatu and the USP presence over the last 38 years. Clearly the collections will not be able to be bound and printed by that time, so we plan that the presentation will take the form of unbound typescripts contained in woven custom baskets.

I have been able to obtain contributions relating to the customs of some twenty six different islands of Vanuatu. There are about eighty islands in the Vanuatu archipelago, so twenty six is clearly not most of the islands, but many of the islands are just small islets, with very little, if any population. The 26 islands that I have been able to collect contributions about represent all the main inhabited islands, except two islands in the Torres group- the most northern group in the archipelago. It must also be emphasised that in the larger islands, there is always more than one custom area, and with regard to most of these custom areas I have been able to obtain contributions.

There is more work to be done. There are some missing islands, and also some missing custom areas within some islands. But hopefully the collection is substantial enough to encourage a continuation of the search for the missing islands and custom areas, and add them to a further edition of this collection, or an additional collection.

My own hope for the future is that there should be a continuation of this edition, but expanding it to include the values and ethos of the custom areas that are described here. This collection can provide the skeleton onto which flesh can be added to describe the full aspects of customary life in Vanuatu.

### **Challenges and stumbling blocks**

Undoubtedly there have been challenges along the way. One of the first was the lack of an English map or atlas of the islands of Vanuatu. That was not to say that

there was no atlas or map. There is a very excellent atlas, but it is in French, and so when one looks for villages like 'whitewater,' or areas like 'waterfall,' they are not to be seen, and even Bislama names are given French spellings, with additional vowels, which tend to camouflage them for a native English speaker like myself.

Another problem was relatives who took a keen interest in the proceedings, and then started to misunderstand and mislead the interviewees, so that they ended up in an inaccurate confusion. On one island a woman who had been listening to her spouse giving information about his island, and intervening, and bossing him about and telling him what particular questions meant, then undertook an interview herself in relation to her island, and ended up in getting the contributors so confused that she eventually had to say that the contributors were so confused and so confusing that she could not make a proper report and would have to give up. So then I had to go looking for other contributors to replace the reports which she was so confident that she could provide.

Another challenge which I found very distressing was that a very good friend of mine from academia who I had hoped would be able to assist with the analysis of the various customs, could not resist the temptation of running the academic ruler over all the words of the contributors, and could not resist also the temptation to critique customs according to the extent to which they conformed, or did not conform, to standards of international human rights. That was not what I was wanting, and although I explained very clearly to her, she persisted in going her way, and eventually I had to abandon all hope of assistance from that good friend.

Cyclone Hola paid a visit to Vanuatu during the course of the interviews and disrupted all work for some 7 days. The Municipal elections which were held on 7 March 2018 also prevented some people from being available for interview. The Prince of Wales also paid a visit at the time of the Commonwealth Games, and although the visit of HRH lasted only half a day the preparations for it dislocated the normal working routines of many people for days before he arrived, and after he left.

The greatest stumbling block, however, occurred so often at the time of the checking of the typescript by the contributor. So often the contributors, who had

made a very good oral contribution, seemed, when they saw the type written version, to get cold feet and find it necessary to consult with someone else. That someone else was often someone on the island, and this would involve sending the typescript far away, or else waiting for some relative to arrive from the island – either of these options would often mean delays of weeks, and in some cases months. It was very dis-spiriting, to say the least.

The final stumbling block, and I am sorry to mention it, was what I must describe “scheming chief.” There was a small minority of chiefs who obviously saw in me a possible pathway to work or to riches. There was one chief in particular, who kept pestering for work or money, and eventually I had to respond by loading my car with members of my Vanuatu family, in the face of whom, the chief was too embarrassed to ask for more money, and hastily jumped out of my car, without having asked for a single vatu.

### **Helping hands**

It has not however been a journey totally confronted by challenges and stumbling blocks. There have been many heart-warming encouragements on the way. Almost every colleague and student on Emalus Campus has been glad to help me find appropriate people to interview.

The two strongest pairs of helping hands came from the assistant librarian, Elisabeth Leekeley, who kindly edited the typescript from beginning to end, with great conscientiousness, which, considering that she had just recently arrived from the United States, knowing nothing about Vanuatu, must have required a great deal of effort and concentration. The other strong pair of helping hands belonged to Daryl Abel, who took over the designing of the collection and converted a very plain typescript into a thing of beauty

The members of my own Vanuatu family have been very enthusiastic in their interest, and also in their assistance in suggesting and locating people and accompanying me to unfamiliar places. Eric, Elia, and Nivaldo Molbaleh and their two cousins, Alain Molgos and Arcade Buleban made many suggestions about people who could be interviewed and where I could find contributors for an elusive part of the country..

And there are people from within the Campus who have been very helpful- Allen Daniel, John Stephens, David Lenghone

People outside the Campus who have proved most helpful. Edson Willie of The Cultural Centre was able to provide contributors with regard to some areas that were difficult for me to find contributors, such as Erromango, Aneityum, and North East Malekula, South West Malekula.

The Brothers at the Paterson Household for Melanesian Brothers were able to provide contributors in respect of islands far from Emalus Campus in the northern islands of the Banks Group.

A copy of the excellent French atlas produced in 2012 by Patricia Simeoni, L'Atlas du Vanouatou, and a copy of the report of the Mini- Census of 2016, which was kindly provided by the Census Department of Statistics, free of charge, proved to be invaluable in supplying background information for the different islands, and areas within the islands.

### **Planning, Patience, Perseverance and Persistence – and GRIT**

Before I started on this project I wondered in my mind why someone else had not done this before- just going round collecting up the accounts from the spoken words of people from each place did not seem to be very difficult or strenuous. But I soon found why this had never been done before. It proved to be very difficult, and demanding – much more so than I had expected. In fact it started to take over my whole life. I started to wake up at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning to think about what had to be done that day. I had to buy a diary, and soon found that I was filling up the pages with scribbled reminders of what had to be done each day. The project took over my weekends, Saturday and Sunday, and my garden deteriorated and became covered with weeds, as I ceased to have the time, or indeed even the interest, to devote to it which I had previously very much enjoyed.

The most strenuous task was that which I have already mentioned in relation to stumbling blocks – it was the keeping track of typescripts of interviews which the interviewees so often felt that they must share with relatives or friends on the island or elsewhere in Vanuatu. It was just grim determination that I had to display, returning and revisiting and coming back time and again, until eventually

the contribution was returned to me, with and sometimes without, any significant change. I often thought of my Mother, who used to say to me when I was a young boy and complaining about having to do some errand time and again. She would say: "Donald, you must keep trying. You must have grit." Grit certainly was called for often.-

### **Luck, sheer luck**

But it would be a mistake to believe that this project progressed and succeeded solely by virtue of my own planning and determination alone. I must acknowledge the contribution made by Lady Luck.

One good example of the role played by luck occurred when one day I was making my way to interview a contributor at a radio station, when I saw coming along the footpath towards me a man who I knew lived in a remote northern island which I would never have been able to get to in order to interview. It just so happened that he had come to Port Vila because of a court case in which he was involved, and was walking on his way to see his lawyers. A few more minutes, and I would have missed him as he made his way past the radio station where I was heading.

That piece of luck led onto another piece of luck in that he was able to give me the name of a man who lived in another nearby remote island, and who had come to Port Vila to attend to some business which lasted long enough for me to be able to interview that man also, and add another remote island to the collection.

Another stroke of luck occurred one day when I was walking along an aisle in a supermarket looking for provisions, when I saw a man whom I had not seen for many years. So I asked him where he was living, and it turned out that he was living in one of the small off-shore islands of Efate, with which I had no contacts at all, and not only that, but that he was married to the daughter of the paramount chief of that island, and was able to persuade his brother-in-law to tell me about the customs of that island – such luck!!

Another day when luck shone upon me was when I was sitting waiting for the arrival of a person whom I was going to interview, and a former student stopped and we chatted and he mentioned that a friend of his was visiting from an area in Malekula, for which I had been unable to find any contributor, and had more or less given up. Thanks to this chance meeting with a former student, and his

chance remark, I was able to obtain about an area which I had almost given up on trying to find a contributor.

These were all occasions when Lady Luck was shining benevolently upon me and my contributor. But there was one occasion Lady Luck shone benevolently on me, but sadly, not on my contributor. There was one island where I felt that I need to get another contribution, and so I interviewed a senior journalist from that island. I made notes from his oral conversations as usual, and presented him with the typescript to check. A few days passed without response from him so I had, as so often happened, to remind him, and the next day he cheerily provided the amended typescript. Three days later that same week, I was shocked to pick up the newspaper and find on the front page news that my contributor had quite unexpectedly died of a heart attack. I felt extremely lucky that I had been able to secure the amended typescript only a matter of three days before death overtook this contributor.

### **Lessons learnt**

It is usual when undertaking a project for a Non Government agency nowadays to be required to include a section devoted to Lessons Learnt, and I think I should follow that example, and recount what it is that I have learnt as a result of this project.

1. **Do not delegate essential aspects of the project to some one else, even if that person seems very enthusiastic.** I quickly found that it was very unwise to ask anybody to undertake any of the questioning about customs. Because sometimes a response needs to be opened up or pursued further or queried without seeming to be disrespectful, and these actions are not easy for a person who is not accustomed to pursuing answers to questions in a way that will not produce antagonism or confusion.
2. **Do not believe people who say that they will call you.** I soon found that it was very unsafe to rely upon other people to make contact with me when they were ready. I found that it was much safer to say that I would call at a time that they agreed to, rather than that I was dependent upon them making a call at their convenience, which might never happen, or else be very delayed.

3. **Do not show any great enthusiasm in what an interviewee is reporting.** If a person has a captive audience, as a person providing information to an eager enquirer does have, and if any enthusiasm is shown by that captive audience in the information that is being provided, I discovered that this is likely to inflame and intensify the enthusiasm of that person for the information that he is or she is providing, and he or she may be carried away into excruciating detail and unfathomable obscurities. My heart used often to sink when I could see the eyes of a contributor suddenly glint or sparkle in response to an indication of enthusiasm on my part, and away the contributor would go on a wild chase through winding backroads and byways of custom, dragging me behind, twisting and turning, and unable to keep up the pace.

### **Some observations**

The purpose of this collection of customs was, as I mentioned, to describe what existed, the customs that exist or did exist, and not to make new discoveries of what was not known to exist. Nor, as I said before, was the purpose of the collection to provide an opportunity for comparison or contrast with Western norms or United Nations ideals. But undertaking this collection has had the effect of bringing to the fore and demonstrating the extent and significance of some practices and customs that were known by me to exist, but their full extent had not been fully realized.

For me, the two most interesting discoveries that this collection has brought to my attention are two customs which have been evolved to regulate or control marriage: (1) the practice of moieties, or divisions of the population so as to provide two social groupings which regulate marriage, and (2) the practice of custom wives, ie a woman related to a man whom a man was supposed to marry.

In some islands of Vanuatu , moieties still exist and still regulate marriages, by prohibiting marriages to people within the same group (exogamous moieties), as in South Tanna, (Nemrukwen and Kouyamota), Futuna (Namruke and Kawiameta), North Pentecost (Bule and Tabi), Central Pentecost (Bule and Tabi, Mabin and Martin), North Maewo (Ngwele and Aru), East and South Ambae

(Tongaro and Mwerembata), Gaua (Velau and Martin), Mota (Sagan and Tokelae).

In other islands, moieties are still recognized as existing but they do not now regulate marriages, as in Makira Island; South Tanna (Nemroukwen and Kouyoumeta ); Middle Bush, Tanna (Namourock and Koyometa); Aniwa (Namruken and Koyometa).

And then there is a third group of islands where moieties are not recognized as existing at all for any purposes, as in North Malekula, Paama and Tongariki. Whether they never existed, or whether they did once exist, and have now been forgotten, it is not now possible to say.

A second custom regulating marriage that the contributions in this Collection have shown to be more widespread, than I had understood, is that of a custom wife, whereby a boy is expected to marry the daughter or granddaughter of a brother of the mother, as in Futuna, North and West Tanna, Paama, South East Ambrym, and North Pentecost, or of a sister of a father, as in Mota Lava, Tongoa, East Ambae and West Ambae.

Another matter that is of interest to observe from this collection of customs is how Western practices and facilities, such as freedom of marriage, medical care and clinics and hospitals, religion and churches, can be, and have been, integrated with, and have supported, custom practices with regard to some matters, eg, marriages and deaths, and how they have diminished or removed custom practices with regard to other matters, such as the circumcision of boys by persons without medical training using only sharpened bamboo; the isolation of women and girls when menstruating; and the expectation that a man should marry only a daughter or grand-daughter of a sister of his father or of a brother of his mother.

Another aspect of custom which I found interesting and unusual, as compared with Western family life, is the prominent role in a family custom provides for the uncles, ie the brothers of the mother, to play. In the custom of many areas in Vanuatu, the brother of the mother of a child has a much closer connection with, and responsibility for, the upbringing of that child, the child of his sister and brother in law, than would be seen in most Western families. Children in Western families usually see their two parents, their mother and their father, as

their main source of their support and control, whereas in the custom of many places in Vanuatu the brother of the mother seems to have a role that is equal to that of a parent, so that when growing up, a child has the support and guidance of three adults, rather than the two who are observed in Western families.

For those people who believe that Melanesian custom provides only for male inheritance of land, the number of islands and areas in Vanuatu where custom provides that land is inherited through the female (matrilineal inheritance) as in North Pentecost, North Maewo, Mota, Gaua, Mota Lava, and Vanua Lava, may also be an interesting observation.

### **Conclusion**

Normally, when one sits down to write a conclusion to an article one is able to look back over a completed project, something that has come to its natural end. But the conclusion of this article has to be written when the end of the project has not yet occurred, and when the project is several days yet from completion. The interviews have been completed, the hand written notes have been converted into typed contributions, and these contributions have been edited. But the design work is still to be undertaken, and the presentation to the Ministers of Government is still to happen. So all I can provide in this conclusion is a hope of things to come, about which I should be able to say more at the Conference itself, next week on 26-27 July 2018.