



*Pigs, Tusks and Precious Red Mats
Notes from a Mission in Vanuatu*

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FORWARD

In 1990 and 1991 I made two field trips to Ranwadi Churches of Christ Secondary School Pentecost Island, Vanuatu to study dance and *kastom* as part of my research for my Master of Education degree at the University of Canberra. On each occasion I spent about 5 to 6 weeks at Ranwadi. This book relates my experiences in Pentecost during the first of those visits.

There are many people who made this book a reality. First and foremost I wish to thank Silas Buli, Principal of Ranwadi Junior Secondary School whose assistance in organising my teaching and research experience enabled me to complete my project.

In Port Vila I was assisted by Michael Liliu, Director of Education, 1989, Phil Mathews, Director of Education 1990, and John Laan from the Ministry of Education. I could not have embarked on my study without their interest.

I am very grateful to Imelda and Reuben Delos Santos for making my visit such a pleasant and comfortable experience. I also wish to thank Zaccheus Tabi, Pastor Japhet Garae, Chief Resis, Chief Cyralow, Venneth wife of Silas Buli, Judith Melsul, Charles Bani, Francois, Tom Buli and Lera, Stephen and Mary, Dorica Matan, Jonas of Baravat Village, Margeurite from Lolwari Village, and especially all the students and children at Ranwadi and the villagers of Central and South Pentecost for their friendship and hospitality.

I am especially grateful to Agnes Kiri, my friend in Port Vila since 1979 whose concern for my well-being during my visits to Vanuatu and her interest in the *kastom* of Vanuatu provided invaluable support to my mission.

Finally, I wish to thank Alf, Louise, Nicholas and Anthony, my family, each of whom at one stage or another has accompanied me to an unexpected part of the world in pursuit of knowledge and truth.

Carlene Winch-Dummett, September 2000



Table of Contents

Chapter 1	<i>A Lizard in My Bookcase</i>	3
Chapter 2	<i>The Waterfall</i>	15
Chapter 3	<i>The Nakamal</i>	23
Chapter 4	<i>Dancing, Mats, Baskets and Sorcery</i>	33
Chapter 5	<i>Social Life</i>	43
Chapter 6	<i>Dyeing of the Precious Red Mats</i>	57
Chapter 7	<i>Precious red Mats, Pigs and the Graded Society</i>	69
Chapter 8	<i>The Wedding</i>	84
Chapter 9	<i>Island Night</i>	93
Chapter 10	<i>Leaving</i>	104

Chapter 1

A Lizard in my Bookcase

Ranwadi High School sprawls over a small emerald bluff of cultivated land sandwiched between the mountains and the sea on Pentecost Island. The name Pentecost is a combination of the French words pente and cote meaning mountains and sea, an apt description for this part of Vanuatu where villages are perched on narrow sandy foreshores or lost within almost impenetrable escarpments.

As the old Japanese four wheel drive utility truck groaned its way over the rocky track that forms the main thoroughfare for the island, hiccupped before ascending the last hundred meters up the steeply curved incline bordered by gnarled lemon trees planted by a missionary of the past, and eased its way onto the level grounds of the school settlement, my attention was caught by the towering mountains behind the school, just a few hundred meters away, mountains which rose abruptly perhaps 1500 metres or more in height. And green. Deep, dark green with here and there patches of lighter green from a coconut plantation. And there, about halfway up a thin column of smoke! As I strained my eyes to discover the source of the smoke, a small building became visible but too far away to determine its form. Then the sun slid behind a cloud and the little building was lost in the shade.

To the left a narrow sandy beach gradually vanished from sight as our truck attacked the steep little hill. The glittering sea was gently filling the cracks and crevices of the rough brown reef stretching some twenty meters seawards from the little beach. Someone, a man, silhouetted against the mid-afternoon sun at the edge of the reef, was fishing with a hand-line or dragging something in from the sea. Nearby, two boys were hauling a bucket of broken coral up a narrow grassy path towards the school

All was quiet and still for it was Monday and the students were in class. Only last Friday, I had bade farewell to my colleagues and students at school in Australia, as they completed their first semester's end and were about to enjoy the last weeks of June at the snowfields or rushing off to the warmer weather of Queensland. But I would continue teaching for almost another six weeks here at Ranwadi while engaging in some academic research in the dance and kastom of Pentecost. This was 1990 and Australia had recently

implemented a four term year organized around two semesters while Vanuatu had continued with the three term academic school year.

A year earlier I had visited Vila and requested permission from the Ministry of Education to research the significance of dance in Vanuatu. The Director of Education agreed to my proposal which was to provide my teaching services in return for the opportunity to engage in the research. He had suggested June 1990 as villages throughout Vanuatu would be preparing dances for the 10th Anniversary of Independence ceremonies in Vila that July. I had been offered a choice of two placements, one on the island of Efate and the other on the island of Pentecost. I opted for Pentecost as it was the furthest from the tourist trail and I knew that Pentecost and was known to have rich *kastom*. Dance, especially performed for the men's graded societies, is highly respected in Vanuatu.

I had arrived in Port Vila the previous Saturday evening. Since I needed a three month visa which could only be obtained at the international airport in Vila, I requested one from Immigration on arrival. The request must have been fairly unusual because the officer looked puzzled, and then asked advice from another officer. The two whispered together, searched through drawers and riffled papers. The second officer disappeared. I stood waiting watching the long line of holiday-makers pass through controls and gradually disappear. I continued to wait. The noise of the arriving passengers faded away. I wondered what was happening to my luggage outside in the luggage pick-up area. Would it still be there if and when I received my visa? Eventually the second officer returned in slow motion with the appropriate forms for me to complete. The first officer had already disappeared. In the waiting lounge lights were being extinguished. I scribbled quickly and shoved the papers at the officer who, with slow, careful precision, stamped my passport, smiled courteously and handed it to me. I rushed to the luggage area. All the passengers and most of the staff had vanished. There were now only two lights at the airport, one where my sole suitcase lay abandoned and alone, lit up like a sad memorial, and one at the main entrance welcoming visitors. Gathering my suitcase and hand luggage I struggled in near panic to the taxi ramp. Neither a taxi nor bus in sight! In fact, nothing except one or two parked cars and a van loaded with luggage to be transported to the various hotels.

Perched on top of a pile of luggage I arrived at the Solaise Hotel, situated immediately opposite Vila's taxi base. Previous visits to Port Vila, a delightful but casual town, warned

me that the nearer I was to a source of transport the better chance I had of getting any when I needed it. An inauspicious start to my assignment but at least I had my three month visa. I had to leave for the airport at 6.00 am the following Monday for my flight to Lonorore, Pentecost, via Santo. I was feeling very confident about my arrangements, even though they had been made some weeks earlier and there had been no further confirmation because the school relied on a very slow system of surface mail or radio phone which was limited to a couple of hours or so each day and was in demand by all the villagers from the surrounding area. I was explaining this to my friend Agnes Kiri over coffee at The Solaise at about 5.30 on the evening before my departure to Pentecost. Agnes looked startled and then asked whether I had been in touch with the school by radio phone since my arrival in Vila? Who would meet me at the airport? Did I realize that it was a 10 kilometer walk to the school? I could only reply in the negative since I had not previously considered these questions. I had assumed that the arrangements made some weeks earlier would be sufficient. Agnes looked horrified.

“What is the time?” she cried looking at her watch, springing out of her chair and grabbing me by the shoulder all at the same time. “Quick, we have less than 20 minutes to get to the radio station before 6pm, closing time!” I had no idea the reason for her panic but obediently tumbled into the passenger seat of her Mazda van as she revved the motor, slammed her door, stamped on the accelerator and took off with a lurch, the motor roaring as we negotiated the intersections and bends, all the while climbing the hill behind Port Vila to the radio station. The van shuddered to a stop in the radio station car park with such force that we were shunted almost through the front window, but there was no time for hesitation. Agnes took off, running before me, her mission frock billowing in the wind, and I followed in confusion but with a growing sense of apprehension. The door to the radio station was closed. Locked!

Agnes checked her watch. It was just 6.pm. Agnes was not to be deterred. She knocked heavily on the glass door and rattled the lock. Silence! Agnes began rattling, knocking and shouting. Eventually whoever was inside realized that Agnes would not be defeated, and opened the door. By this stage I was dumbfounded and Agnes breathless, but she managed to impart the seriousness of a naïve Australian woman arriving at Lonorore without warning; it was therefore imperative, of the utmost urgency, that a radio message be sent out to Pentecost although the expiry time for such messages was surely met! I guess I did

look inexperienced, to put a positive spin on the situation, and clearly the radio announcer was of the same frame of mind as Agnes because he bolted to the microphone “to remind Ranwadi and the villagers of Pentecost” (and presumably all of Vanuatu since other Ni-Van friends later told me that they too had heard the message on Efate so they knew I was in town) that one Australian woman would be arriving at Lonorore next morning and would a truck please meet her and take her to Ranwadi”. Well, I think that was what the announcer said because it was a rushed message in Bislama, the language spoken by all Ni-Vans, and I could only catch an impression. But there was certainly a sense of urgency and also a sense of relief as Agnes flopped down on a chair, took a deep breath and laughed, “we just made it!”

Monday morning saw me standing helplessly at the front door of the hotel, staring at the lifeless taxi stand across the road. The perplexed night manager of the Solaise telephoned the taxi stand number fruitlessly, and pointlessly, it seemed to me. Finally, he ambled across the road and thumped on the door. Then he circled the building tapping on the windows. He returned, phoned again and some twenty minutes later a sleepy, rumpled driver tottered out, clambered into his little sedan and rolled ten meters across the road to the Solaise.

In the early nineties there were only three flights a week to and from Lonorore in Central Pentecost and even this timetable was subject to alteration due to weather conditions or the serviceability of the aircraft. There was no direct flight to Lonorore until my return visit in 1991. The journey involved flying from Port Vila across the string of islands to Malekula and Santo aboard a twenty seat aircraft which would prove to be luxury compared to the tight confines of the 9 seat Normandy Islander which continued the trip to Lonorore. The flight proved one of the most interesting and beautiful that I have experienced. The plane skimmed dark, heavily forested Efate, sea-washed atolls and reefs, uninhabited Lopevi with its silent, threatening volcano, the inhabited islands of Emae and large mysterious Epi, over the black lava plains and through the billowing clouds of Ambrym’s active Benbow which sent the little plane bobbing about, and along the coast of Malekula, an island rich in kastom. At Norsup, on Malekula, a very busy Ni-Vanuatu official reorganised the seating arrangements of the passengers at a speed uncommon in these parts, pushed the inevitable baskets of live chickens, squawking piglets and clumps of kava roots under the seats and squeezed an extra passenger into the already congested

plane. The pilot, stretching his legs on the airstrip, slapped the official's wrist warning him "Don't do that again!" and, with the extra passenger aboard, flew across the shark infested strait to Santo.

Inside the pleasant, small airport at Santo I managed to buy a cup of hot tea and fruitcake to pass the hour or so wait for my flight to Lonorore. Gradually a handful of Ni-Vanuatu travelers filtered in to make five of us who flew on to Lonorore. Having visited Lonoroe the previous year to attend the South Pentecost Land Dive I was familiar with the airstrip, a narrow, grassy field having a very tight approach immediately adjacent to the sea. But the words of my friend Agnes in Vila occupied my thoughts more than the hazardous approach: "If there is no-one at the airport to meet you, make sure the last truck doesn't leave without you."

Parked at the airport were three trucks that, I suspect, represented the entire transport system for the southern half of Pentecost, an island of approximately sixty kilometers in length. I scrambled down the steep steps of the aircraft, hauled my luggage from the rear section and looked around for anyone who might have recognized me. At first no one approached although I felt most conspicuous with my small suitcase, a shoulder bag stuffed with cameras and a large sunhat flapping around my head in the afternoon breeze. A niggling anxiety began to grip me as the other passengers were greeted by family or friends and assisted into the first two trucks. Then, as I began to toss up whether I should beg a lift on the last truck or find myself abandoned, an elegant young man impeccably dressed in dark trousers and shoes, white long-sleeved shirt and dark tie, approached. He introduced himself as Silas Buli, the principal of Ranwadi High School. His calm, competent and courteous demeanor and his concern for my safe arrival and transfer to the school impressed me. I also enjoyed immeasurable relief!

Silas Buli, and I, together with my luggage, squeezed into the cabin of the remaining truck with Stephen the school driver. Stephen lifted his foot from the brake and the truck commenced a slow roll down a slope and then gave a couple of convulsions as he lifted the clutch and we all jolted forward. I doubt whether it changed from first gear as we slowly and noisily rumbled along rocky tracks, through creeks, avoiding larger rocks on the road or protruding from the hillsides which came perilously close to the sea but needed to be negotiated if we were to reach our destination. We passed pretty thatched and woven

houses grouped together in little seaside villages where cattle roamed chewing at fallen coconuts, past tiny shops and here and there a small church or clinic. In one village an entire team's football jerseys flapped from a clothesline. Everywhere, the enormous mountain range rose as a massive bastion behind the houses and gardens while to the front of the villages the sea lapped softly on brilliant white sand laced with coconut palms. Central Pentecost revealed a dramatically beautiful landscape decorated with pretty villages and gardens.

Our journey ended at the top of a steep incline on a broad stretch of neatly mown lawn dominated by a modern white church. This formed both the geographical and social hub of the Ranwadi mission settlement. To the east of the church and overlooking the sea were the two boys' dormitories, the houses of the principal's family and that of the pastor as well as a few small uninhabited cottages. To the south were a number of buildings including the store, classrooms and the clinic. On the northern side were the refectory, kitchen and home economics class rooms. A long grassy play area stretched perhaps 100 metres back towards the hill at the end of which were basketball courts and finally a coconut plantation. For the length of this area buildings were positioned in deep shade thrown by mango and breadfruit trees and bordered by a long row of red and crotons and pink, red and white hibiscus.

The buildings strung along this stretch of play area on the northern side consisted of residences for the staff. These were single cottages or double units in the same building separated by a common wall, semi-detached residences - a style frequently seen as holiday units in Australia in the fifties. On the south side of the play area the ground sloped steeply downwards in several stages towards the oval at sea level. On these terraces were constructed some four buildings each with the equivalent of two classrooms. These included the science and woodwork classes, the staff-room and the library. At the eastern end of this section were the gardens and chicken coops of the agricultural classes, and the generator used to provide electricity for the mission from dark until 10 pm. It was a compact and efficient use of the site by the Churches of Christ Mission.

But on this Monday there was little time to orientate myself. I was driven to my house, one of the semi-detached types, which was in fact the very last residence at the eastern or mountain end of the mission. The French teacher lived in the adjacent residence although

several days went by before our paths crossed. At the rear of my house was another semi-detached residence with one section inhabited. To the eastern side were the basketball courts, overshadowed by an enormous mango tree, and in front, to the south, were the chicken coops. Immediately I had deposited my luggage I was whisked away and served afternoon tea at the principal's house. Since the island settlements of Vanuatu suffer isolation due to their geographical locations and poor communication, visitors provide a welcome contact with events in the outside world. Our discussion was lively and continued well into the evening at the home of an expatriate couple from the Philippines who had arranged a welcome dinner for myself and had invited the principal and other teachers. So I was made to feel very welcome at Ranwadi and although everyone was very busy, this hospitality continued throughout this visit and a subsequent visit the following year.

Innocent of the 10pm lights out on the mission when the generator is turned off, I forgot about time. So when at 11pm I left for my house the mission was in complete darkness. My new friends gave me a kerosene lamp, instructions on using it, and the loan of their torch to find my way back along the play area to my house. I bumped along the grassy path in the dark, crunched across the coral verandah and into my house and found my way to my suitcase. I lit two candles that I had brought with me and then attempted to light a kerosene lamp for the very first time in my life. As it pumped into action it stirred a number of creatures that had moved into the house during several months of vacancy. Although a teacher and some students had spent time cleaning the house, washing and replacing curtains, and Tom, the thoughtful caretaker of the school, had installed a kerosene fridge and filled the gas cylinders to the stove, some little inhabitants had been most reluctant to vacate the premises.

Some travel writers relate tales of their personal heroism or their ability to recognize confront and combat danger. Some small adventures can be equally challenging. That night was for me. Holding the kerosene lamp gingerly in front of me I slowly explored my path from the kitchen through the lounge/dining area, up the hall, past the bathroom and toilet to one of the two bedrooms. The larger room opposite the chicken coop had been made attractive with a floral bedspread and curtains in front of the cupboard and the dressing table-cum-desk. As I shone the light into the room an enormous green lizard with shiny eyes sprang off the ceiling towards me and bounded across the room to vanish behind the bookcase in the living room. I am not sure who received the greatest shock –

me or the lizard that had enjoyed his evening forays for months without disturbance. Over the time of my occupancy we learned to work together. He respected my right of ownership during the day by remaining behind my dressing table and at night I respected his right of ownership by not shining my torch on the ceiling. On my return a year later we continued with the same arrangement as though there had never been a break.

During that long impenetrably dark night there were many strange noises that I was unable to identify for several days. I lay awake listening to chuckling of hens and the fluttering of their feathers, scuttling cockroaches, and a light pattering on the roof. I'm still not sure whether they were, as the girls insisted, little rats, or in fact, flying foxes making their way to and from the mango tree which overhung the roof. Moreover, for this one and only night I was prepared for even the largest army of malarial mosquitoes. I covered myself with insect repellent, set up a mosquito coil and hitched up a mosquito net and sweltered all night. Next day Tom explained that I didn't need the mosquito net and pointed to the mosquito mesh on the windows. So I patched up a few tears in the wire with tissue paper and rolled up my net. But at 3.00am on that first night, and every night I ever spent at Ranwadi, a rooster in a hidden nearby village would start a crowing competition with boisterous cocks from several other villages as well as the school's rooster. This lively vocal altercation would ensue until the morning breezes stirred the coconut palms and the sun ran its long fingers over the mountain, across the mission and out to sea.

During that long dark first night in my little house somewhere at the back of the mission beyond which lay obscurity I reflected the feasibility of the task I had set myself. I wondered how I would manage to meet the chiefs of the local villages and even if I did make contact, would they be prepared to teach me about their kastom. And could I manage to teach my classes and achieve my research in just over five weeks? A few days later I wrote to my family:

Thursday, 21 June. I am very busy now. 2-3 hours of teaching during the day and one hour tutoring Year 10's. At present there are about 8 girls outside my house. They are intrigued by my travelling clothesline which I put up there to dry my skirts. I had to go out and explain. The children are very well behaved in class and can listen intently for 40 minutes. Better concentration than Australian kids.

I have settled in now. My house has been nicely prettied up with cotton curtains. One man brought me a small tuna for a gift, Imelda brought me limes and onions, and Judith brought some bananas. Mr Buli's father, Zacheus Tabi, is very knowledgeable about kastom and he called in and had coffee with me. All the villagers know I am interested in kastom so eventually I expect to go to kastom ceremonies. I think there will be one tomorrow three quarters way up the enormous steep mountain behind me. Worse than R L Stevenson's grave (Samoa)! I think we will have to leave very early in the morning. There is only a very narrow coastal strip (we can hear the waves in the classroom) and there is an enormous ridge behind. It's all very green and attractive.

We rise at 6.00 (every change is marked by the ear splitting beating of a large four and a half foot long and two feet in diameter slit gong). We have chapel at 7.30 and classes at 7.45. At 9.45 there is recess followed by lunch 12.15 to 2.00. It is very hot then. Also, I'm so busy I need that time to attend to washing etc. Class finishes at 4.00pm and it is dark by 5.30 when electricity comes on. I have tutorials with year 10 from 7.00 to 8.00. Lights go off at 10.00 and then one uses a kerosene lamp. Today I managed to bake a cake in my oven (everyone bakes cakes) and I have bought taro, cucumber, bananas, grapefruit, rice, tinned meat and fresh fruit. So, if I am not too fussy I can get by pretty well.

The boys and girls have separate dormitories and sleep at midday. Prefects keep them in order. There are 13 boys on detention and they have to mend roads and dig gardens. The road is something to be seen to be believed! A water-worn track of coral lumps – and no bridges, straight through the creeks!

It is very dark here at night. I can't see a thing at all! Rats run across the roof and I am having an on-going argument with the cockroaches. I cover up at night because of the mosquitoes.

I think I am being given much more help with kastom than one would expect as the principal often comes in to tell me things. His uncle is the chief of this area and I hope he will talk to me at some stage. How I'll fit it in I'm not sure. I'm flat out. I haven't been out of the mission yet. I hope to walk down to the sea this afternoon.

The journey here was long. The plane was delayed from Port Vila for one hour and then it takes one hour and ten minutes to Malekula. Then fifteen minutes to Santo. Half an hour to Pentecost! Mr Buli met me with Jonas, the local businessman who brought me the fish.

I have ordered frozen food from Santo. There is no need to bank as my house as a key. In fact, I locked myself out the first morning and we had to undo part of the fly-screen to open the bolt on the screen door. I also keep forgetting how to light the gas stove and twice Mr Buli has had to come and check it. But I think I just had too much to absorb in the first couple of days.

There are hens here. Yesterday a teacher said in Assembly, "Those boys were not suspended for chasing the chickens near the girls' dormitory. The chickens must be chased down. But it is the chickens you chase – not the girls!"

This is a pretty place with lovely views across to the volcanoes of Ambrym. There is often fine ash flying around that has been blown over. I plan to look over at night as I am told it glows. To the west on a clear day one can just see Malekula and I am told also Ambae to the north, But it has been very cloudy of late. The buildings are in reasonable condition for the islands with good roofing. But my shower needs a photo. A real camp shower!

Love to all, Carlene

It was to be another four weeks before I had a chance to visit the village hidden in the shadows lying over the mountain, but in the meantime I was very busy with my teaching responsibilities. Approximately 144 students aged from 12 to 16 attended Ranwadi Junior Secondary School. It was a co-educational boarding school serving the surrounding islands. Only the highest achieving students from those islands were offered places and only the highest achieving students in Year 10 in any year would be offered the opportunity to continue further studies at a senior college. This was always a serious concern to Silas Buli who was anxious that all students who embarked on secondary studies would have the opportunity fulfil his/her potential and to offer each student the chance to pursue a course leading to further employment. Silas was a forward thinker who

sought opportunities for both students and staff to continue their academic and vocational development.

Since my training and experience was as a teacher of English in secondary schools, my temporary employment at the school was mutually beneficial. The teaching methodology was outlined in the schools text books because English was usually a third or fourth language of the students. I was required to teach English to each of the four grades and tutor Year 10 students for their up-coming oral exams. I was also expected to attend the morning church service each day before school, fellowship evenings and Sunday church services. My other duties included sport supervision, staff meetings, setting and correcting examinations and accompanying students on any excursion such as a picnic or an invitation to a church service in a neighboring village. Teaching at Ranwadi was a most enjoyable experience and the only problem I had was chasing up the two or three students that had not finished their class work or homework. By the second week I was able to write to my teaching colleagues in Australia:

30 June 1990. Arrived via Malekula and Santo and my fears of being left on the airstrip complete with hat and baggage fortunately were not realized! I was met by the principal, an efficient young man. Most reliable and he has given a lot of time and effort to assist with my teaching and research. It was 40 minutes at 15 mph over a bone-shattering road to the school. It is a most beautiful place. The mission is on a small, level hill just above the sea and behind, about 75 meters, the land rises into vines, plantation and forest covered mountain. Small villages nestle up on the mountain but only smoke from the gardens can be seen.

The school has 143 students and at assembly I had to shake hands and smile at each student. There are four dormitories, four ordinary classrooms in two concrete buildings and another block with woodwork and science rooms. There are other houses and lawns, hibiscus, fruit trees, chickens, agriculture class gardens for tomatoes, peanuts and island cabbage. There is also a chapel that serves as an assembly area as well. Now this all looks over the sea and in the distance on a clear night the volcanoes of Ambrym glow against the sky. Very beautiful!

Not only are the surroundings a teacher's idea of Paradise but so are the classes. There are about 38 students in each class and when the teacher talks or is writing you can hear the sea, the students are so quiet. I can talk for half an hour and no one takes their eyes from me. I don't think it is because I am a bit strange! They are very anxious to learn as the opportunities to progress to upper secondary are limited to the better students. Year 9 boys are so shy that they are apt to disappear under the desk if I single them out. They were not in the practice of reading each other's work and when they did this, the boys who all sit on one side of the room, turned their backs to the girls whilst those sitting next to the window put their heads down.

The kids are great. I spend a lot of time with them after school hours listening to them sing, watching them play volley ball, collecting coconuts for the chickens, making baskets or just sitting on the grass talking.

All the best, Carlene



Chapter 2.

The Waterfall

By the end of the first week I had settled into the usual routine of school life which, despite the individual requirements of any locality, is much the same everywhere. The library was well equipped and the book room was stocked with a variety of novels and text books. I enjoyed scrummaging around the bookroom, ferreting through the files of previous teachers' laboriously typed exercises stacked in manila folders that belched great clouds of dust as I leafed through them. Some of these exercises had been prepared as master sheets that I could print on the big Roneo machine in the office.

Since my house was a few meters from the classroom I returned to my kitchen between lessons to have a snack and catch up on my marking. We rose so early that I needed the long lunch break to complete my chores, especially meal preparation for the evenings because I held tutorials at that time. Mornings were heralded first by the roosters' chorus and at about 6.00 a.m., the drumming of a tamtam, or slit gong, in one of the hillside village announcing mass. About half an hour later the school tamtam would commence its pounding and, although it was still dark and there was no electricity, with water warmed on the gas stove, I would shower, dress and set off for chapel.

My gas stove and kerosene fridge were great luxuries. The fact that they regularly ran out of fuel on a Sunday when work was forbidden leaving me with either cold stew or warm drinks was not an issue. Most of the teachers cooked in their earth ovens adjacent to their houses and the scraping of the coconuts could often be heard in the early hours of the morning. I was reluctant to contact Tom refuel my appliances on the weekend as he worked so hard during the week with the maintenance of the school and surrounding gardens and cow pastures that I felt he deserved his rest. All the same, whenever I approached him about the fuel, or the lack of water in the pipes, or any other small problem, he would immediately set about solving it. He was a very kind man who made my life pleasant and comfortable. When, some years later I heard that he had been lost at sea, I was genuinely saddened. He was a fine family man, a good Christian, a splendid preacher and a strong member of the community. He was also the brother-in-law of Silas.

There were two major challenges in my little house. The first was the oven and the second, water. The stove had an enormous oven and, remembering the gas oven we had in our home when I was a child, I was very anxious about using it in case it exploded. One day Imelda came to my house for an afternoon tea of lemon juice and biscuits and demonstrated how to use it. The process involved opening the oven door, lighting two matches and placing them on a shelf in the oven, then turning on the oven to the highest point, closing the door and running out the back door of the house. If there was a loud boom within 15 seconds the oven was alight. If after 30 seconds there was silence, the fuel switch on the oven had to be turned off and both the oven and back doors left open for 10 minutes to clear the gas before repeating the procedure. Imelda explained that she had used this technique ever since having her eyebrows singed off whilst attempting to light a similar oven in the conventional manner in PNG.

Access to a regular supply of water was a major issue to me. Having never lived anywhere for long where there were water restrictions I was inclined to be too liberal with the use of this precious fluid. Moreover, since it rains almost every day on Pentecost it seemed to me that there was an abundance of available water. And so there was, but not always in the tanks. I am sure that if Silas has any memory of my time on Ranwadi it would focus on my continuous moans about lack of water.

My house, situated at the far end of the mission away from the other buildings, was the last in the plumbing system and the final meter of piping was vertical, meaning that at its least pressure level the water had to defy gravity and make its way up to the windowsill before disgorging into my sink. Somewhere, high in the mountain behind my house was a reservoir and water was reticulated through PVC piping to the school's huge water tanks next to the girl's dormitories. As a consequence, if there was any sudden heavy demand on the water such as morning showers, the pressure to my house would be lost and there would not be a trickle for at least an hour. To make matters worse, my house had excellent roof guttering and a large concrete water tank immediately adjacent. But there was no connecting pipe. So on days when the rain pelted on the corrugated iron roof, swelled the guttering, and spilled into enormous pools in the coral outside my back door, the taps in the house remained as dry as an Outback waterhole in February. My frustration would bubble over into pleas for a connecting pipe. But none was available. Perhaps this type of

pipng was scarce in Pentecost or all of Vanuatu. But it would have been such a simple solution to a major problem.

There were other unexpected complications with the water supply. One day, after waiting several hours for water to be restored after what I thought was an unprecedented heavy use of water in the showers or somewhere to the front or seaward side of the mission, I searched for Tom who was busy oiling the generator. He was puzzled because the students were in class. After considering the problem for a while he disappeared into the generator shed and returned with a spanner and a bucket. He labored away in his usual quiet manner undoing the pipe from my house to a larger main pipe while I observed with interest. Suddenly, he grabbed the bucket and shoved it under the upright section of pipe as he extracted a small thin eel that had become jammed. I was astonished and grateful that the creature had become stuck during its journey rather than arriving at its ultimate destination, my kettle!

On another occasion the main pipe from the reservoir to the school had been cut, inadvertently by some boys at the point where it traversed a creek tumbling down the mountain to the school. The damaged section of pipe was low down in a steep ravine of about ten meters in depth and overhung with thick bush and vines, and broad, long flat leaves that constantly dripped water onto the slippery earth and rocks below, making repairs difficult work for Tom. After ascertaining the damage Tom set out for an hour's arduous climb up the mountain to the reservoir to turn off the main tap and then descended to rejoin the pipe, another lengthy procedure. On that occasion only the houses possessing small concrete or galvanized iron tanks had access to water for a period of two days. I hauled buckets of water from a galvanized iron tank belonging to a family in the house behind mine, but even then I was disappointed to see water escaping from a small hole halfway up the side of the tank. During that difficult period the students resorted to temporary bush toilets and bathed in the sea. My frequent complaints must have become too much for Silas to bear because during my last days at Ranwadi, there was lively activity around my house as the old concrete tank was cleaned out ready to be restored to use.

The demands of school duties and learning to cope with my new domestic arrangements occupied my time for the first few days but I continued to worry about how I could conduct my research. It was important that I observe kastom dance. Kastom is a Bislama

translation of the word 'custom' or traditional culture. Consequently, dance performances cannot be predicted as they depend on an important event or ceremony such as a wedding, a grade taking ritual, a circumcision or a public occasion such as the annual Independence Day. However, Silas knew that a nearby village was rehearsing regularly for a performance at the 10th Anniversary of Independence celebrations to be held in Vila during the last week of July. I hoped to visit that village but permission would have to be sought and granted. That was one challenge. A second challenge was that I needed to meet with a village chief who could explain the kastom, especially the men's graded society, a rigorous series of elaborate rituals involving challenges which displayed a man's honor, wisdom, leadership and business acumen. Only by achieving the required grades throughout his lifetime could a man expect to become a chief of a village and only a boy who demonstrated such potential would be provided with the necessary sponsorship. The graded society demonstrated all of kastom be it dance, art, religion, mythology, music, kinship, social obligations, power and authority. Consequently, by learning about the graded society every other aspect of kastom would fall into place.

But how would I, a female schoolteacher from an urban center in Australia, ever have the opportunity to learn this rich culture. There was no recorded information on the graded society, or in fact any aspect of kastom, of Central Pentecost. My absorption with the culture of Vanuatu had led me on several previous trips to Vanuatu including the islands of Pentecost and Tanna. I had completed studies in anthropology focussing on the culture of Vanuatu but I had not found any material relating to Central Pentecost. I was not even sure whether there was any traditional kastom in Central Pentecost at all.

Despite these concerns I was enjoying learning to adapt to my new home although it was very difficult to reduce my pace from the city attitude that everything has to be completed by yesterday to island time which is never hurried and is focused on the task in hand. Being a punctual person I always arrived in my class, or church or staff meeting at Ranwadi at the advised time only to wait, and wait, and wait! This must have amused Silas for on one occasion he indulged in a private joke that only I could appreciate. I had complained long and loud that if we were advised to leave the school for a village church service at say nine in the morning why did we leave at ten, or otherwise, if we were to leave at ten why would he tell me to be ready at nine. On this occasion we had been invited to a picnic at the nearby village of Baravat, leaving at ten on a Sunday morning. I packed

pancakes, a cake, lemon cordial and biscuits and then decided to leave my house at ten forty five. Feeling smug at beating the problem and the waiting game, I emerged from my house only to be confronted by Silas waiting patiently a few meters away looking pointedly at his watch, fighting back the spreading grin on his face. The straggling tail end of a long line of students was already disappearing over the hill towards the sea.

Saturday was the only day of the week that school and church services were suspended. The students were expected to spend the morning doing their personal chores but also community tasks such as gardening, or cleaning classrooms or preparing the church for Sunday Service. The afternoons were for leisure and sports. The boys enjoyed soccer. The girls preferred to play volleyball, watch the soccer or rest. Often I would spend Saturday afternoon in the shade of my little house adjacent to the volley ball courts preparing my lessons with the thumps and squeals of the combatants drifting through my louvered windows.

Since all land, foreshores and adjacent water is owned by the respective villages, it was not possible for me to set off for a hike in the hills or down to the beach. Also, it was not appropriate for females to walk in groups rather than alone. As a consequence despite the ample grounds of the mission, I was beginning to feel physically restricted until Saturday when Imelda suggested we go for a picnic to a waterfall about a kilometer south. One of the students from the village that owned the waterfall was granted permission for our excursion and so began a regular Saturday outing.

The waterfall became my favorite escape from school duties. Halfway down a mountain behind the village of Waterfall a clear white torrent of water cascaded from a small river above through two large rocks jutting out from each side of the mountain. In the past it had probably been one massive rock that had now become eroded by the tumbling stream of water. The torrent plummeted into a deep clear pool, overflowing into a small river that continued its passage to the sea. Here, high on the side of the mountain, the soft spray of water floated into the dark shadows of leafy caverns where sunlight filtered pale lacy patterns on the damp earth. Faintly sparkling tiny droplets spilt onto the lush overhanging deep green foliage, bouncing lightly from one shiny, trembling leaf to another leaving a delicate mist suspended in the cool air. The girls enjoyed springing from the glistening rocks down into the depths of the pool while Imelda and I slid lazily through the cold,

clear, glassy water or rocked in the rush of the rapids immediately below. Other than the splashing of the stream, only the sigh of the breeze or coo of a pigeon could be heard. Far, far down below, a coconut plantation was silhouetted against the pale, calm sea stretching westwards into the golden afternoon haze.

Saturday 23 June. Today the kids spent the morning cleaning. Two girls came to my house and made me some coconut cream. From Santo, by order and air transport, I bought two chickens, some eggs, tinned pineapple pieces, tinned tomatoes and two frozen apple pies. It cost me \$AUD 70 so I don't think I'll repeat that except for the eggs. Anyway, I made a chicken stew and cooked some cake.

Judith, Imelda, nine girls and I went for a picnic today. The mission is right next to the sea but the kids keep much to the grounds. Well, we walked to an extraordinarily beautiful waterfall about two coconut trees in height. The water pelts down into rock pools. The waterfall is so big that we could see it from the plane on our way to Pentecost. When we arrived there the girls lit a fire and cooked corn and breadfruit and some shellfish they collected in the river on the way. We also had two kinds of cooked taro, tinned meat and fish, juice and my chocolate cake. The girls jumped into the pool. Judith is seven months pregnant so she didn't get wet. We walked beside a village (Waterfall) and past cows to reach the falls. Later we walked back to the sea and swam there. But we swam in shorts and shirt and then put our skirts on over the wet clothes to walk home. A soaking, shivering misery! The wet skirt sticks to you and flaps around your legs. That was awful. As we walked home the girls sang gospel songs. Although this is a mission, apart from the songs, a brief prayer and lessons from the scriptures, this is not a demonstrative religion except for a firm commitment to doing what is right and thanking Christ for all that is good. It is very gentle.

The kastom dance we were to see yesterday did not eventuate; nor did my meeting with the chief. At this rate I won't get much information, but some of my students have told me interesting stories, which although having nothing at all to do with my thesis at least have other value.

My fridge ran out of kerosene today. Always something that needs doing! Last night we watched a video on Rambuka of Fiji. Francois, a young teacher, is helping me with my

French. It is very nice here. Very slow for me but I have an endless stream of kids calling in to see my photos. I've told them not to come after dark otherwise I'll get nothing done! They explain the content of photos to each newcomer!

My biggest problem is that there is no newspaper or radio. Please write about politics, sport, gossip, international affairs, especially politics in Australia. I need mental stimulation because input like this is non-existent. After one week I feel it acutely. Could you please send me the front section and magazine section of Saturday and Wednesday's Herald by airmail? I know it is expensive but it would be very much appreciated.

Love to all, Carlene

A small limestone cave was hidden amongst the thick foliage in the cutting of the coral road where it left the sea and began its curving climb to the mission. One afternoon on our return from the waterfall and the tiny, rock enclosed cove where we had a final swim before straggling back home in our wet clothes, we scrambled up a steep slope for about two meters and entered the cave. The girls pointed to what appeared to be two calcified figures lying on a rocky bench half way up one side. It was cool and dark in the cave and water dripped continuously through the permeable rock above onto the rough textured calcification. One of the girls told us the story of the cave:

'A long time ago a boy from Pentecost dived into the sea near the little cave. The sea grew stronger and stronger and took the boy far away to another island. The island was called Ambae. Two girls were walking by the sea and they saw the boy. The boy fell in love with one of the girls. He wanted her to return with him to Pentecost. She would not leave with him. The boy gathered sweet scented flowers and as he swam away he left a trail of the sweet scented flowers behind him. The girls were captivated by the perfume of the flowers. They swam to each flower. Each time they gathered a sweet scented flower they would see another in the distance. So they swam further and further away. Soon they could no longer see Ambae. The scented flowers led them to a little beach. The girls were afraid. They saw a cave in the hill so they climbed to it and hid there. They were very tired so they lay down on a little rocky ledge to rest. They were hungry and thirsty but they had no food or water. They waited and waited for the boy, but the boy did not return. The two girls did not leave the cave. You can see their shapes hidden by a covering of rock. They are still lying on the rocky shelf.'

Later that afternoon while I sat in my dining room resting in the breeze brought by the South East Trades and listening to the hoots and whistles of the students on the volleyball court, Silas called by with his little daughter Lois. He was very pleased to advise me that he had developed a research strategy for me. This would be a two-pronged approach. The first approach would be for me to speak with Chief Resis concerning kastom. He had arranged for me to visit Chief Resis on the following Tuesday. The second approach was to have a cultural day at the school at the end of term to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of Independence. Students could present songs, stories and so on from their own islands on that day and evening and I would thus be given the opportunity to learn more about kastom.

I was excited at these opportunities and very appreciative of Silas' help. I realized that this proposal would incur a great deal of planning and effort by Silas as well as the school community. Chief Resis held a prestigious position in his community and was well respected and the opportunity to discuss kastom with him would be a great honor. The cultural night would require effort by both staff and students at the school so it was important that they perceived the event as enjoyable and worthwhile.

It seemed at last that my research was underway.



Chapter 3

The *Nakamal*

My visit to the *nakamal* or men's house took place the next week. This was an extraordinary honor for me. My initial ambivalent response to this unique experience resulted partly from the fact that it occurred very early during my stay on Pentecost before I had made my own adjustments to my new social and physical environment. Moreover, I did not anticipate such an acceptance into *kastom* and suddenly, without any preparation, found myself totally immersed in those manifestations of culture rarely, and probably never, accorded to a 'European' woman.

At about 4.pm on Wednesday, Silas and I, and Pastor Ian hitched a ride in Stephen's blue pick-up truck with the faulty handbrake and downhill clutch start. Our short bumpy ride of little less than 2 kilometers took us down the hill from the mission southwards towards the sea. We bounced over the flat seaside stretch, past the school oval with its surrounding mango trees and the small grave of the first local missionary who returned from Queensland with Christianity after being converted whilst trapped as an indentured worker on the cane fields. We drove through the little river spilling down from the waterfall in the hills, rumbling along beside taro gardens towards a few scattered woven houses and a little trade store. On the right, close to the road, was the ever-present sea, bordered by a rough brown reef, or a little rocky headland or the long, narrow, powdery white beaches broken by the outwash from the little river spreading out in golden wavelets.

We stopped at the village center with its congregation of houses and the small store. Since I was hopeful that Chief Resis might tell me more about the men's graded society I had brought a school cassette tape recorder plus an assortment of notepads and pencils. We called in at the tiny trade store to buy some new batteries for the tape recorder and then ambled over to a group of women from the village who were dressed in fresh, colorful mission frocks and sitting on several woven mats. They beckoned me to join them and offered me juicy pamplemousse to suck. They kept me company for the next couple of hours while we awaited Chief Resis' return from his garden.

No matter which village I visited in Pentecost and despite the fact that frequently the women and I did not have a shared language, even Bislama the local pidgin, I was treated kindly and thoughtfully. They always drew me into their social group and made sure I had refreshments and somewhere to rest where I would not feel isolated. I always wished I had time to learn Apma, the local language, so that we could share our life stories.

The houses were neat, woven with designs similar in a way to the designs of the well-known Pentecost baskets, and roofed with coconut palm fronds. Sometimes, the woven section had bright pink or blue dyed material interspersed with natural colored fiber producing a more pronounced pattern on the walls. Some of these houses were quite beautiful and one particularly attractive house built and owned by John had eaves over the doorway, shutters and a porch.

A long and eventful evening unfolded. Just as the sun slid down over the edge of the sea, Chief Resis silently emerged from his garden somewhere in the dense greenery of the nearby mountain slope. He approached me smiling, shook my hand and led me, Silas and several young men to the nakamal, or men's house, a long building about twice the size of a local house about fifty meters away from the village. The nakamal was built from the same coconut palm fronds and leaf fiber as the houses with low eaves and small openings. Like the domestic houses it was designed to allow the cool breezes to filter through the thatch but reduce the amount of sunlight and heat. Consequently, in the rapidly darkening twilight, it was almost impossible to make out what was inside the nakamal.

Across the entrance to the nakamal was an enormous log about two to three feet in diameter. I was to remain seated on the log while the men entered the house. The log symbolically served as a barrier ensuring harmony within the nakamal and forcing discord without. I felt that this somehow symbolized my situation at the time as the men of the village determined whether I should be admitted! Behind me the sea was fading to tones of gray and silver, a thin pale strip of beach bordered by the black shapes of coconut palms bent by the sea breezes into a variety of crisscross shapes. Suddenly, all light faded from the sea then the sky. Outside was absolute blackness.

My letter home describes my experiences and emotional responses to that evening far better than I can recall.

18 June. Yesterday was quite extraordinary. After school Silas and I went in the school truck with Stephen and Pastor Ian to Waterfall Village. I took two kilos of rice, two packets of tobacco and some cake. Chief Resis had arranged to meet us. I also had a camera and we took a cassette recorder. When we arrived at the village Silas got out and we walked to the co-op store with James, a villager, who also has a daughter in Year 9. He opened the shop and I bought some batteries. I rejoined Silas and Pastor Ian, Old John and some young people and sat down. A woman brought me a mat to protect my clothes. John's house was beautiful. It was built on a concrete base, beautifully woven, push-out windows, thatched roof with wide eaves and a stool made of bamboo at the front.

We waited about an hour or so until we could see Resis at his house and the men, boys and I made our way to meet him. Darkness falls easily and quickly in the tropics and the sun had dipped low over the sea. Resis took us to the nakamal or men's house. It was quite large and had an enormous hand carved log-shaped piece of timber at the front entrance. I was instructed to sit on it. The function of the log was to keep disorder, anger and stupid behavior out of the nakamal and secrecy within. The interior was very dark. There was a center pole supporting the roof about half way down the length. To the left just inside were two enormous tam-tams or slit gongs. To the right of the door were many coconut shells in a pile for drinking kava. Half way between the door and the center pole was a fireplace. To the left were the big boards and grinding stones used to for making kava. It was too dark to see what was beyond the center pole.

The sea was about thirty meters away to the west and the sun was setting, sending long golden shafts of light across the sea and through the door into the nakamal. About eight men and several children joined us. Chief Resis shook hands, opened his gift, sat on a stool by the fire and began to discuss kastom with Silas in the Apma language. I couldn't understand anything that was being discusses but I could see Chief Resis repeat several actions. This went on for about half an hour and then we tried to use the tape recorder but the microphone failed. Not to be deterred Resis took the tape and batteries and said he would record more information on his own tape recorder over the next days.

They continued to talk and it grew so dark it was impossible to see any more than vague shadows moving across the pale light emanating from the sea and playing around the opening to the nakamal. The fire began to flicker and glow. More men drifted into the nakamal until there were about fifteen men altogether. Several began to cut up the kava root, wash it and grind it on the large boards with stones. The shadows of unseen men illuminated by the dim glow of the fire jumped across the walls, rising higher and lower, dim, vague and eerie. I remained seated on the log, now completely blanketed in darkness awe-struck and enchanted by the apparent figures dancing all over the interior of the nakamal.

Suddenly, Chief Resis stood up with Silas who beckoned me. Silas explained that Chief Resis wished to show me something at the back of the nakamal behind the center pole. It was so dark that I struggled to see a means of working my way to the center pole and behind it. We skirted the down dying fire with soft black and pink embers to an area visited only by the invitation of the chief. Remember the men were all seated in front of the center pole. Right at the back of the nakamal was a very large, neat pile of stones. On top was the bubu (or conch shell) of the type used only by chiefs to summon the people for important assemblies. Beside the bubu was a basket. In front of this structure were two palm fronds about two feet apart slanting slightly outwards away from it. This was the sacred oven or fireplace. Only the very highest chief has this oven because it is in front of this oven that other men are accepted into chieftaincy. No is ever permitted to go around the center pole to the fireplace without the chief's permission and no one may step over the fronds or touch anything on the sacred oven. The chief may give permission for a lesser chief to use the bubu to summon people in times of importance such as when someone dies. I was much honored. (This was an enormous privilege and was more than I had expected and which would be explained in detail before I left Ranwadi.) Resis explained that this was the sacred oven before which boys were first accepted into the graded society by the chief and before which only a man who had attained a rank in the graded society could take food. With the promise that we would receive further information on the tape recording, Chief Resis accompanied Silas and me to the entrance side of the center pole. The men within the nakamal were no more than blurry shadows. The fire had died with very little warmth or light but the kava makers were now working by a kerosene lamp. I returned to my seat on the log at the door to wait. About half an

hour later Silas rose from where he was chatting with Chief Resis and we said farewell and left the nakamal.

Stephen and the truck had not returned to collect us so we set off for Ranwadi on foot with another man and a boy who led the way with a torch through a coconut plantation and towards the sea. The boy was from Waterfall Village but it was so dark I didn't know who the other man was until we arrived at Ranwadi. It was Pastor Ian. We walked along the road, through the little stream and down to the beach. It was easier to see where we were going on the sand which captured the starlight. We crossed a deeper river. I always wear old tennis shoes but we waited while Silas removed his shoes and socks. We crossed the coral sand beach back to the road which winds its way up the headland to the school, a four meter drop to bush and coral on one side and cliff type hills on the other. Then the land flattened and spread out again with the school oval on the right before the road wound steeply up the hill to the school. At one point a section of the road had collapsed several meters into the sea causing a gaping hole about four meters by one meter to the sea immediately below. We had been discussing kastom on our journey back to the mission and Silas decided to stop here, on this point of the headland, to explain at length what had transpired between Chief Resis and himself in the nakamal. The explanation took ten minutes as it is customary to repeat everything once or twice. Then we continued. I still was unable see the faces of our companions and I would never again recognize the boy from the village.

Further in my letter I remarked:

That was a most extraordinary experience afforded to few women and one that is quite an honor. Apparently we may go back for further discussion and maybe kava

Well, I do feel some apprehension about the kava despite my interest. There is a wedding on July 13 and I feel easier about that. Also, the principal has organized Island Night for the school on July 14 and told the kids yesterday. They were pleased but shy. He told them that they can read, dance etc. and I will make a video of it. They should enjoy it.

There on the side of the road in the darkness with the white phosphorous sparkling on the black waves sucking and roaring below the yawning hole in the road, Silas briefly explained the men's graded society as Chief Resis had described. Chief Resis had agreed to make a tape recording of an explanation of the experience, sponsorship and acquisitions

required for each grade and a detailed description of each grade-taking ceremony. I was most grateful for the assistance of both Silas and Chief Resis but I knew that this was a heavy demand on the chief which would take weeks if not months. I hoped I would still have enough time at the mission to wait for the tape. But as it turned out, things moved much faster.

Next morning, the warmth and brilliance of the sunlight contrasted with the darkness and mystery of the previous evening. It was as if that night was something dreamt, elusive, unattainable in the daylight. The morning seemed so ordinary, so mundane after such an experience. But it was back to school routine. Morning assembly and bible readings, classes, essay marking - the usual.

About this time I was, for a number of reasons, preoccupied with the chickens that dwelt in the coop opposite my house or wandered around the mission grounds pecking at the vegetation or tidbits provided by the staff. These bush chickens were a little smaller than the western domestic fowl but their plumage was magnificent. The colors varied from brilliant russets, coppers and bronzes to emerald, teal and olive greens with splashes of vibrant blue and red. In my attempts to photograph these glorious creatures, I would stalk them around the clumps of sugarcane behind my house but with little success. They always managed to elude me.

They eluded the lively little boys too. Collecting eggs and rounding up chickens was the delight of the younger boys. One Sunday morning before church when all should have been quiet, my peaceful surroundings were disturbed by whispering and giggling, flapping and squawks. Two little boys had risen very early and were determined to catch a chicken but made such a racket that they woke Charles who sent them back to their dormitory *fastaem*.

The annual fees to Ranwadi consisted of a monetary sum plus a chicken. The notion of students arriving at school on the first day of each year with a live chicken in a basket seemed very strange to me at first but in reality was a very wise and sensible requirement. The hens provided the eggs for cakes and the meat for cooking classes. One afternoon two girls once demonstrated how a chicken was prepared for cooking. They brought a chicken to my house tucked under the arm of the girl who would demonstrate this rather

inauspicious end for the chicken. First after catching the chicken, a feat in itself as I had discovered, a large strong feather was taken from the animal and pushed through the neck and throat thereby disposing of the animal which was then quickly plucked and gutted. It was fast, and without the awful violence that accompanied the dispatch of Christmas fowls that I had witnessed in my childhood.

About this time I was attempting to teach prepositions to my year 9 students, a difficult concept because in Bislama the word *long* replaces all prepositions I decided to use examples from the students' experience wherever possible and I attempted to demonstrate as many prepositions as possible with some impromptu acting. This caused a great deal of amusement as I jumped in and out the door, climbed under and walked around the table and so on. But it was when working through the follow-up blackboard exercises that I began to realize there were unanticipated problems with this approach. One such problem emerged as a result of the Melanesian use of soft endings in words. In the case of words ending in 'er' this final syllable is often not articulated but the meaning is understood – well, most often but not in this case. So, when I filled the space in the sentence “The hen jumpedthe roost” on the blackboard with the word “onto” the whole classed lifted their heads and stared at me in amazement. I repeated the sentence. The students said nothing but shook their heads in denial. It was clear that they thought that their city bred teacher was ignorant of biology!

Most days the girls spent their free time during milling around the school store or in the near their dormitories in little social groups. The boys tended to congregate near the church, their dormitories, the oval and the food hall. Both boys and girls spent time at the volleyball courts. However, after the announcement of Island Night the number of students in any of these areas diminished. Gradually over the next weeks, there were fewer and fewer students playing volleyball after school; then most of the boys completely disappeared from the immediate school area.

At first this change in behavior was barely noticeable but by the second week after the announcement there was hardly a student to be seen at these times. Yet any questions about where they were meeting and what they were doing were met with eyebrow-raising and shoulder-shrugging. Clearly something was going on. But what?

Saturday 30 June. On Monday I sent a letter to you but I put the wrong stamp on it so I'm not sure if you will receive it. I now have a radio as Reuben fixed one for me so that I can tune into radio Australia. I feel a whole lot better. That was the one thing I felt dissatisfied about – that I couldn't get any news. The other problem is that as beautiful as the mission is, I need to get away at times and no one else feels so inclined. This morning I went over to the Principal's house to talk to Dorica who minds Silas and Venneth's beautiful little one and a half year old girl, Lois. So we went for a walk for half a kilometer along the road adjacent to the sea. We saw three cruise yachts moored at the next village, Waterfall. We also watched a trade boat calling for copra and I bought a gateau from a girl walking by with a bucketful of gateaux which are rather like a long snake-shaped do-nut sprinkled with sugar.

I didn't enjoy yesterday. I was so busy with three classes and then a staff meeting, Year 10 tutorial and duty at lunchtime, dinner and then lights out. The children organize their own meals although the food is prepared by the cook in a cooking shed. The food is cooked over a sort of trough about two meters long filled with firewood and traversed by two sets of parallel pipes. Onto these pipes the cook places two cauldrons of soup and two of rice or taro. The soup is usually island cabbage, tinned meat pieces and noodles. Then the students on dinner duty put the cooked soup into twelve big stainless steel bowls and the rice and taro into another twelve. This is all done on the concrete floor. They carry the bowls into the dining hall that has twelve tables with long stools or benches to be shared at each table. The children bring their own plates and spoons. The boys are shy and eat very quickly. The bowls are cleaned under a tap outside and scrubbed with coconut husks and ash from the fire.

The girls' dorms are long brick buildings with single beds or bunks, Years 8 and 9 in one and Years 7 and 10 in the other. The girls like privacy so they hang lava lavas (sarongs) around their beds. They set up mirrors and posters like any teenagers although they have limited possessions. Most have never been away from their islands except to board at Ranwadi. The only thing they don't share is their schoolwork knowledge as they are so very anxious to achieve in this competitive education system.

My grocery order came from Santo yesterday afternoon. It consisted of a kilo of beef, two chickens and some eggs. There was also the honey and biscuits I ordered last time so

maybe they charged me for that last time and they were too heavy for the aircraft (a nine seater with passengers). Later I heard that a bullock had been killed. There are only bullocks and cattle up here (not bulls and cows). Well, I couldn't tell you which part of the animal the meat came from! I've seen that kind of meat before in the islands! The butchering certainly is rough. I bought a kilo and cut it up into chunks. It cost one hundred and fifty vatu per kilo (about one dollar thirty Australian). Today some girls were sent to me for a work assignment so I showed them how to cook a cake with a packet mix that I bought at the school store. Imelda offered to accompany me to the reef with but I haven't seen her yet. She had a headache yesterday.

Later today Silas and Chief Resis arrived. Chief Resis and another chief spent yesterday morning making a tape-recording on grade-taking for me. It is in Apma, their language, so Silas will translate it. Chief Resis told me that no one other than himself and one other chief know this information because no one has ever asked before. He added that I did the right thing by bringing gifts. I gave him two more pouches of tobacco to share with the other chief and a cake I had in the freezer. He was very pleased and said he would give the cake to the children.

After Resis left the mission Silas sent a student to invite me to go to the next village, Vanworki, with Judith and her mother to collect leaves to wrap laplap (taro, island spinach and coconut cream) for the earth oven. I have been hoping to see that village. We went along a narrow path, up and down a gully in rainforest and came to a clearing where some young men were pulling a log for a house they are building. It is a Catholic village so the people speak French. I tried to speak a little French and the people responded warmly. We collected big leaves like banana leaves, removed part of the mid-rib, folded them and brought them back to Judith's home. It was a nice village with the usual woven houses and this one grew marigolds for the Catholic church at Melsisi.

The principal has organized Island Night for 14 July. Yesterday afternoon eight boys left the school to walk two hours over the mountain to their villages. They will collect the materials needed for their kastom performance. That should be very interesting.

Yesterday Silas loaned me some books and they are more valuable for my fieldwork than I expected. Included are census tables for the area of central and south west Pentecost. I

am accumulating a lot of data. This area has never been researched. Next week I am going to the village of Lalbetaes to see the men rehearsing their dances for Independence Day celebrations in Vila. I know lots of kids' names now and am even beginning to speak as they do with the short vowel sounds. I can understand a fair amount of Bislama and I am improving my French.

...

It was only three days since I had visited the *nakamal* and already Chief Resis had completed his recording of the description of the men's graded society. This precious information was there - in a small tape, small enough to fit in the palm of one hand. I was amazed. I could hardly believe it. But I would not know the extent of the information until Silas would have time to translate. But I suppressed my impatience. Silas was busy with the responsibilities of managing his boarding school. He was very committed to his work and this was rightly his first priority. So I said nothing, but waited in great anticipation for the day that he would divulge the treasure contained in that tape.



Chapter 4

Dancing, Mats, Baskets and Sorcery

Lalbetaes Village is a one hour walk from Ranwadi along the same rugged road from the airport but now climbing and descending steep little hills, straddling large, hillside coconut plantations and dropping steeply to the sea. The villages are no longer strung out along a narrow coastal plain but cling here and there to level areas at the lower slopes of the high range of mountains forming the backbone of Pentecost. Lalbetaes is an attractive and relatively affluent village with several houses and a church built of cement brick. It has a trade store and its own cargo ship. Lalbetaes is connected to the Marist Catholic Mission at Melsisi and French was spoken there but little English

Imelda and I, together with two girls from the school including one who could speak the local language, set out early on Saturday afternoon in order to arrive at the village when the men were rehearsing their performance for the 10th Anniversary of Independence.

Until Independence Day, 30 July 1980, Vanuatu or the New Hebrides as it was known until that time, had been jointly administered by a French-English Condominium, notoriously known as The Pandemonium. French expatriates were subject to French rule and English expatriates were subject to English rule. The indigenous Melanesian peoples were subject to whichever colonial administration they preferred since every rule and regulation was duplicated. There was a choice of French or English language for education and this choice of language would determine the future opportunities for the students unless they were fluent in French and English, as well as Bislama and their local language.

Schools for expatriates in the New Hebrides were conducted by either the French or British administrators. Schools for the indigenous Melanesians were mainly mission schools and kastom schools belonging to local villages. The mission schools were conducted in French by the Catholic Marist Mission, and English by the Anglicans, Presbyterians and Churches of Christ, Seventh Day Adventists. Since Independence there have been a number of other religious choices but mainly connected with either of these two European languages. Consequently, villages spoke either French or English as a main administrative language besides Bislama.

The effects of this arrangement are evident in the area of Pentecost where Ranwadi is situated. Waterfall Village, sharing the south boundary with Ranwadi is the most northern village in South Pentecost according to government administrative maps. Other than the kastom villages of Bunlap and Wali, most villages in South Pentecost adhere to English speaking missions, of which the Churches of Christ based in Adelaide, Australia, is the most prominent. Ranwadi is the Churches of Christ Mission secondary school for South Pentecost, but it also provides education for students from other parts of Pentecost and nearby islands. The students are not required to be members of the Churches of Christ religion but are expected to adhere to Christianity. Vensamakul, a village bordering Ranwadi to the north, is a French speaking village attached to the Catholic Mission at Melsisi. Central Pentecost stretches as far north as Bwatnapne, after which North Pentecost tends to be mainly attached to the Anglican Mission. Father Walter Lini, the First President of Vanuatu, came from North Pentecost. He had achieved great prestige because he was both a kastom high chief and an Anglican priest.

However, these geographical areas which accord with the introduced languages, and are used by the government for administrative purposes, overlap the traditional culture or kastom areas. South west Pentecost and central and north Pentecost have similarities in kastom and their languages differ from that of the villages south of Lonorore, which has a different language and culture to the villages of south west Pentecost. A significant pointer of the kastom difference is that the people of south west, central and north Pentecost wear a narrow mat about twelve inches wide that passes between the legs and gathers into a waistband or belt. It is folded from behind the belt to drop into a neat short skirt in front and behind. The men from south Pentecost traditionally wear the nambas or penis wrapper. In south west, central and north Pentecost the women also wear a large woven mat wrapped and tied around the waist. Women from South Pentecost, traditionally wear grass skirts.

The church and trade store were to the left of the village of Lalbetaes and separated from the nakamal to the right by a grass dancing ground. Dancing grounds are frequently situated under a banyan tree, which, because of its huge size, throws a deep cool shade over the dancers and onlookers. The banyan also offers a tiered gallery for viewing performances below as it is easy to climb and has broad horizontal branches to sit on. To

the far side of the dancing ground and separating it from the houses of the village was a garden bordered by shrubs. There were about twenty men dressed in shorts and T-shirts gathered on the dancing ground. The men organized themselves into in lines. These lines changed to rows in the various dances performed that afternoon.

Saturday, 7 July. Today Imelda and I and two students one of who could speak the local language went to Lalbetaes Village to watch the men practise the kastom daces they will perform in Vila for the 10th Anniversary of Independence. It was raining and we walked for an hour to reach the village to the north. The men asked me to refrain from filming while they rehearsed the song that they had not yet perfected. When they had finished practicing the song they signaled that I could video. I told them that I wanted the sun behind me and shelter from the rain so I sat in doorway of the church to watch. The men performed five dances. After the fourth dance and with the help of two students May and Lines as translators I asked about the dances.

The first dance was taught to the men by another man from the village. He went away from the village and met a man who taught him the dance and told him to teach it to the village. He came back and taught it and then he just disappeared. That was about a year ago. The second dance was about a hawk and how it looks to its prey below and how the prey, maybe a fowl, tries to escape.

The third dance, which had a man with a bow and arrow, was about two men fighting over a woman. The man with the bow finally won. The fourth dance was about a butterfly, so for that reason a small boy was included. The butterfly flutters over the flowers. The fifth dance had no story. It was just the final for the performance in Vila. These people were very helpful and I told them I will send a copy of the practice video, or better still, if I can get a video of the dance in Vila with the men in 'uniform', then I will send a copy of that.

My informant was Clement Wai and he showed me his fine brick house and the house of the captain of the St Joseph the trading and passenger ship that runs up and down the coast of Pentecost. It belongs to Lalbetaes Village. We passed the nakamal and went to Annie's kitchen, a beautiful, long woven building in which was an earth oven. Annie had

just made laplap and gave a piece to each of us. I took Annie some cake. It was she who had arranged the visit for us. At one time she had been Imelda's house girl.

Laplap became my favorite food. It is a rich source of energy and the staple diet in the islands. To make laplap a coconut kernel would be scraped to make coconut milk. The cook would sit straddled on a device like a stool and grate the coconut on a metal tooth shaped insertion on one end. The grated coconut dropped into a bowl and was then squeezed over another bowl to extract the coconut cream. This was mixed with grated taro or yam and seasoned with island cabbage or sometimes meat or fish. The mixture was folded in a leaf similar to that which Judith and her mother collected and then placed in an earth oven.

The earth oven, a large shallow hole in the ground filled with volcanic stones, would have been prepared earlier. This was achieved by covering the stones with timber, fanning the timber into a lively fire, and then covering the ashes with large leaves similar to banana tree leaves to maintain the heat in the stones. The food parcels would be placed on these hot leaves and the whole oven covered with a stack of more leaves. This would subject the food to a type of slow pressure cooking. After three to four hours the oven would be opened, the parcels of food taken out, the *laplap* cut into pieces and distributed. The *laplap*, now similar in color and texture, to a thick porridge, would be cut into slices and shared.

Annie's kitchen was relatively large without walls but having very low eaves to keep out the rain. The earth oven was to one side of the central supporting pole around which lay an assortment of metal kitchen items. Hanging from the horizontal beams which supported the roof were several precious dyed mats of the type used as reciprocal gifts for ceremonies such as weddings, the birth of a new child, grade taking or for wrapping the deceased. These mats differ from the mats used for everyday use such as sitting or sleeping as they have patterns dyed onto the woven pandanus in a deep magenta color. The smoke from the earth oven would prevent mildew or bugs settling into the mats which could be stored for months or years.

Pentecost is famous for the quality of both its precious red mats and its baskets. The baskets are of an especially fine fiber and design but are extremely tough and durable.

Both men and women carry or store their possessions in these baskets. On one occasion a girl from the school behaved inappropriately and her punishment was to weave a basket for the person she had offended. There is a myth from Central Pentecost concerning the making of baskets:

Nuenue was a woman from North Pentecost. She made baskets. However, although she was very skilled in her craft the chief of her village told her to leave because she made too much noise when she tore the pandanus leaf or straightened the fibers with a piece of bamboo. Nuenue walked to Central Pentecost and sat under a rock by the sea near Lalbetaes Village. Here she sat down and even today you can see where she sat because in that place is a large rock in the shape of a basket. The people of Central Pentecost saw that she had a special skill. They asked her to teach them to make baskets. So she stayed with the central Pentecost people and taught them. That is why the people of Central Pentecost make the best baskets on Pentecost. You can see another rock in the shape of a basket. That is the place where she sat just up on the hill to the north of Waterfall Village on the path to Lolwari village.

The rain had stopped and the long orange shafts of sunlight broke through the heavy cloud and glittered on the sea as we thanked our hosts and set off home. By the time we had reached the last steep little hill to the school darkness had fallen although it was the evening was lighter than the week or so earlier when I visited the *nakamal*. Tiny little fireflies flitted around, their bright tail-lights beaming like tiny gold stars spinning around our heads. At White Stone, a point jutting out into the sea about a kilometer north of Ranwadi, the girls stopped. They pointed to a place at the base of the cliff where, I had been told by several people, the skeletons of two people lay in a cave but no one goes there continue to fear sorcery. One Saturday afternoon some girls, local women, teachers and I were sitting on mats near the volleyball courts. The girls were discussing how they had trimmed another girl's hair. One of the women explained that in the past hair cuttings would be burned for fear that the hair could be used to harm that person. The hair could be taken to a person who would perform sorcery. Similarly, skin or toe parings would also be destroyed. Children should never eat a banana offered by a person from another village as this could also be the work of a sorcerer and cause the child to become ill. That is why a villager always asks a child eating a banana who gave it to him.

Sorcery, I was told, is usually based on jealousy. Perhaps if someone has a good job other people become jealous and practise sorcery. The sorcerer can send a spirit in another form such as a shark, or commonly, a dog. Many years ago there were not many sharks near Pentecost but in the last few years there have been many sharks and some people have been eaten. In the past the children could go out to sea in their canoes and dive into the water but today no one goes as there are many sharks. People think they are the spirits of sorcerers.

Sorcery is attributed to certain islands, one of which is Ambrym. I was told this story about sorcery on Ambrym: once, a young girl from Ambrym was bitten in half by a shark. Her family buried her upper torso. Some time later they received a message from another clan who said it was their sorcery that had caused the girl's death. The other clan said they would return the girl because they now had her if someone came to their village to collect her. The girl's village knew that if they went to that other village they would be killed. So they did not go.

Usually sorcerers are men but the wife of an important chief may have magic powers. She can be very evil and malicious. If a woman is pregnant she will not go near another village or out at night for fear that someone could practice sorcery and kill her baby. Another story concerned a woman who was asleep one night but was awakened by her unborn child kicking. She wondered why it was kicking and then she heard a noise outside. She saw a large black dog outside her house. She knew some people believed spirits can take the form of a dog but she did not believe this and would not allow it to frighten her. So she ignored it and went back to sleep.

There is also belief in supernatural powers. It is believed that ancestral spirits can change themselves into animals. Here is a story written by a student and verified by another student. The second student said that the event occurred in March 1990. The story was verified again by a teacher who explained that the stingray in the story was believed to be an ancestral spirit.

A young man and an old man went out fishing from Santo. The boat's motor broke down and the boat began to drift away. It drifted for some days. According to the student, the old man grew weak and died so the young man tried to swim towing

the boat behind him. The teacher believed that the old man fell asleep, the boat capsized and the old man, who was a very good fisherman, was caught under the boat and drowned. From this point the students and the teacher agreed on the events. The young man stepped into the water and found something firm under his feet. He realized he was standing on a stingray. The stingray took him a long way until he reached shore. The teacher thought that he was carried south to Noumea (New Caledonia) where he was admitted to hospital. At first, when he told his story, people thought he was mad. But then it was discovered that he was not sick in the head. So the story is true.

Imelda, Lines, May and I parted at the top of the hill, the girls making their way to the food hall and Imelda and I to our own houses. The generator was humming so the electricity was on. I heated a stew and the ubiquitous rice, and followed this with a rice custard, pikelets and tea. There was little variety in the meals that could be prepared from the tinned fish and duck, tinned butter, powdered milk, flour, condensed milk, sugar, biscuits and cake mixes that could be bought from the school store. I longed for fresh vegetables but there was little surplus available for purchase in the cool dark cellar in the school kitchen because there were over 140 students to feed. Sometimes, during the quiet hours of mid-morning when I would be in my house correcting the students' work, I would observe a little group of men and women and sometimes children from the villages in the hills pass my house silently, their backs bent almost double with laden sacks. These sacks held taro, onions and chokos which they sold to the school. Less than an hour later they would return, walking back to their homes with smaller sacks of purchases from the school store that sold a variety of products from thongs and lava lavas to toilet paper and batteries.

A small order could be placed at the school office on Monday for food to be sent by plane from Santo the following Friday. The arrival of the order was subject to a number of conditions. These included whether the order would arrive at the office before Stephen left in the truck for the airport on Monday morning; whether Stephen and the truck would even make it to the school on Monday morning; whether the order would arrive at its destination on Santo; whether the requested goods would be available; whether there would be room on the plane to deliver the order to Pentecost; and, finally, whether Stephen and the truck would make it to the school before dark on Friday. Everyone waited

anxiously at the front of the mission on Friday evenings because that was also the evening the mail arrived.

Occasionally delicious salad vegetables such as lettuce, tomatoes, capsicums and beans were gathered from the gardens of the school agriculture class. The students sold the vegetables to the staff and these variations to our diets were always appreciated. But as much as I tried to live on a staple of rice, and tried to prepare a variety of rice dishes, I missed having bread – bread and jam, bread sandwiches and toast. Heavy, unsalted bread was baked in a local village for the students' breakfast but there was rarely a spare loaf to be bought. On the very few occasions when I managed to buy half a loaf of bread, I cut it into slices, wrapped each individually, placed them in the freezer and rationed myself one slice per day. Pikelets, or griddle-cakes, became almost a necessity except for the occasions when I received eggs from Santo and made cakes. Usually at least a quarter of the dozen eggs were broken or stale by the time they arrived.

Well, today I enjoyed my walk to Lalbetaes. Now being Saturday night all the girls are outside my house on the volleyball court with kerosene lamps practicing their dances for Island Night. They are really quite noisy.

(Later) We have just had two earth tremors. The second made all the walls rattle. I've never experienced a tremor as strong as that! I don't suppose it is so strong by local comparisons but all the girls are squealing in the dormitory. At first I thought it was a very heavy wind growing stronger. Then I opened the windows and the second tremor came. The whole house rocked.

After dinner, when the girls had returned to the dormitory, and all was peaceful, I completed my field notes and then listened to Radio Australia. I had now been on the mission for twelve days. My research was underway. I had hoped to study dance on Pentecost and in particular, to study the dance of the young people so that I could compare the purpose, structure, technique and learning process of the dance with that of the students in my own school and culture. I was also anxious to learn the significance of dance in Central Pentecost *kastom*.

In Australia and in Western society in general, there are a number of socially recognized domains where human movement is regulated, indeed one might say, choreographed. Ballet and opera each provide a medium for stories to be told through movement or dance with the former always involving music and the latter usually doing so. Ballroom dancing is a social activity formalized into a series of actions arranged to musical scores to be performed as an introduction between members of the opposite sex. Sports provide tightly regulated movements or rules for competition between groups accompanied by chants or cries peculiar to the individual action. Ceremonies such as the mass, funerals or weddings have highly stylized movement accompanied by appropriate hymns and music. The most public of all choreographed movement is the street parade, the march, the baton twirlers and pompom girls, and the beauty pageant, all of which are accompanied by music of a loud enough volume to demand all within proximity be drawn into the ceremony, willingly or not.

These categories of human movement are all subsumed under the term “dance” in Vanuatu. Unfortunately, in a way this is a misnomer because it suggests, to the Western observer at any rate, that the movement performed by men or women of a village are just simply dances. They are more than dances. Dance is a term that refers to organized human movement evident in all social interaction. Dance narrates stories and records history. Dance displays and reinforces relationships between individuals or groups. Dance provides an opportunity for competition with other villages. Dance displays beauty in human form and movement, questions change in society, celebrate events and victories. Dance provides the ritual reinforcement for achievement, marriage and death or simply an opportunity for enjoyment. Singing and chanting, the rhythmic clattering of seedpod bracelets attached to the feet and ankles, the drumming of tam-tams and sometimes the whistling of nose flutes or panpipes provide the musical accompaniment to all these performances. The dancing ground found in most villages, is therefore all at once, the sporting oval, the stage, the podium, the fairground, the marching ground and the auditorium of a western neighborhood or town.

The two-pronged approach of observing the students dance (that is, should they choose to do so) at Island Night and learning about dance as a part of *kastom* through the information provided by the chiefs and by observing *kastom*, such as the performance of dance by the men from Lalbetaes, was an excellent research strategy devised by Silas. His

efforts in bringing this about were beginning to take shape. I could not anticipate the next opportunity to learn about *kastom* but I hoped that I might have an opportunity to observe more of the traditional practices. The chance of this happening in the remaining three or four or so weeks of my time at Ranwadi seemed remote. I consoled myself with the thought that at least Chief Resis' tapes would provide some information concerning the graded society, the pivotal *kastom* institution. Little did I know then, or even fully appreciate for some years, that Silas would introduce me to the important rituals and reveal to me the intricacies of Central Pentecost *kastom* of which dance was an essential elements.



Chapter 5

Social Life

The rain and grey clouds of Saturday had vanished. Brilliant sunshine painted the foliage with vibrant emerald, olive, and lime greens, scarlet, vermilions, purples and yellows. Dazzling pale gold light splashed from the brilliant white patches of coral paths, sand and sea foam. The magnificent little whitewashed church stood commandingly at the easterly point of the mission framed against an azure sky and a turquoise sea.

It was Sunday, the most important day of the week on the mission. Although each school day began with an assembly and short service in the church, the main service took place on Sundays. This was the day that everyone on the mission, teachers, students, employees, family and children congregated at about 10am for Service.

We gathered at the church dressed in our best clothes. I wore my neatest frock, dispensing with the skirts and blouses that I kept for class or the long baggy trousers I wore in the evenings to defy the malarial mosquitoes. The students changed their blue uniforms, the girls wearing a variety of bright skirts or lava lavas and T-shirts, and the boys resplendent in their T-shirts, shorts or trousers and their *de riguer* sporting shoes. Venneth, the wife of Silas and school bursar, and the women living at the mission, wore very pretty, fashionable frocks made either by themselves or a local seamstress. I was pleased that I had included dress length pieces of cotton material, calico, as gifts when packing for my visit to Pentecost. The children were decked out in modern, dainty cool frocks and suits and all this color and freshness added to the festive nature of the morning and decorated the walls of the church in a kaleidoscope of color.

The girls festooned the interior of the church with red hibiscus for Sunday Service. Rows of red hibiscus were laid along the floor, and placed on the windows, the table and the oratory. The boys wore hibiscus in their hair and set up a home-made percussion band next to Francois' guitar on the podium. We all filed in, first the students and then the teachers and other members of the community. Women and girls sat to the left of the church facing the front, and the boys to the right.

In my youth, attending church was a necessary chore to be dealt with as quickly as possible. But for the students on the mission it was a joyous experience and they sang their hymns with gusto to the strumming of the guitar and the cacophony caused by the beating of various metal drums. There were several sermons given by Silas, Pastor Japhet and often a visiting pastor. I was fascinated by the styles of oratory of the visiting pastors that varied from the gently persuasive to the fire and brimstone variety. But despite the interesting sermons of the visiting pastors, I found those of Ranwadi's Pastor Japhet the most engaging. It was always pitched at a level that both children and adults could enjoy and, it seemed to me, contained a great deal of basic common sense.

The remainder of Sunday was spent quietly. Occasionally the school would be invited to Sunday Service at another village such as Baravat, or some teachers or students might spend the weekend with friends or relatives in nearby villages. On Sunday evening the school body would separate into small groups in the homes of various teachers or employees for scripture readings. The text was the *Good News Gospel*, and the scriptures were thoroughly known and understood by the staff. These evenings were an intellectual experience. I usually met with a group of employees and their families. One of the participants would have selected a passage from the scriptures and spent time examining the text and making notes before the meeting. The significance of the text would be open to debate. The participants thought seriously about the topic and I was interested in the variety of responses since I had never attended scripture readings such as this before. Charles Bani was a particularly inspiring leader and his comments were always carefully prepared and thoroughly considered. The evening closed with refreshments.

I was always impressed by the courtesy extended to a speaker whether in a church, a meeting or a small group. School staff meetings at the mission were always a wonder to me. These usually took place after school hours and occupied up to two hours as every speaker expressed his or her opinion followed by a long polite pause while we considered its implications and our response. How different was this to my experience in Australian school staff meetings. There, anyone who wants to 'have a say' will employ any strategy including interruption, not listening, exploiting or ignoring agenda or meeting procedure, and are often so anxious that the meeting be over within the allocated hour that often they remember very little of the information. All the same, I found myself becoming impatient as the long Ranwadi staff meetings drew out beyond two hours.

Monday 9 July. I've managed to read a couple of novels although the weekends are busy too. We went to church for one and a half hours yesterday morning and, because there was a visiting pastor, another two and a half hours last night. There is Fellowship on Thursday nights and the children go to chapel each morning. Saturday is the only day when I don't have to go anywhere in the morning or night as I tutor every evening except Thursdays and Fridays. Friday and Saturday nights are free for the students and they make a racket until lights go off at 10pm.

On the weekends I have visits from the girls who want to look at the photos of my family but the boys are shy. The boys, who traveled to their village for materials, have returned and both boys and girls are preparing for Island Night. The girls are quite open about their performance and allow me to watch their progress but the boys are very serious and have secluded themselves on the playing field near the sea where they cannot be observed. I plan to video the girls rehearsing tomorrow. I made a video of the men of Lalbetaes dancing and I will show that to the students this week.

Some items I brought with me are most useful. They include my little flashlight, my little iron, my clothesline, a travelling sewing kit, ball point pens, light weight typing paper, the battery clock with the terrible alarm, the digital watch, my sun hat, sun and insect lotions, antiseptic creams, scissors, tweezers and so on. My careful preparation has paid off.

Today I tried to bake a chicken that I ordered from Santo. I baked pumpkin and island cabbage and the chicken for Sunday lunch. It worked although the baked taro was like hard little rocks. Yesterday I opened a tin of Chinese brand curried chicken to eat with rice. I have never seen anything more disgusting. There were great dollops of yellow oil, floating around chopped up splinters of bone and flesh. I can hardly bear to think about it. I tossed it out pronto! My fridge needs kerosene every four or five days but it is very good and I am no longer afraid of the oven! I have been invited to dinner with Imelda and Reuben. I wish I had something interesting to take with me.

I was desperately trying to develop new recipes for my limited supply of groceries. Unlike the resident teachers and staff I did not have a vegetable garden which I would have planted had my stay at the mission been longer. I always enjoyed invitations to Imelda and Reuben's house and Silas and Venneth's house for dinner. Their houses were cosy with ample furniture, curtains, books and all the trappings of comfortable homes. They had verandahs, indoor kitchens and flush toilets. It amazed me that flush toilets were available here, a couple of hundred kilometers from Vila, yet there were no flush toilets in our village eight miles from Sydney until the mid-1950's.

My cottage by comparison, while adequately furnished, presented a problem for me because the four dining chairs were a little too high for me to work comfortably at the dining table. If I pulled one of the two wooden-slatted reclining chairs to the table, my chin was almost on my books. Sometimes, I placed my bed pillow on the reclining chair and this helped a little. Since I didn't have a garden I occasionally took a frozen apple pie that I had ordered from Santo or a block of chocolate bought from the school store when I went visiting. Unfortunately, my lack of supplies made it impossible for me to reciprocate and I was limited to providing afternoon teas.

During my visit to Ranwadi I enjoyed a number of social outings. On several occasions Silas, Venneth, Tom and Lera and Stephen and Mary and I would make a visit to Baravat Village, about half way between Lonorore and Waterfall Village. This pretty village had a gentle stream flowing through and a number of impressive buildings including a clinic with four beds, a primary school and the women's house where lunch was set out on a long table. Jonas, a capable businessman from the village, and his wife, had a well-stocked trade store which, I was told by wide-eyed youngsters at the school, sold ice-cream! Although many of the older women could not speak English I was always included in the group of women. Lois, the mother of Kensen who is a student at the school, and Dorica, who cared for little Lois, always spent time with me and drew me into the conversations. On other occasions church services for the staff and students of Ranwadi were held under the huge flame trees on the coral sands of the seashore adjacent to Baravat Village. These were followed by a picnic lunch of rice, meat and laplap brought out piping hot, now wrapped in steaming, wilted leaves, from the earth ovens in the village. Lunch was always preceded by grace and then served on large leaves laid out on the ground like a sort of smorgasbord with smaller leaves used as plates. Some time after the meal the boys would

make their way to one end of the long beach in front of the village and the girls to the other end for a swim. These were long, leisurely days when we teachers and students sat on the sand or grass, watching the babies and toddlers playing with the older children and chatting in little groups with the girls and women from the village.

My visit to Melsisi Mission, which occurred towards the end of my stay at Ranwadi, was a fascinating experience. I had often expressed a wish to visit the mission as my curiosity had been aroused for a few reasons. About a year earlier I had visited father Paul in Vila and he had given me a gift of a book *One Hundred years of Mission 1887-1987 – The Catholic Church in New Hebrides- Vanuatu*. It is an absorbing account of the struggle of the French Catholic missionaries all over Vanuatu, but also on Pentecost and in particular Melsisi. The rivalry, disputes, and even wars that eventuated between the Catholic and Protestant missions and all the missions with the so-called pagans makes compelling reading and goes some way to explain the insular nature of the missions of the various religious denominations today. Despite these conflicts, Zaccheus explained, today the people are grateful to the missions for bringing peace to their island which was subject to fierce inter-village hostilities in the past. He continued that although the trading of slaves or indenturing workers from Pentecost for the cane fields of Queensland, Australia, was a dreadful period it provided an opportunity for a young man, David, to learn Christianity through the Churches of Christ in Australia. Later he returned to teach the people of Pentecost.

The second reason for my interest in Melsisi Mission was quite mundane. It seemed to me that there were only three vehicles on this part of the island. They consisted of the blue truck Stephen drove for the school, a smart brown truck belonging to Jonas from Baravat Village, and another noisy brown truck that roared down the hill towards the airport in the morning and roared even more loudly as it revved and raced back up the hill in the afternoon three times a week to coincide with the arrival of the plane at Lonorore. When I asked who the aspiring Grand Prix racing champion might be, I was advised, disapprovingly, that he came from Melsisi. It was very clear that his habit of ‘speeding’ along the one thoroughfare was frowned upon.

Another reason for my interest came about because of an injury suffered by one of the Ranwadi students during a Saturday soccer match with a team from another village on

their home ground about six kilometers south of the school. The boy, who was about fourteen years of age, broke his leg. The leg needed to be set and other treatment provided before the next plane arrived the following Monday to take him to the hospital on Santo. Melsisi, about ten kilometers north of Ranwadi had the necessary facilities because the hospital was larger than the clinics further south. It seemed, then, that Melsisi, which had such medical facilities including a laboratory, and like Ranwadi a radio-phone, should be a village of considerable size.

Stephen, Silas with Albert, a little boy about five who was the son of the nurse at Ranwadi, and I set out for Melsisi Mission one cold afternoon. Huge, ominous low-lying clouds menacingly threatened rain. All color had been washed from the landscape leaving the sea a dark gray. I sat in the front of the truck with Stephen while Silas and Albert stood on the back looking over the cabin to the road ahead. Groaning and grumbling the truck struggled over the hills from the school, past Vensamakul and Lalbetaes villages, through plantations and scattered houses and gardens. After about twenty minutes the land flattened out at sea level and we crossed a small river. The final ascent to Melsisi Mission was steep for the enormous mountain range of Pentecost dropped suddenly to the sea at this point and only a small ledge of land was available for settlement. As we drove into the mission we passed dozens of vacant tiny woven houses clustered tightly together. There were no gardens around them and this puzzled me. Further on the full extent of the mission was evident. There were two or three streets with numerous cement brick houses, three stores, two houses for the Marist Sisters, an enormous house for the priest built according to the French colonial style, a church large enough to hold one thousand people, a boarding school for four hundred primary and one hundred secondary students as well as a small hospital.

We parked on one of the school playing fields which was adjacent to the sea and where numerous cows wandered, their behinds to the wind and their heads down. Despite the size of the mission there was no one to be seen. Most of the children had left for their vacation and all was quiet except for the howl of the wind and the waves slapping the rocks and coral. Towering behind the mission was an enormous, almost vertical, hill with a slash of road that attempted to cross directly over the hill rather than circumvent its gradient. The cold wind blew in our faces and around our legs as we jiggled to keep warm in the shelter of the leeward side of the truck while awaiting the arrival of the priest.

Suddenly, the roar of a motor broke the silence. Over the crest of the mountain burst a battered brown truck with someone standing unsteadily at the back hanging onto the top of the cabin. As the truck roared down the mountain we could see it was the priest, his hair flying back and his cassock blowing around him, flapping in the wind like an enormous black sail on a stricken yacht. His body swayed alarmingly as the truck negotiated bumps and bends without a pause. Then, as we stared in mute amazement at this awesome sight, the truck and its occupants disappeared behind some buildings only to emerge shortly afterwards and approach us in a more sedate manner. It ground noisily to a halt and the priest lowered himself to the ground, shook our hands and welcomed us warmly to his house that he described as “the fort”.

Father Finley, for that was the name of our host, led us to his huge house. We climbed broad stairs from the back, emerging on the next level where there was a long covered verandah or walkway at the front of the house. On one side doors led off into various rooms that seemed very dark on that colorless afternoon, and on the other the verandah wall gave views that would have been pleasant on any other day but today just reinforced the sense of the restlessness and hostility of the sea. Father Finley invited us into his study and the mission library which has been a sense of fascination to me ever since. He told us a little about early priests who had documented local history and culture and of his responsibilities on the mission.

I was curious about the numerous vacant leaf houses at the entrance to the mission. He explained that many of the Catholic villages serviced by the Melsisi Mission were almost a day's walk away in very rough, mountainous country. The occupants of these villages owned these small houses, the equivalent of 'weekenders'. Every Saturday they would leave their pigs and their gardens to trek over the mountains to Melsisi. On Saturday night Father Finley would show a film in the old Nissan hut in the middle of the mission and on Sunday morning all the visitors and residents on the mission would attend mass in the big church with the colorful murals decorating the interior. After lunch the visitors would set out on the return journey to their villages. Although each village has its own chapel Mass can be offered only by a priest, so the villagers would make the weekly journey to Melsisi.

Father Finley took us for a walk around the mission explaining the purpose of the various buildings. My previous notion of Pacific communities as being hamlets of horticulturalists, for that is how they are described in academic monographs, had already been eroded by my experience at Ranwadi and Baravat, but this community bore little similarity to that model. This was more like a large medieval town in which all the workers were engaged in supporting the community through their various trades. The residents of this little town were serviced with fresh food from the gardens of the surrounding villages. The villagers carried their surplus over the mountains to sell at the mission on Saturdays and stocked up on imported items from the three trade stores to take home to their families and friends. Although I describe Melsisi as medieval in style, because of its Christian administration and ethos, in fact it also bears similarities to the isolated missions and cattle stations in Australia where the interdependence of the management and workers ensures their viability and productivity. Remnants of earlier examples of this type of community are evident in the abandoned heritage towns of Kameruka and Boyd Town on the New South Wales south coast. Melsisi, because of its isolation, organization and size, provides a unique model of an extended self-sufficient community. I thoroughly enjoyed my visit and secretly envied the woman from New Caledonia who had recently spent time on the mission while learning the craft of making Pentecost baskets.

Since the day was now growing darker we thanked Father Finley for his hospitality and set off for Ranwadi. The truck was heading into the wind that had grown stronger and colder. I was so lost in thought and excited from our visit that as we began our journey I failed to notice that young Albert was wearing only light clothing. He was standing on the back of the truck with Silas while I was enjoying the comfort of the cabin. I think he was too shy to sit with me in the cabin so I offered him my jacket. When I later learned that he had a cold I felt so dismayed I never rode in the cabin of a truck again. I always sat on the back with the children and other passengers.

Despite these misgivings it had been a fascinating afternoon for all of us. Moreover, since inter-mission visits like this are not common it aroused interest from the other members of our community.

Tuesday 10 July. Yesterday the girls rehearsed their dancing after school again so I went to watch. I asked what the words of their song meant. I was told that nobody really

knows as they are from a very old language that people don't speak now. The dances were first learned by a man from someone who knew the dances. Sometimes someone comes to people and teaches them the dances in their dreams. He can be good or bad, and can take spirit form or other forms. It is believed to be a white man who lives in a cave on the eastern side of Pentecost. The dances were passed down through generations and taught to the children by their grandparents.

The girls who were dancing were from Anglican villages in North Pentecost although the dances were supposedly from Central Pentecost. They learned the dances when they were about four years old. The dances I observed were led by two Year 10 girls followed by two lines of about 10 girls each holding a short bamboo gong and a stick to beat it. They beat time as they sang and the steps were remembered as they related to the words. When I asked how the girls from North Pentecost knew traditional dances from Central Pentecost they explained that they had met students from Central Pentecost in an Anglican primary school to the north of Central Pentecost. I filmed the dance and both the dancers and onlookers were delighted.

Each afternoon about 10 boys secrete themselves on the school oval about 200 meters from the school and obscured by trees, shrubs and vines. They can be heard rehearsing and are also busy making masks in their dormitories. Coalton, a splendid dancer from Year 9, agreed to my filming their rehearsal on the condition that I not divulge any information. I was to have filmed it yesterday but it was raining so I will film them this afternoon.

The boys first learned the dances from their paternal grandfathers on the occasion of the opening of a new church. They were only about ten years of age at the time. The song that they were singing was about birds so they will wear the feathers of the fowl or kingfisher. Only the chief can wear the feathers of the hawk. They wear nuts of the nadodo tree around their ankles and that was the reason they had to return to their villages as this tree does not grow at the school. Their parents were surprised to seem them arrive home for the weekend.

Because all of the students from Ranwadi and Melsisi will leave Pentecost during the same week at the end of term I had to confirm my flight back to Vila although it will be

another two weeks or more before I leave the mission. I can hardly believe it! It has taken five attempts to make this confirmation. I tried the local airport at Lonorore and made two attempts to contact Santo and two more attempts to contact Vila. It is difficult to make connections by radiophone. I was talking to Vanair in Vila one afternoon when suddenly the time was 4.30 when Ranwadi's access to the airwave ends. So the switchboard in Vila just cut our conversation in mid-sentence. Confirming the flight has been a nuisance and a worry to me for a few days.

The school finishes for the winter break and the 10th Anniversary of Independence celebrations the weekend before I leave. Although most of the students will walk home to their villages, up to a whole day in some cases, and others will travel to their islands home by passenger and cargo boat, many will fly back to their islands on the Friday and Monday. Some will leave on the day of my departure, the Wednesday. Getting a seat on the plane won't be easy. Also, if there is heavy rain the airport could be closed because it becomes water logged in wet weather. So remember this in case I am late back to Vila. P.S. The girls have been telling me scary tales of creepers who wander around the bush at night!

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“You will have to get up early tomorrow. We are going to Lolwari Village to watch the villagers dye the precious red mats.” Silas had dropped into my house with Lois for a cup of coffee and a lemon juice immediately after school had finished on Tuesday. He removed the strawberry cream from a biscuit and gave the less sweet remnants to Lois and continued. “It is a long way to Lolwari, up a steep hill, and the day will become very hot. We will leave about 8am.” Lois helped herself to another strawberry cream biscuit, put my sun-hat on her head and wandered around the house, looking behind the curtains which served as doors to all the cupboards and wardrobes in my house.

The opportunity to see the dyeing of the precious red mats was a unique opportunity and one that I had never anticipated. There were no descriptions of this process in any of the academic literature so I had no idea of what was involved. I was very keen to go to Lolwari until Silas explained where the village was situated. Pigs and the precious red mats are the most important items in *kastom*. They are essential for all occasions as reciprocal gifts for the services of others. The size and numbers of pigs and the numbers of precious red mats

required as gifts for special occasions is known and understood by all participants in any ceremony such as grade-taking or marriage. This responsibility is first accorded when a child reaches its first birthday. The white mats given to the baby's parents by the bride's father's sisters must be returned as red mats at that time. Precious red mats, like pigs, represent real wealth

"Lolwari is up in the hills behind the school. You know, sometimes you can see some smoke up there. Do you remember you asked me about the smoke up on the mountain the very first day you arrived at the school?" I remembered catching a glimpse of a tiny building in the distance which suddenly disappeared into shadow as the truck pulled up at the school on that very first day. Since that time, I had occasionally seen its shape in the afternoons when the afternoon sun briefly lit up its surface. Occasionally one of the boys would point out the 'little house' on the mountain and we would strain our eyes to stare in wonder. But since none of the students or teachers had ever visited that part of the mountain, the exact purpose of the little building was a mystery to all.

"Do you mean - we are going to walk up to that village?" I asked. My enthusiasm had been punctured. After all, the village would have been at least one thousand meters up an almost vertical incline. And even then it was little more than halfway up the forbidding ridge.

"Of course," Silas replied. "The school truck cannot drive up such a steep hill. I will meet you tomorrow morning after assembly. We won't get back from Lolwari until evening so pack whatever you need. One of the boys will help you carry your cameras." And he gathered up little Lois who protested loudly, smiled and waved and was gone.

My heart sank. Well it wasn't my heart that was the problem but rather my legs! My idea of a walk was to amble down to the beach in front of the mission. My experience of walking was strolling through the park, wandering around shops, or taking the dog for a short exercise. I knew that back home there were clubs of people with masochistic tendencies who set off into the scrub despite the dust, heat and flies or abominable rain, clad in shorts, thick socks, boots and hats, weighed down by enormous packs of clothes, food and shelter and who called this a 'sport'. But I had never aspired to this type of heroic

misery and dismissed it as another of those things the English enjoy when they arrive in Australia.

I opened the front door to my house to take another look at the height of the majestic bastion looming over it, and attempted to find the little building. But it was lost amongst the coconut palms of the enormous plantations that covered large sections of the mountains. I examined the entire arc of the range that spread around the mission. The only sign of life on that huge mass of rock and greenery, so high that I could not see the top from where I stood at my door, were a few straggling clouds of smoke from hidden gardens.

I crunched back across the coral that formed a verandah at the front of my house, took my washing from the line I had strung under the awning of the verandah in order to avoid the afternoon showers, and began to prepare my bag for the following day's excursion. Since that alarming experience during my visit to the *nakamal* when I had taken nothing other than my cameras, notepad and tape recorder, I had refined my kit. This consisted of a shoulder bag containing my video camera and extra battery, my Pentax SLR and attachments, extra film and batteries, small notebook and pen, insect repellent and sun block-out for my fair skin, a bottle of water, a boiled egg, some pikelets or an apple, a plastic bag to sit on since the grass or earth was invariably wet, and some tissues and a small torch. I found this was the limit that I could carry but was enough to sustain a day's research. Although women always wear dresses in the islands, I was very concerned not to contract malaria in this region where the malarial mosquito breeds prolifically. So, although I took anti-malarial tablets such as quinine and Maloprim each week, I wore a loose fitting pair of floral trousers and a long-sleeved loose shirt over my T-shirt. Wherever I went I wore a large sun-hat that the girls adored and I would often see it being shared by a group of fashion conscious girls, and, sometimes, boys!

But there was other work to do before the day was over. This was the afternoon that Coalton had arranged for the boys' dance to be filmed. It was after 4pm and I had also agreed to make a film of the girls' performance that afternoon. The girls were waiting expectantly with a group of women from the nearby village at the back of the girl's dormitory. This site provided just enough privacy to avoid close scrutiny and just enough exposure to entice curiosity. Time was of the essence now because I would not have an

opportunity to film on Wednesday and the only other day left would be Thursday. Friday was the day of the wedding that had been mentioned during the first week of my arrival, but had not been mentioned since. However, matters are not discussed in detail on Pentecost so there was every reason to assume that the wedding would still go ahead and we, I was not sure who the 'we' were, would attend.

After filming the girls performing their dances I set off for the sports field to film the boys' dance. It was a struggle climbing over the stile at the school boundary fence and negotiating the steep, slippery, rugged track down to the playing field with my camera bag slung over my shoulder. Two groups of boys had observed my clumsy arrival. One group was at the far end of the grassy area kicking goals over the soccer goal posts. The other group, the performers, was closer to the school. They had formed a double line ready for me to film their dance.

The filming of the girls' dances had been very successful so my optimism and enthusiasm compensated for my undignified arrival. The boys first demonstrated the dance so that I could position myself for the best angle for making my video film. Then they performed what seemed a rather uninteresting short dance. I figured this was just a warm-up. But then, to my astonishment, not to mention my disappointment, they advised me that was it! That was it! All that secrecy for that! I probed gently. But they were resolute. However, they explained that although the dance was longer they could not perform it as it was to be a surprise on Island Night. Feeling a little deflated, and not entirely confident that there would or could be any more to the dance, I accepted their explanation and also promised that under no circumstances would I play the video before Island Night. It was only about twenty minutes after my arrival that I was again struggling miserably back along the rugged path. I hauled myself uphill, over the stile, past the laundry, the clinic, the typing rooms and the store all before the questioning eyes of the girls and teachers who had not expected to see me for another hour or so.

Fortunately, the girls did not share this need for secrecy and, in fact, were keen for an audience. That evening after dinner I played the girls' video in the dining hall that also served as the video room. The dining hall was also used for cooking classes and at the south end of the hall there was a modern kitchen with gas stoves. Adjacent to the kitchen was the food store. The performers and their friends arranged themselves on benches,

leaning on long tables to look at the television set on the south wall. The windows in the dining hall had no louvers so a number of boys, who were too shy to sit in the dining hall with the girls, leaned through the windows to watch the video, vanishing out of sight whenever a girl glanced in their direction. There was a great deal of squealing, hooting, laughing and clapping as the performance was played several times to accommodate the numerous late-comers. Teachers and other staff wandered in and a great deal of hilarity and excitement ensued. Of course, the girls wanted to view the boys' performance but we respected the conditions of the chance to film their dances. However, the boys were shrewd enough to realize that they could excel in their production by using the knowledge gained by viewing the girls' performance.

The generator, which provided electricity, was due to cease at 10 pm. It was getting late so we packed up the VCR, turned off the lights in the food hall, closed the door and departed in twos and threes through the now dark mission grounds to our houses.



Chapter 6

Dyeing the Precious Red Mats at Lohwari Village

The morning of our walk to Lohwari was sunny with a crisp, light south-east trade wind flicking wispy, white clouds over the mountain towards the sea. I wasn't sure whether our appointment was 'real time' or 'island time' and therefore whether Silas would arrive very early or just early. But he was there about 8 am 'real time' with Zacheus, and a student, Philip.

We set off across the volleyball courts adjacent to my house, and towards the east, or back, of the mission. I had only been in this area once before when I accompanied Judith and her mother to collect the leaves for *laplap*. There was a stile in the wire fence between the school grounds and the coconut plantations where cattle roamed chewing blades of grass or the sprouts from fallen coconuts. Although Zacheus assured me coconuts only fall between 10am and 2pm, and in fact I often heard the dull plop of falling nuts during my lunch breaks, I was very nervous in the plantation. If I tried to avoid walking under a clump of nuts by making a large arc around a tree, I simply found myself under a clump of nuts in another tree!

The ground began to slope gently upwards as we made our way across the plantation. Abruptly the hill rose ahead of us. A narrow path wound and twisted its way up the mountain, sometimes with taro gardens nearby, at other times thick bush and vines, and then more coconut plantations wherever the slope was gentle enough to sustain the trees against the wind and rain. But in general, this was the leeward side of the mountain and the coconut trees could attach themselves in more perilous positions on the steep incline. The climb was very difficult, and although Philip assisted with my bag I had great difficulty clambering up the slippery, black paths of damp volcanic soil. At times we rested on a rock looking down to the mission now far away in the distance, laced by trees and coconut palms, the white buildings for all the world like splashes of over-exposed film on a green and blue background. The track rose in a series of zigzags where the slope allowed and then in almost vertical step-like sections where the slopes gave way to almost vertical bluffs.

At one point high on the mountain we rested next to a rock which appeared to have been windswept into the shape of a donut. We took a longer break there. It was cooler up there with a breeze and less humidity from the sea. As we lounged around enjoying the respite from our efforts Silas pointed to the donut shaped rock. He explained that it was a magic rock; it was so magic that anyone could wriggle through the hole without becoming stuck because the rock could accommodate anyone! Silas demonstrated by working his way uphill through the hole, one arm stretched above his head, his upper torso bent several degrees in the same direction. The hole was not regular in shape and bordered by rock of varying thickness. I really did not think he would be able to push his way through the rock and wondered what we would do if, in the unlikely event, he became stuck. His upper body emerged from the other side of the rock as his lower body twisted around to follow it. He then pressed his two hands down on the top of the rock and dragged himself out onto the damp grass where he sat catching his breath and grinning with delight.

Silas invited Philip and me to enjoy the same dubious pleasure. Philip, being a young lad, had no trouble but I was not at all inclined to attempt the exercise. The problem with these sorts of adventures is that one is loath to appear to lack confidence in the judgment of one's host, but on the other hand one's own judgment might be correct. And in my opinion, there was unlikely to be enough room for me to squeeze through the hole despite the strong magic imbued in the rock. Moreover, it seemed to me, things could be very inconvenient if I were to be metamorphosed into a section of rock here on the side of a mountain too steep to accommodate wheeled vehicles, on an island with minimal telecommunications and occasional air transport. I expressed my regret for my lack of faith, and declined. We left the rock and I was relieved that its claim to magic remained intact.

A little further on we passed a couple of little houses to our right and then began our final steep ascent that ended unexpectedly on a small bluff of level land. Perched on the very edge of the bluff overlooking the mountain slopes and far, far below, Ranwadi mission and the sea, was a beautiful little white church. The shade of surrounding trees and coconut palms lifted and fell, illuminating and obscuring it. This was the building that had fascinated us down at the school. Also on this small level area less than half the size of a football oval was a row of precious red mats, perhaps fourteen of them, drying in the sun. Two or three cattle grazed close to the mats. Further on, about twenty meters beyond the

church, the earth rose suddenly again in a steep step-like fashion but all that could be seen from where we stood was a small column of smoke.

We skirted the mats and climbed the last few meters to the village of Lolwari, a French Catholic village. What a sight met our eyes! Never before had I imagined such an industry. For that is the only way that the dyeing of the precious red mats can be described. It was an industry in which the entire village was involved and for which the whole village was responsible because everyone had a particular job. It is an industry in which mats are woven over a year and for one week each year the dyeing process takes place. On this occasion seventy mats would be dyed during the week.

Before us was a temporary hut roofed with nylon fabric and sheltered by coconut fronds on the seaward side in which six rows of about five or six women sat with their children. They were divided into three lots of two rows of women facing each other. About ten meters behind them to the left was another hut where a group of men were building a fire. To the rear of this hut was a huge pile of firewood. To the right of the firewood was another small hut with several banana trees lying on the ground. Further to the right was the *nakamal* and to the far left were the houses of the village surrounded by gardens of taro, vegetables and coconut palms.

I stood in amazement observing this activity while behind me laid the church, the precipice, the narrow coastal plain and the sea. I had seen precious red mats selling in Port Vila for about \$30 to \$60 but had no idea of work that went into their production, certainly not an industry on this scale. Zaccheus introduced us to the chief of the village and several men standing nearby. As was the custom of all Ni-Vanuatu people I was accorded great hospitality that included meeting and shaking hands with everyone, including the youngest children. This was not always a positive experience for the little ones who had never seen anyone of my strange coloring before and consistently reacted by screaming in terror.

The sun was now high in the sky. The chief planned to show us around but decided to explain the procedure first. So we sat under the shade of a coconut tree, but he first cautioned me about the coconuts above my head causing me to spring out of the way, and then described how the precious red mats are prepared and dyed:

First, the woman who will weave the white mats eats the top of the pandanus tree because now she will always weave good mats. She knows that if she stops making the mats she will go blind. The leaves of the pandanus, a tree commonly growing close to the sea in tropical and sub-tropical areas, are taken and torn into fine strips. These strips are dried over a fire and then left in the sun to whiten. It takes about four to five weeks to weave the white mat and although there are several known patterns there is no particular ownership of these patterns. When the weaving is complete the mat, and several others, will be carried down the mountain to the sea. They are dipped in seawater to keep them soft.

The dyeing of all the red mats takes about a week because there are at least forty to be dyed. First the master carver eats a leaf, the type of leaf unknown to others, to make him confident in cutting the stencils for the patterns on the mats. When he was a boy he was selected by a master carver and taught the craft. The master carver has ownership of his designs but he can buy or sell designs from other craftsmen. He charges one red mat for every ten for which he provides stencils.

The master carver, who worked in the small shed between the nakamal and the area where the fire was beginning to take flame, used the trunks of banana trees for his stencils. The shed was covered in corrugated iron roofing and three sides were enclosed with coconut fronds that provided shelter but allowed the breezes to penetrate the enclosure. For this occasion two other master carvers assisted and also a boy he was training in the craft.

The stencils, each about one and a half meters length, are made by cutting through two layers of the tree trunk. The carver makes the design twice on that trunk thereby making two sets of identical designs (four stencils in all) to cover two sides of a three meters long bamboo trunk around which the stencils and the mats will be wrapped. That is two stencils lie side by side on one side of the bamboo trunk and two stencils lie side by side on the other side of the bamboo trunk. It is the responsibility of another man in the village to take the stencils to the women sit in the shelter with the coconut frond sides and nylon fabric roof.

Between each of the three double rows of women is placed a bamboo trunk about three meters long and about 20 centimeters in diameter. There is a slit about 6 centimeters in

width cut along the full length of the bamboo trunk. This opening makes it possible for the women to fill the hollow bamboo trunk with a powdered red dye that has been ground from the roots of a particular tree. They tie the fringe around the end of the mat into sections and folded it back into the mat. Then they wrap the mat around the bamboo trunk, first adding more dye under the folded area before tucking it into the slit in the trunk.

The next step is to position the stencils. Two pairs of stencils are laid end to end along the mat. They then place two stencils end to end on the opposite side to that, in effect, the entire mat encircling the trunk is covered in stencils. The stencils are tied in position with pandanus every 20 to 30 centimeters or so along the length of the bamboo trunk. They then take another white mat and wrap it once around the previous white mat and the stencils. They roll the tied fringes back under the mats adding more dye under the folded section. The four stencils are placed in position as before and again tied with pandanus strips. The women take a long rope made of coconut fiber, tie it firmly around one end of the bamboo trunk with the mats and stencils attached and wind it tightly around the full length of the cylinder. Each strand is about 8 centimeters apart, thereby binding the mats and stencils tightly together. The mats are now ready for dyeing.

The dyeing takes place in vessels in the shelter where the fire is being built. The shelter has two sides and a roof made of corrugate iron. There were two vessels for dyeing the mats each made of a regular sized sheet of corrugated iron bent into a U-shape. The open ends are drawn together and attached to a wooden pole. This end is made watertight by an encasement of earth of approximately one cubic meter. Under these vessels the men heap fresh timber for each two sets of mats to be dyed. The men lift the bamboo poles with the mats and stencils attached from the women's hut and carry them to the dyeing vessels where they are placed in a mixture of water and powdered dye. They then light the timber that bursts into a roaring fire. The water and dye mix and boil. The dyeing is complete when the fire dies (about twenty minutes).

When the fire has burned away two pairs of men stand on each side of each vessel. Joining the shoulders of each pair is a bamboo rod with a hook attached to it. Holding the rod between them, they put the hook around the bamboo trunk with the mats and stencils that are lying in the boiling dye. Then, balancing the rod on their shoulders they lift the mats

and stencils out of the liquid and advance past the pointed end of the vessel and on to either side of a pair of post and lintel structures about one and a half meters high and three meters long. They lay the steaming mats on this structure.

The women unwind the long rope, rolling it into a ball to be used for other mats. The pandanus strips binding the mats and stencils are beaten with sticks to break the binding and scrape away any residue from the dye. The stencil is discarded and the mat, when cooled, is removed and shaken to discard any remaining residue. The same procedure is followed for the underlying mat. Each mat is carried by two women down to the flat area near the church where no one will step on them and lain to dry in the sun.

From time to time during the day the women will shake and turn the mats. The mats remain in the sun for about six hours. Later they are folded and will be dipped in sea water and dried again at a later date in order to be kept supple. They will be stored in special baskets and used for special occasions.

Men and women tend to be segregated in most activities in the villages of Vanuatu. Although men like to supervise women's work to some extent the women and smaller children sit together to weave mats and baskets or to work in the gardens of taro, yams and fruit. The men and older boys congregate around the *nakamal* and usually the older boys sleep at the *nakamal*. This is especially the case where ritual circumcision is practised. Consequently, the chief prudently sought a female companion for me and Silas, Zaccheus and Philip joined the men.

My companion, a delightful teenager named Margeurite, had been educated in the French mission schools and spoke fluent French. I battled with my high school French and we seemed, at least to me, to be communicating. We joined the women wrapping the mats for dyeing and spent some time chatting about our families, Margeurite being the interpreter for all of us as the women spoke only Apma. I took their photo which I posted to the village on my return to Australia and they answered my numerous questions about their technique of tying the mats and stencils to the pole.

A little later we wandered over to where the men were building a fire to dye the mats. There were some eight to ten men in this area but only about three were actually building

the fire. After they lit the fire and had immersed the two bamboo poles with the mats attached I asked one of the men fanning the fire how long would it take for the mats to be completely dyed. He answered, quite logically, “Until the fire has gone”. I timed the process on my wristwatch. It took twenty minutes.

As the men lifted the mats from the vats onto the structure where they were unwrapped, enormous clouds of steam rose, were trapped by the roof of the shelter and then spread sideways to dissipate over the area where the women were working on one side, and to the gardens on the other. It was very hot in the shelter but it provided shelter from the sun that had now reached its zenith. I needed my sunhat to protect my head from the sharp hot sun’s rays.

Margeurite took me behind the dyeing hut, past the enormous pile of wood and over to the shelter where the carver’s were working. They were amazing. The master carver quickly cut the designs into the banana tree trunk with a sharp knife. The knife was different from the bush knives that most islanders carry with them much as a business man might carry a ball point pen. The knife was smaller and very sharp and the carver shaped the design with a few swift, deft slashes. He then delegated the remainder of the stencil production to his assistants. The pieces cut from the banana tree were discarded and the two layers of the trunk supporting the stencil were taken to the women.

It was now 1.pm. I had been there for three hours and although enjoying this experience immensely, I was beginning to feel very hungry. Margeurite and I were returning to the women’s shelter when a boy from the village approached me to invite me to the *nakamal* for lunch. The women were leaving their shelter and returning to their ovens to prepare food for their families, so Margeurite and I went our separate ways – Marguerite to the village and I to the *nakamal*. The *nakamal* had a wide entrance and strewn on the floor were a number of white mats for us to sit on. There was a row of double bunks at the back of the *nakamal* on which several young lads or men were lounging. I sat on the mats with Philip, Zacheus, the chief and some others. It was cool in there, the darkness relieved by sunlight filtering through the woven walls. I hoped that I might be offered a little laplap for lunch. I did not expect the beautiful food presentation that I received. A carved wooden board was placed before me on which artistically arranged was baked taro, bullock, laplap,

a pamplemousse (grapefruit), and a dessert of soursop, a delicious white fleshed fruit similar to a custard apple.

About an hour later when the women returned I asked Margeurite to show me to the toilet. Since it was a little way from the village my apparent leave-taking caused a little consternation amongst my male companions until we pointed to the structure forming my goal. Toilets can provide surprises anywhere one travels and are usually approached with some trepidation. Fortunately, in Vanuatu, they always seem to be spotlessly clean which goes a long way to making the experience less challenging.

It was a pit latrine surrounded by a woven shelter but unroofed. The pit was a square, each side about two meters and covered by logs placed close together with a wider space between the two central logs. It seemed to me that this required both agility and imagination but I worked out a procedure for its use. The toilet at Lonorore airport provides greater comfort in that a seat has been constructed over the pit, similar to toilets in rural Australia. It is roofed but at the front of the structure where one would expect a door there a piece of woven nylon fabric hanging from the top of the opening to about a meter from the ground. This has the surprisingly unusual effect of exposing the identity of the user to the passer-by, but concealing the identity of the passer-by to the user!

My visit to the toilet had been a singular public event. The women had been alerted to my visit by the questioning of the men. The children's attention had been diverted to my visit by their mothers' interest. It was one of those times when really one is most anxious to be inconspicuous, but alas, that was not to be. Fortunately, for my increasing sense of embarrassment, the villagers lowered their eyes and maintained a discreet disregard for my movements as I emerged from the toilet and returned to where everyone was again busy at work.

I spent an enjoyable afternoon with Margeurite, the small children and the women. The women were great company as they had a lively sense of humor and enjoyed a joke. They were highly amused when I took a photo of them working and promised to send them copies which I later did on my return home to Australia. We were able to exchange stories about our families with Margeurite as our interpreter and since we were all mothers we had a good rapport.

At about 4 pm Silas and Zaccheus reappeared from wherever they had spent the afternoon so we said our farewells. Behind us the villagers continued to work, silhouetted against the orange late afternoon sun. Gradually, their forms were blurred by the smoky mist, sea haze and the glare, sometimes lost in the deep shadows of the shelters or under the coconut palms. Then, as we left the village and commenced our descent they vanished altogether. Only the smoky mist gave any indication that there was anyone in the area. We set off downhill in a slightly different direction from that which brought us to Lolwori earlier in the day. It was extremely difficult to descend the perilous trail and Zaccheus assisted me on many occasions as I came close to tumbling headfirst down the slippery path. Zaccheus and Silas were as nimble as mountain goats yet wore only rubber thongs on their feet. It was while we were struggling down one of the particularly ominous slopes that Zaccheus told me he had assisted my elderly mother down such a steep hill at Wali Village in South Pentecost the previous year when she had accompanied me to the Pentecost Land Dive. She was 74 at the time and I told her she looked like the pope, dressed all in white with a staff in her hand, accompanied by two local men, leading a long procession of brightly dressed islanders and visitors down the mountain. They were too polite to walk in front of an elderly person. I was able to express her appreciation to Zaccheus but regretfully informed him that she had died just one year later to the day.

The most treacherous part of the descent took about an hour. We were now south west of Lolwari and a little south of waterfall Village, or so it seemed to me. The path became wider and wound in larger loops than higher up the mountain. At one point we came close to a garden where a huge inviting bunch of ripe bananas hung low to just above our heads. Zaccheus and Silas engaged in a long, intense discussion that ended with them cutting down the bananas. They explained that they had ascertained that the owner was somehow or other related to them (they were father and son) and therefore it would be quite acceptable to take the bananas. I could see no reason to disagree but wondered how the owner of the garden would react when he found the bananas missing.

It was now close to 5 pm and proceeding down the last slope to the airport road which would take us past Waterfall Village and back to Ranwadi. I took the opportunity to ask Zaccheus about the 'language of the leaves' which I had read about in old books. I knew that the fronds or namele leaf, that is placed at the sacred oven in the nakamal and which

also appears on the country's coat of arms, indicates a sacred item or place which is tabu and therefore could not be touched except by a chief. He agreed that there is such a 'language' because the people of Pentecost used plants or leaves. Everyone knew the meaning attributed to the use of certain leaves. So, for the remainder of the walk back to the mission he pointed out the various leaves, which I photographed, giving them their local names and explaining how they were used in the 'language of the leaves'.

This is what Zaccheus told me:

In the old days the *mamlege* tree was used to make a knife to cut *laplap* into pieces and to distribute it to many people. If a person holds the *mamlege* leaf in a dance it means that the holder is somebody who is peaceful, kind-hearted, loving and gentle because to cut the *laplap* means that you hide nothing and are generous and kind. If you say "that person has a *mamlege* attitude" it means that the person is generous and good.

If in a pig-killing or dance *bongong* (or white kava) is used as a decoration it means that I try to tell you that I am the only person of my tribe left, that I am the last of my family, all the male members have died.

Butsu rava (in Bislama, *burou*.) is used for fence posts. It speaks in many ways but an important way to express that someone has wronged you – you won't forget. Or someone has done something very good for you and you will remember.

Butsu matpas is a plant that is easy to cut or break. If in a dance I put it on my body people will know I am a man who is short tempered, give up easily, impatient. In a pig-killing it means I have a fully grown-up pig and I am here for business. I am giving it today – it's not somewhere else. The chief will have to get – it's not in the 'fence'. It's with me now.

Butsu sebwek is a tree that is hard to find, rare. We do not know the meaning and not even the chiefs are sure.

Kae kabwi is rare, right in the middle of the bush, right up in the mountain. If someone lived in the village and was crooked or a hypocrite, he would appear kind but we would

know he was not. A chief will communicate this to him on his doorstep or in his boundary that he is really deceitful and hateful.

Butsu sangul (red hibiscus) is a very important plant. If someone puts a red hibiscus flower on the head or body it means “I am very angry and I want to kill somebody”. If a person puts it on the doorstep of another person it means “I want to kill you”.

Butsu galatni (*nalangalat* or stinging nettle) is used with *butsu sangal*. If a person is very angry with someone he will plant it at the door of that person’s house or on the road to show his anger. It can also mean that the person knows he has been treated badly by a particular person and will treat him badly too. People used these leaves to talk to each other in dances and in other ways. People won’t say these things in words but the leaf will tell the message.

Namele is a type of palm frond. When a chief puts a *namele* leaf on a tree to make it *tabu* no one can touch the fruit of that tree. If he does, even if the *namele* leaf has blown away and the person does not know it was placed there, the person who touches that fruit will be punished by the spirits. The *namele* has yellow tips. It is a type of palm with a thick trunk. Suppose someone wants to use the *namele* leaf, he cannot pull it off the tree and he cannot put it somewhere to make that place *tabu* unless he goes through a special ceremony. Then, an elder who has that power will give him the right to use that leaf at the ceremony. But he will have to give a tusked pig (to the elder). At the ceremony he will learn a special gong beat. He cannot give that power to someone else for a long time after he receives it. (I realized later that this information referred to the graded society, *lel leuten*.)

This was a fascinating discussion and we stopped from time to time to study those leaves growing nearby. We continued our way back to the school as the shadows lengthened and nightfall was imminent. It has been a wonderful day, challenging in every way but I had enjoyed such unique experiences. I now realize just how much I was indebted to Zaccheus for his knowledge, advice and care of my welfare. Sometimes, when we are busy we don’t really appreciate the help of others, but on at a later time when there is time to reflect, we understand. So it has been for me. I will always be grateful to Zaccheus. He is a wise man.

It was growing dark as I reached my house. Before entering I stood under the huge tree and tried to discern the little white church or the puffs of smoke. But darkness fell across the mountain concealing any evidence of the village. The trees on the upper ridge of the mountain briefly lit up with fiery intensity, and then they too darkened. My village was gone, it may have never have existed so dark was my mountain. Its extraordinary secrets were protected once again.



Chapter 7

Precious Pigs and the Men's Graded Society

Island Night was looming closer. Only three more days of preparations! There was a great deal of excitement and much whispering amongst the girls as they huddled in small groups outside the classrooms, next to the little store or behind the dormitories. The boys were silent. They were also absent from view. The volleyball courts were silent. The boys had left the immediate school campus for the sports field down near the sea. Word had spread to the villages that there was to be an "Island Night" at the school. More visitors appeared at the school than usual and several women arrived in the afternoons to watch the girls rehearsing their dances.

So far I had heard nothing more about Chief Resis' tapes describing the men's graded society that he had brought to my house a few days after my visit to the nakamal and which had been given to Silas for translation. That was almost three weeks ago! I had not mentioned this to Silas as we had been so busy with schoolwork, Island Night and the visit to Lolwari Village. I thought I would wait until early the following week after Island Night, but even then it would be difficult for him to find time to interpret the tapes because he would be organizing the transport for the students' return to their islands for the winter break. I would just have to be patient – and hope!

There were only three school days before our big night, but there was much to be done before the end of term in less than a fortnight. Early on Wednesday, the morning after my visit to Lolwari Village, I was back in class. My students were curious about my previous day's experiences and at morning tea there were questions from the staff. The purpose of the little building that was tantalizingly revealed and concealed by the sunshine and shadows had been explained. My class was on the lower slope, a short walk from the stile leading to the sports ground. It was the first room in the two blocks on that level and the room nearest to the front of the mission and the sea. I needed to descend a steep, short flight of steps to reach its entrance. The room was illuminated by shafts of sunlight that slanted through glass louvers, spilling across the desks and onto the floor. Otherwise it was dark and cool. Coming from the brilliant sunshine of Australia and also used to

artificial lighting I found the dim light made it difficult for me to see clearly and I was inclined to suffer from eyestrain on cloudy days.

It had taken a little while for me to adapt to different means of communication in my class, to little things that I had not anticipated. The first problem I encountered was when I called the attendance roll. As I read out the name of each student there was no reply. I had expected that at least those present would respond. But not a murmur! I asked a couple of students at the front of the class to provide their names just in case I had the wrong class roll. But the roll I had was correct. So I started to call the roll again. Still not a sound! When I came to the names of the students that I had just identified I looked up to see what would happen. And then I learned that in my class the students would respond with body language only. A shoulder would shrug. A finger would move. A head would bend down. But most usually the eyebrows and eyes would be raised and dropped. In fact the raising of eyebrows was a very common and convenient means of communication used in a variety of contexts and it was not long before I became adept in eyebrow-raising. My expertise in applying this technique became almost second nature and when I returned to my school in Australia I continued to raise my eyebrows frequently in situations that did not usually require raised eyebrows. Other people responded by either raising their eyebrows in question or friendly imitation. The result was a lot of raised eyebrows for reasons not fully understood!

Learning to ask the right question was another lesson for me. On my first few attempts to ascertain whether a student was present or absent from class the conversation went something like this:

Me: “David? David? Isn’t David at school today?”

Class (softly emphasizing the ‘s’ sound), “Yes”.

Me: “He is at school?”

Class: “No.”

Me: “He is not at school?”

Class: “Yes.”

Me: “So, he is not at school. Where is he?”

Class: “Ssssss.” I think it meant “sick” but since the students had such soft voices and didn’t articulate final sounds in words I had to guess. But at least I was fairly sure that David was absent for some reason that was understood by the class.

This lack of verbal response, I later realized, was because the students did not wish to draw attention to their selves. This was particularly noticeable amongst the boys of Years 8 and 9 who sat on one side of the room and turned their backs to the girls on the other side of the room whenever it seemed that I would address them. Similarly, in the food hall the boys sat squashed together at the entrance end of the long stools on their side of the hall, backs to the girls seated on the same bench and with one leg at the ready for a quick escape.

My four classes were quite different in their collective personalities. Year 7 students were very young in outlook and boys and girls worked well together. They were happy, outgoing and ready to participate in any activity. I taught them a song about an old woman who swallowed a fly. They thought the song was hilarious and since I enjoyed their hilarity we began and finished each lesson singing it. Year 8, like Year 8 anywhere that I have taught, was full of enthusiasm and energy that proved to be very productive when directed in a way that appealed to their imagination. They could be persuaded to work in groups and experiment with new ideas. They particularly enjoyed library assignments.

Year 9 was like my Year 9 classes at home, quieter, slower to motivate, and interested in other pursuits. The boys were keen on sports and the girls liked to draw hearts with quotes like ‘Jesus loves me’ on their arms. Like teenagers anywhere they enjoyed music and often sat in groups, singing. On Saturday afternoons they joined a lively bunch of younger music enthusiasts to congregate at the house of Francois, the French and Music teacher. The house had a wall adjoining my house and the entire building would throb to the music bursting forth at full volume from his ghetto blaster. The songs were hymns or spirituals. One particularly popular song was “Let’s get together and we’ll be all right”. In Bislama this sounded something like “Yumi togeta yumi bi oraet” and could be heard everywhere in Port Vila, especially when it was released about 1985 and the tourist couldn’t escape it whether in the bus, the stores, or the hotels. It seemed to be a national theme song.

Year 10 students were highly motivated to achieve and worked well towards their final exams. But in an education system that rewarded only the very few top achievers, several of the year 10 students who realized that they would not be selected for secondary college at Santo or Port Vila, were beginning to lose their enthusiasm. Silas was well aware that there would be some very capable students who would not have the opportunity to continue their education. He was anxious that some other training opportunities be provided for them to utilize their skills and intelligence and to reward them for their long years of effort. He was planning a vocational course to provide other career paths when I left the school and I learned that he has been successful in implementing these initiatives.

On Monday I had been asked to prepare an English exam for my classes to be given before Saturday because during the following week students would leave on different days over the week as transport to their islands became available. These variations to the daily routine were usually communicated a day or two before the change was to be effected. I found this very difficult to deal with since I was used to planning for the term in advance. It meant I couldn't plan more than a day or two ahead because anything could alter my arrangements. On one occasion, I heard by radio, which is the official means of communicating any messages to individuals, groups or the nation, that there would be a holiday in two days' time. Since many students needed an extra day on either side of the holiday to return to their villages and then to the school, with very little warning.

I learned I would lose three teaching days.

I was keen to prepare a reading test because I suspected that the students did not really understand the reading comprehension exercises in their textbooks. Although it was a very good textbook designed in Fiji some of the comprehension questions could be answered by finding a sentence in the passage using the same group of words used in the question. In an effort to encourage the students to use their comprehension of English I had set library exercises and urged them to paraphrase information. But I would usually be offered large chunks of text removed without alteration. Illustrations for stories and assignments were copied faithfully from books and when asked to write a story students usually repeated a story they had been told at school or in the village or otherwise described a process with which they were familiar such as planting yams. Although at first it seemed to me that copying or modeling was impeding their education this was not strictly the case. In the villages children learn by watching and listening, not by experimentation. Whether it is a

myth, a dance or learning to make a basket, there is a way to do it that is passed down from one generation to the next. If everyone were to go off and 'do their own thing' the traditions and activities for survival in these self-sufficient horticultural communities would be lost or at least be less efficient.

And yet it was important that I knew just how much they were learning. I decided to prepare a comprehension test for my Year 8 Class on a book they were studying about children who had escaped from the Germans in World War 2 and were in a train traveling across Poland in the dreary colder months. I think the book was *The Silver Sword*, used in schools in Australia also. In any case, the subject material of the book was problematic for students in such an isolated part of the world, but that could be managed. The particular chapter I decided to test concerned the young escapees getting food from a soup kitchen at a railroad siding. The only way I could think of discovering how the students imagined the soup kitchen described in the book was to include among the comprehension questions two or three questions requesting that they draw the events described in the book. This was most informative because several of the students drew a soup kitchen that consisted of large leaves on which were placed bananas, paw paws, pineapples and coconuts. I had expected similar responses and this gave me a point of departure for my future reading lessons. I also decided to try to stimulate their imagination by asking them to work in small groups to write stories. Below are some of the more successful narratives.

A Frightening Experience by Steward, Bese and Gibson Year 8

Once upon a time there lived two boys named Peter and Tom. They lived on the island of Tongoa. One day they decided to visit their grandmother's house in the forest. It was quite a long way to their grandmother's house so early in the morning they started to set out. While they were halfway to the forest the sun was about to set and it was getting dark and the cool breeze was blowing. Suddenly they heard a loud noise crushing towards them, then they stopped and Peter looked back but he saw nothing. But the noise was getting louder and nearer. Then they saw a huge pig. Without saying a word Peter ran into the nearest tree and climbed up, Tom followed but he was so frightened that he tripped over a branch and fell to the ground. The pig ran over him and nosed him all over but there was no sign of life. So the pig turned and ran towards the bush. Peter climbed down and went to Tom. "What's wrong Tom? I thought you were dead." Tom

replied, "There is nothing wrong, Peter". So the two boys laughed at each other and went safely to their grandmother's house.

A Happy Occasion by Lorita, Gwenneth and Linges Year 8

In 1987 when we were in Class Five at Bwatnapni Primary School our teacher decided that his class should have a picnic. So we discussed it and we all agreed to his suggestion. The day after that he told some of us to climb for mangoes, green coconuts, get some sugar cane, water melon, pineapple and corn while some of us went to choose the place and clean it for the picnic. We all carried food and started to go to that place. When we reached there some of the girls cooked the rice and roasted the corn while the boys dug the hole for the posts to hang a net for us to play. When the rice was cooked the students who were responsible for sharing food served the food on the leaves. When they finished we all gathered together to eat. We ate and ate many different kinds of food. So when we finished we played some more and swam and we started walking back to school. It was a very enjoyable day. I could say that because I enjoyed it.

A Frightening Experience by Glennys, Carol and Enid Year 8

Once upon a time there was a group of Year 9 girls who were always very happy. Everyday they grouped together and told stories about ghosts and monsters. One night when they were ready to go to bed, some of the girls were sitting on the floor continuing their stories which they were telling to each other during the day. The story was about 'creepers'. Suddenly a thief stoned one of them with a ripe banana, but she did not call out because it might disturb their story. While they were happily telling the story, the thief again stoned them with a ripe banana. A girl saw the ripe banana coming through the window and she started screaming. But then a girl stopped her from screaming so she stopped. A girl found out that one of the windows was not yet closed so she sent a girl to close it. When she was about to close it, the thief stoned her with a ripe banana and it splashed on her face. She started screaming and all the other girls started screaming with fear. Some of the girls jumped out of their beds and joined with the girls who were screaming, and everyone screamed loud at the top of their voices. One of the girls who didn't now what was happening shouted at them and all of them were shut up! After that the girls took their bedding from their beds and put it on the floor. That night they slept

with great fright until morning. A few weeks later they found out that it was one of them. She stoned them with the banana because she wanted to find out how much faith they had because they always wanted to tell stories about monsters and ghost!

At the end of each lesson one of the students would collect all the exercise books and carry them to my house leaving them on a chair on the coral verandah for me to collect for corrections. I would return to my house during my free periods, make a cup of tea and settle down at my table to correct the students' work. The light floral cotton curtains would lift and fall in the soft breeze offering glimpses of hibiscus, the chicken coop and the green towering mountain as I enjoyed an hour's peaceful work. Most of the students were punctual in presenting their work for correction except one or two of the older boys who needed some firm reminders, and a little boy in Year 7 named Tony.

Tony found it very difficult to complete his work in class. He would spend long stretches staring vaguely out the classroom windows or doodling with his pen. If I encouraged him to put his mind to his work he would almost fall apart with embarrassment, wriggling and giggling, dropping and raising his eyes, or hiding his face in a book or on the desk. By the end of the lesson he would have completed very little, and would grin and squirm when I insisted he remain during the lunch break to complete his work. Each lunch break he had detention and during each of these detentions he managed to complete a full lesson's work in less than fifteen minutes. He was a bright boy and I can only assume that he found me such a bizarre person that he was immobilized with astonishment each time I appeared in the classroom.

On another occasion a girl had been impolite to another teacher. Since there had been a short history of this behavior, and following a long deliberation by the school board, it was decided that she should receive a fine. The fine was a basket that she was required to weave and present to the offended teacher. The girl was suspended from school for the period required for the manufacture of the basket. It was three weeks before she returned to school. Traditionally girls and women are required to weave a basket or offer a small pig as an apology or a fine. A boy or man is required to present a pig to anyone he has injured or offended. Within the villages the chief considers complaints and makes the decision concerning fine. He will decide on the size of the pig to be offered as compensation taking into consideration the age of the boy or man and the seriousness of the misdemeanor. The

loss of a pig is a very serious penalty for pigs are the most valued of all possessions in the traditional society of Vanuatu. It is through the exchange of pigs that all negotiations and contracts are sealed. Although the national currency, the vatu, is recognized as value, pigs remain the measure of value, the means by which “things are done”.

The most valuable of all pigs are those whose tusks have been deformed into a double circle. This can only be achieved by nurturing the animal for about seven years during which time the lower tusks are encouraged to curve upwards, pierce the upper lip, curve through the lower lip and again through the upper lip. This deformation requires hand-feeding of the animal during the years after the first tusk curvature, a task performed by women, because the pig can no longer forage for itself and in any case the curved tusk would be damaged or break in the attempt. The value of the pig is directly associated with the degree of curvature of the tusk which is a specific criterion for a number of socio-political advancements, particularly in the graded society but also for exchanges for marriages or as reciprocation for certain favors.

A young man relies on relatives to present him with his first pig or pigs. To be forced to offer a pig as compensation not only deprives him of a unit of value and his means of entering into exchanges of goods and services, but also draws attention to his poor behavior. Should he wish to work through the graded society to reach the status of chief, such a penalty would not go unnoticed and would bring his character into question.

The graded society is the major socio-political organization in the northern islands of Vanuatu. Although there are variations such as the number of grades, requirements for entry to the various grades such as the types and numbers of pigs and mats, and other conventions including symbols such as songs and body decoration, the graded society is the underlying means of achieving status, prestige and power wherever it is practiced. The graded societies were active long before Europeans arrived in Vanuatu, and despite the success of missionaries in eliminating the practice in some areas, the graded society continues to flourish as a legitimate structure for ambitious men. It has managed to survive alongside, and sometimes in conjunction with, Christian social structures that provide education and advancement for young men. In some areas, such as North Pentecost, some men, such as the late Prime Minister Father Walter Line, have managed to ascend both structures successfully.

It was shortly after school on Wednesday when I was in deep conversation with two year 10 girls that Silas approached almost unnoticed. I was making a brief video recording of their demonstration of killing a chicken. The girls were breathless having just pursued and caught the chicken that was now held tightly under the arm of one of the girls, its glossy brown feathers twitching against the deep vivid blue cloth of her school uniform. The chicken was to be baked in the school oven the following day as part of a home economics exam and they were now demonstrating how chickens are dispatched island-style. The girls set off to pluck the chicken and Silas explained the reason for his visit. We had been invited to a wedding in a village north of Ranwadi, the wedding mentioned some weeks ago, that would take place on Friday, and we would leave school late in the morning but before midday, after the first two classes. We would be away for the remainder of the day so the English exam I was preparing would need to take place on Thursday. Also, it would be helpful if I could assess the Year 10 rehearsal for the examination in spoken English in order to give the students some idea of what it would be like speaking in front of a stranger. The examiner would be arriving on Monday's plane from Malapoa College in Vila. He would remain at the school until Wednesday, lodging at the house of the principal and his family, and would leave on the afternoon flight.

The second reason for Silas' visit was that he finally found an hour to spare to translate the tapes that Resis had made concerning the men's graded society. He had spent some of the previous weekend listening to the tapes and was keen for the content to be recorded. This was the first time that he had learned the details of the graded society and, since only Resis held this kastom knowledge, it was important that it be recorded so that it would not be lost in the future. Moreover, if the recording was written in English it would be available to a wider audience than the audio-tape in the Apma language. I carried my video camera into the living room of my house and handed Silas the tape recorder which fortunately had new batteries. He settled into one of the large wooden slatted armchairs on the eastern side of the room and placed the tape recorder on the arm of the chair and slowly and methodically, as was his manner, inserted the tape. Meanwhile, I hurriedly grabbed a pen and notepad and perched on the edge of one of the tall chairs at the table on the opposite side of the room. My heart was in my mouth. I had no idea of what was on the tape, or what might be revealed. I knew about the graded societies of Malekula from earlier library research and had read descriptions of grade-taking in Ambae and Vao, and

earlier writings by Codrington of similar societies in the Banks Islands. Although there were similarities, the conventions would vary from on island to another. However, villages and even islands could buy and sell particular insignia such as drumbeats, songs or body decoration for their graded societies' ceremonies.

Chief Resis had produced a lucid and thorough account of the graded societies in Central Pentecost. As Silas began to translate we were led into a unique cultural experience, a vivid and reliable account of *kastom*. While it might seem appropriate to document this information as it was translated, further reflection has indicated that for fluency and ease of comprehension it would be better for me to summarize the notes that I made that afternoon.

This is my interpretation of Silas' translation of the description of the men's graded society of Central Pentecost as described by Chief Resis in the Sao language:

The Ten Grades of the Men's Graded Society of Central Pentecost

The graded society is the means by which a boy may acquire the status of chief in his village. There are ten grades in the graded society of Central Pentecost and these are arranged in hierarchical order. It takes almost a lifetime for a male to achieve the highest grades. The attainment of each higher grade requires the acquisition of numerous pigs of certain tusk curvature, as well as mats, money and yams. A detailed record must be kept of each donation as the candidate is required to reciprocate with pigs and other items of value at a later date.

Nowadays if a man lives in the city and does not have time to raise pigs of a certain tusk curvature these may be bought. They are very expensive but it is one way to become a chief. The importance of the graded society is illustrated by the case where a high chief sent a message to his son to return from the town where he was employed so that he might dance for his new grade.

There is a song and dance for every type of tusked pig. There is a special dance that the candidate must perform when he presents the tusked pig to the chief who will confer the

grade, and there is a special dance performed by the chief when he confers it. During the preparation and the grade-taking the chief will dance the appropriate dances and the candidate will follow him. Some of the steps have special meanings but only the high chief knows all of these meanings.

When parents have their first male child they may decide immediately to prepare for him to be a chief one day. For the first four days of his life he cannot leave the house, he stays with his parents and paternal aunts. On the fourth day his father's sisters, that is, his paternal aunts, carry the child out of the house for the first time. Even when they go outside they cannot leave immediately. One of the aunts will take white ashes from a fireplace and go along the route that the child will take dropping ashes all along the road to wherever it is that the child will be taken. Another aunt with the baby must put her feet right on the dropped ashes. They can only walk as far as the ashes lead them. When they return the baby, now four days old, kills his first pig. The aunts take a special long-stemmed leaf from the *darvwe* tree, hold it in the baby's hand and make the action of hitting the pig on the head. The pig is killed by the baby's father and then eaten by the aunts. When the aunts have eaten the pig, the baby's father presents them with red mats

If the child turns to sleep on its stomach the parents must give red mats to the father's sisters and again when his hair is cut for the first time or when his first teeth appear. These paternal aunts receive more red mats when the baby is weaned and when he leaves the house for the first time to stay with another person. These presentations continue until such time as the parents think the boy is ready to take his first step in grade taking.

Step 1 *bahribe* the 'stepping on the pig'. This is the initiation, the first public step that a boy takes to enter the graded society.

The chief observes his sons and the boys of the village, taking note of any boy who has the qualities desirable in a chief. These qualities are kindness, goodness, not given to anger, cruelty or revenge, for a man who has not goodness will not be able to take care of his people or punish wisely. If a boy wishes to become a chief he will notify his father. If his

father is a chief the process will be easy but otherwise he will need to work hard to acquire the pigs, mats, money, yams and knowledge required.

When he thinks the boy is ready, the chief will take him to the back of the *nakamal* and will stand him in front of the sacred fireplace or oven. The sacred fireplace is usually made of coral stone on this coastline. In front of the oven and at right angles to it are two *namele* leaves warning that the oven must not be approached or touched without the chief's permission. Next to the sacred oven is a basket in which lies the *bubu* or conch shell which may be blown only by a chief to summon the villagers on very serious occasions such as the death of a chief. The boy stands next to the chief, his back to the oven, and in front of him is placed a *namele* leaf to the left of which is also placed a boar's jawbone with tusks intact.

The boy, who has brought the chief a precious red mat, also wears a red mat. He puts his right foot on the *namele* leaf and then on the boar's jaw four times. The chief takes a special type of dried coconut prepared by chiefs and known as *wodo*. He splits the coconut, eats part of the meat, and then gives it to the boy who must eat while sitting on a special *tamtam* a large slit gong made from a tree trunk). In this ceremony which allows entry into the graded society, it is not necessary for the boy to eat from the sacred oven but the eating of the coconut implies the right to eat from the sacred oven. At this ceremony the boy's father's sisters and brothers may bring some people to dance in celebration but this must be paid for in mats.

The ceremony of 'stepping on the pig' means that the child is no longer 'walking on the ground' but he is standing on the pigs'. He can now aspire to the higher ranks of chief. The following year, or at a time that his father thinks is appropriate, a pig killing ceremony is organized to attain the next grade. The boy must give a small pig and a red mat to the chief who gave him the coconut. This is known as *malsi* or 'giving something in return'. To 'make this stronger' the boy's father will give something to the paternal aunties.

Step 2 *bilanban* The boy's father may now organize another ceremony to buy the second step in the graded society, *bilanban*. This ceremony gives the boy the right to wear *karwurowuro*, a special belt, and also *bilanban*, a special red colored mat, or belt. This, as all other grade taking ceremonies, requires the presentation and killing of a pig of a certain

degree of tusk development. In this ceremony the first *tamtam* beat is bought and this beat is known as *birilak*.

Step 3 *warisangul* means red hibiscus. This ceremony gives the boy the right to wear a red hibiscus on his head or body when he dances. Now he is beginning to 'look red', that is, to be recognized. This is a very important ceremony because of the significance of the color. Red is regarded as a very important color in Pentecost and even in the church red hibiscus was used to decorate the walls. This ceremony also gives the boy the right to use particular plants as the foliage of certain plants that have symbolic meanings which may be used by chiefs. *Nangaria*, a croton with long yellow, green and red leaves, may be worn when dancing. The *tamtam* beat for this grade is known as *kabmolan*.

Although these three grades appear simple, they require great expense by the boy's father in the form of pigs and mats, all of which take time to acquire. Consequently, usually two years are needed to prepare for each of the grades.

Step 4 *gori* is the name of the special *tamtam* beat (or gong rhythm) associated with this grade. The boy now has the right to 'dance like a chief' to this particular rhythm. At this ceremony *gori* is beaten and the boy wears *warisangul* (red hibiscus), *nangaria* (croton leaves), and *karwurowuro* and *bilaban* (belts) achieved in the earlier grades. Even if people have not attended the previous grade ceremonies where the boy had acquired this insignia, when they observed him wearing the red hibiscus and heard the beating of *gori* they would know that he had achieved the right to dance this particular rhythm.

Step 5 *malmahang temit* means white mat. *Malmahang* is a special belt or white mat. There are three custom belt worn around the waist. A title is acquired with each grade and in this grade it is known as *liwus*. The beat or rhythm is *kaenmangnanbo* or 'breathing on the pig'.

Step 6 *kavwik* means native apple. This grade occurs about two years after *malmahang temit*. Like the *namele* leaf, the *kavwik* is an important symbol. This grade buys the candidate the right to use this leaf from a sacred tree. In *kastom* this leaf is used in oath-taking. The candidate now has the right to witness an oath-taking and he also has the oath-taking power that gives him the right to judge others. Now others must pay fines to

him if they break *kastom* rules. Consequently, this grade is very important. The candidate receives the title *vi*. All the previous *tamtam* beats are used in this grade.

The four *tamtam* beats of *birilak*, *kaenmolan*, *gori* and *kaenmagnanbo* are the most important beats although there are others. But in the case of these four beats a pig must be paid in return for the beat and the right to dance to it. These are the four important beats that will be used in future grades. (A tape of these *tamtam* beats was made by Chief Resis. I received a copy and the original remains at the Ranwadi).

Step 7 *malmahang tememe* means a red belt. This grade is received one and one half years after *kavwik* and the title *vi* is used a second time.

Step 8 *karwurowuro* is a belt and the title *vi* is bestowed again. After this third ceremony at *vi* level the boy has usually grown to an adult and will not need his father to guide him. This third *vi* gives him self-confidence and control of his grade-taking aspirations. He now has the power to do what he thinks is appropriate for future steps. He is now recognized as a chief.

Step 9 *Natnan karwurowuro* is a special type of hat. The candidate now receives the title *tamaraka* or high chief and he has the right to organize ceremonies. After this step there are no insignia to be bought.

Step 10 *Mariak* means 'the end – finish'. Now the candidate has achieved the culmination of the graded society.

In all of these grade-taking ceremonies the killing of pigs of a certain tusk curvature, dances, *tamtam* beats, and presentation of pigs are required. Anyone may attend these ceremonies and dance to give pigs to the candidate. If any person has the right to dance any of the four important *tamtam* beats the *tamtam* beaters will beat those rhythms when the pig is presented by that person. For those who do not have the right to dance those *tamtam* beats there is another beat to which they can dance.

The pigs required for the grade-taking may come from anyone – chiefs, ordinary men or women. But a woman will give her pig to her husband to present and he will dance for her.

These pigs must be repaid eventually and all chiefs must be paid for their contribution to the grade-taking. If the chief does not possess one of the insignia it must be bought from another chief. Only chiefs in the *nakamal* and pastors in the church have the right to address people.

The translation of Chief Resis' tape had taken well over an hour. The paler light of winter had settled over the mission and a soft delicate rain was beginning to fall, blurring the shapes of palm trees, bushes, and people passing by with their bright umbrellas slanted against small flurries of raindrops. A hazy figure was barely discernible near the generator shed. It was Tom. He entered the shed a little earlier today probably because the heavy clouds would bring darkness earlier. Soon the generator would begin its deep hum, providing electricity to light the classrooms for evening study.

Silas turned the recorder off, explaining that Chief Resis had also included the *tamtam* beats or rhythms associated with each of the grades. He would make a separate tape of these *tamtam* beats before I left the mission to return to Australia. He then turned the recorder on again and we listened to the *tamtam* beats. Finally, when the playing of the tamtams was completed, he rose to leave. This very important *kastom* had been recorded for which we were all very pleased. The audio-tape would remain at the school and I would eventually provide a written record of the grade-taking in English.

This had been another extraordinary afternoon. When I set out for the mission it had never occurred to me that I might have the opportunity to document *kastom* that had never been recorded. I was grateful for the opportunity to participate in the culture of Central Pentecost and learn whatever the people thought was appropriate. This opportunity to document *kastom* represented trust in me and I was anxious to respect and honor this trust. My notes which I had scribbled as Silas translated were crude and as soon as he left for his evening duties I revised them, checking for errors in information and spelling. I was very keen to acquire the recording of the tamtam beats. Like all Australians I am impatient, and like all Australians I had to learn that the 'island way' takes time.



Chapter 8

The Wedding

The rain continued to fall in brief showers throughout Thursday. With each shower the vivid colors of the tropical gardens dissolved into a faded mixture of blurred hues, reminiscent of water spilled across a newly painted landscape, as the heavy clouds bore down, dissolving form and color until they slipped, or splashed into oily rainbows left shimmering in small, brown pools along the coral paths. Raindrops pattered loudly on the large banana leaves. The vague shapes of coconut palms bowed and rose in graceful arcs and tiny leaves bobbed and bounced as whirls of breeze flicked tiny shards of water across the grass. As suddenly as a shower started, it would stop, the sun bursting from the clouds, melting vestiges of mist, suffusing the mission with gold. The emeralds and bronzes of the gardens and the turquoises and sapphires of the sea flared against the pale opal sky. Everywhere, on leaf, grass, hibiscus and croton, tiny watery crystals of fiery brilliance threw out sparks of red and yellow and blinding white. Such luminescence was blinding.

There was little time to reflect on the myriad colors and shapes or the inconveniences of the sudden sprays of rain. Tests of reading comprehension were to be delivered to each of the four grades. This was not as simple as it might seem. The tests were prepared following the evening tutorials of the previous evening. Since the stencil machine was not always available I had decided to write the questions on the blackboard, a fairly lengthy and tedious process. However, this method was satisfactory and allowed for me to supervise the students closely as the only paper before them was that used for writing the responses.

We were all so busy that I did not have time to discuss Island Night or the wedding we would attend the following day. It was not until late in the afternoon when the rain had ceased leaving clarity of atmosphere and glossy sheen on the vegetation, that I had time to prepare my thoughts and equipment for our visit to the village several kilometers to the north the following morning. In the early days of my visit to Ranwadi the marriage rules had been explained to me when I had inquired about the number of students with similar second names. I was not sure whether they were related, or whether it was a village name, or why perhaps a brother and sister had different second names.

In Central Pentecost the individual identifies with his or her village and its clan. A male individual identifies himself as Buli or Tabi and a female as Matan or Mabon. These nomenclatures identify the marriage sub-divisions of the clan. However, descent is matrilineal as mothers pass their names on to their daughters but a man has a different name from his father. A man should marry into that same sub-division as his grandfather married into, and similarly a woman should marry into the same sub-division as had her grandmother. Therefore a father and son will marry into different sub-division as will a mother and daughter.

A Tabi will marry a Matan and a Buli will marry a Mabon. The daughter of Silas Buli was Lois Mabon. When a son was born to Silas Buli and Venneth the following year he carried the same name as his paternal grandfather, Zaccheus Tabi. Often the very young children were addressed by the second name, a practice that would reinforce their social identity. Individuals may marry outside their clans but within the clans or villages, the traditional marriage rules are preferred. In some instances marriages have been performed that have broken these rules.

So in past times the practice was for a man or woman to marry within the clan, into the same sub-division as grandparent, and therefore a male would marry father's sister's daughter and a female would marry mother's brother's son, or equivalent. These marriage rules spread out the gene pool as effectively as possible in small, isolated societies as was traditionally the case in Vanuatu before European contact. There is a gentle relationship between a boy and his mother's brother possibly because they are all from the same lineage. Respect is shown to the father's brother. He is another 'daddy' to a boy and has certain responsibilities as landowner to the boy as although land may be acquired from the mother land is passed down through patrilineal descent.

Of course, this was the norm but not necessarily the reality. As already mentioned there were, and continue to be, occasions when the law was relaxed, but before contact many disputes between villages were caused or exacerbated by raids on villages for young women as wives by other villages, where, perhaps for lack of females in his own village, or simply a case of preference, a young man sought a wife from another village.

After preparing my bag with some bright red patterned calico as a gift for the young couple, my video and SLR cameras, snacks, plastic bag for sitting on damp grass and the other odds and ends I took on each research excursion, I spent time drawing a diagram of the marriage rules for Central Pentecost. Apparently these marriage rules are very similar to that of North Pentecost but there are 'differences'. No one seemed to know exactly what the differences are.

Friday dawned warm and sunny with clear blue sky. A gentle refreshing breeze bent the coconut palm fronds and small white curls broke from the edges of long, low waves beyond the reef. Evidence of the previous day's wet weather could be observed in the slippery black earth and heavy damp turf. The morning lessons continued as usual but after morning break Silas, Imelda, about three girls and four boys from Year 9 and I gathered together outside the school store. When everyone was assembled our happy little group set off down the curved, steep school driveway. To our right were a group of students working in the food hall. Of course they waved to us as we passed by. To the left a boy was leaving the boys' dormitory with his books under his arm, making his way up the hill towards the classrooms. As we reached the point where the old lemon tree bent over the path and the sides of the road cutting began to obscure the mission, we met a parent making her way to the school, a bright multicolored umbrella shading her face from the sun. On reaching the road we turned right, heading towards the French villages and the wedding.

Traditionally, marriages formed important alliances between individuals or villages. The young girl often had little or no influence over the choice of her spouse. In some cases it might not make a great deal of difference to the prospective bride whether she was betrothed or abducted with her parent's approval. In either case the parting from her village could be abrupt and brutal by contemporary view. In the past if a boy wished to marry a particular girl, the boy's parents would approach the girl's parents. The parents of the girl would set the date for the wedding whether or not she knew the boy. She might not even be aware that her marriage arrangements were being made. It might be the case that the boy's parents had already acquired a house and organized the feast without her knowledge. She might not learn about her marriage until the wedding day when her aunts would take her by surprise and announce the event. They would then accompany her to the boy's house. Not surprisingly she might scream and cry but the aunts would persist

and ultimately she would arrive at the boy's house or village where her cries would subside.

Since the young couple to be married came from French Catholic villages, the marriage we were to attend had already been formalized by Father Finley in the church at Melsisi Mission earlier in the day. We were to attend the *kastom* wedding, an important event that would draw together the extended families of the boy and the girl, reinforcing their mutual responsibilities to the young couple through a process of institutionalized giving of pigs, red mats money and other gifts. All the wedding guests would be witness to this process and the effect would be that since everyone was under scrutiny the extended family members would pull their weight so to speak

Our little group - no doubt cheered by the fact that we had both a day off school and a social event to attend - made its way along the corrugated road with chatter and laughter until we arrived at the bride's village. After a church wedding earlier that morning the bridegroom had returned to his village and the girl to hers. The girl's village was only about 10 minutes walk from the school and as we approached we could hear her father wailing sorrowfully. We were told that she was preparing to leave his house for her husband's village and her father was sorry that she was leaving. To me he sounded grief-stricken. He was not a well man. He was unable to attend the wedding and he would have little opportunity of visiting her. We could hear a lot of other noise too, which, we soon discovered, was caused by dozens of people already at the village.

When we arrived at the village we were invited to sit with the men of the bride's village in the *nakamal*. They told us that earlier the bride had stood before the *nakamal* with red mat held over her head as speeches were made. A little while after our arrival the women from the bridegroom's village, his aunts, arrived to collect the bride and all her belongings, and accompany her back to the boy's village. These women wore trousers to indicate that they were from the bridegroom's village and when they noticed that I too wore trousers, as I do when there is a chance that I might be anywhere near malarial mosquitoes, they were highly amused as it appeared that I could be one of their group. They then set out to walk to the bridegroom's village of where he awaited his bride.

The women from the bridegroom's village set off first. They were followed by the bride and women from her own village. The bride and her aunts were dressed in fresh colorful island frocks, sometimes known as mission frocks. These frocks are usually floral cottons, loose from the shoulders to below the knees, with deep lace frills around the edges of the sleeves, neckline and hem. The bride also wore a piece of red calico tied around her waist. All of the women and children gathered at the village followed the bride and accompanying women of the bridegroom and bride's villages. The men and older lads squeezed into a truck that looked like the one that 'raced' past the Ranwadi every now and then on its way to Melsisi. The truck rumbled off towards the road, bodies sticking out from every square inch of it, while those on foot took a walking path through the village. We followed the women along this track that was very slippery from the rain and perilously steep at times. Our journey from Ranwadi to the bridegroom's village took one and a half hours.

On the way the path led us through the village gardens and past little woven houses. However, the path was lined by tall crotons, and other shrubs, hiding the houses from view. The path led us through a rainforest, or perhaps a garden that was lying fallow for a few years since the slash-and-burn type of agriculture is practiced in this area, and then opened out into a large coconut plantation adjacent to the bridegroom's village. The plantation was on the side of a very steep hill and the women from the bridegroom's village led us up the hill in a broad zigzag fashion.

While I was struggling with the effort of climbing through the plantation, constantly looking above me to make sure that I was not in the path of an errant coconut, I could hear a lot of shouting and laughter coming from the women further up the slope. It was explained to me that the women in trousers were playing the role of 'husbands' and having a mock altercation with the women in frocks who were the 'wives'. They were pretending to be going into the gardens to work. The 'wives' were complaining that the hill was too steep and they did not want to proceed. The 'husbands' were urging them on, telling them that they had to go to work. Although this was a game the message was serious, that the bride would have certain obligations now that she belonged to her husband's village.

We finally reached a wide road leading us about 100 meters to the bridegroom's village. By now the bride's attendants had been joined by dozens of guests so that a long procession

followed the women leading the group. The pace of the women in trousers had increased and we found ourselves falling back behind numerous other visitors. Arriving at the village our little group was ushered to the shade of a large banyan tree where the boys and young men of the village sat on the ground in the shade or amongst the broad branches. Our little group was introduced to members of the village and Father Finley who was also seated beneath the banyan tree. Near the banyan tree and around the village a number of earth ovens had been prepared in which *laplap* was cooking for the afternoon meal.

The men who had set out in the truck were now resting with the bridegroom and men from his village at the front of the *nakamal* which was to the right of us, and facing the dancing ground. A spokesman from the village had called each of the bride's kinsmen by name to go to the *nakamal* where they were presented with prepared kava to drink. Directly opposite our position under the banyan tree, on the other side of the dancing ground, next to the *nakamal*, was a church in the process of being built. To my left were the houses of the villagers surrounded by shrubs. The women, girls and smaller children clustered in the shade of these houses.

Fifteen stakes had been driven into the ground along the opposite side of the dance ground leading to the *nakamal* at one end and the houses and gardens at the other end. All the visitors became quiet for now the serious business would begin. First a large tusker was dragged into the open space of the dancing ground and tied to the stake nearest to the *nakamal*. This would be given to the bride's father. Next another large tusker, slightly smaller than the first, was tied to the next stake. It was to be given to the bride's brothers and uncles. Next a smaller tusker was tied for the bride's mother.

The next pig was not a tusker and it was tied to the fourth stake for the sisters of the bride's father. Five more tuskless pigs, including three very small pigs, were tied to the stakes for members of the bride's family. On the last stake was placed some money from the bride's father's eldest brother's daughter. The first born child would be given the name of this person.

Following the presentation of the pigs, eight precious red mats were brought forward to the dancing ground and laid out in full view of the two to three hundred guests. The village chief and an assistant had a list of donors and recipients written on a piece of paper. The

chief then took his ceremonial walking stick, and striding backwards and forwards in front of the pigs and the red mats, began his speech to the young couple and the guests. He emphasized the importance of the new husband and wife's families supporting each other in times of need. He cautioned the young couple about gossiping about their in-laws or fighting with them. Such bad behavior would draw fines of a pig.

After his speech the chief and his assistant consulted the list of donors and recipients and announced who should receive each pig. The recipients untied the appropriate pig and the women from the bride's village collected the red mats which would be kept by the bride's father in a very special basket which hangs in the kitchen to keep the mats dry and free from mould. At this point the earth ovens were opened releasing light clouds of steam here and there around the village. Since there were many people to feed a woman kept a tally of the guests on a cycad leaf, a type of small, yellowish, palm frond. The small leaves were removed from the frond and each guest was given one. After ten small leaves were removed the remainder of the frond was left intact. Thus, each frond was equal to ten guests and the total number of guests was ascertained. Moreover, each guest had a type of 'ticket' for the meal. This enabled the caterers to provide food for everyone.

Each visiting village group had its own earth oven where they had prepared the *laplap*. Silas had been invited because his father was related to the father of the bride. It was his villagers who gave the Ranwadi visitors some yam *laplap*. We were also given taro by the grandmother of one of the students accompanying us. This woman lived in the bridegroom's village. No pigs had been killed for consumption. The boy's village provided food for the girl's relatives. In the past the boy's village would have uncooked food although they would provide cooked food for the girl's relatives.

After the feast the bride and bridegroom sat down together on stools placed on the dancing ground. They lowered their heads, neither speaking nor looking at each other. The bride sobbed softly. A string band played cheerful music in front of them. Guests threw talcum powder into the hair of the band members and the young couple. The guests lined up to shake hands with the young couple and offer individual gifts. Some guests gave money; two nuns from Melsisi Mission gave a calendar with a religious picture decorating it; I offered the calico and while this gift giving continued we sat under the banyan tree and the young couple remained seated with their heads bowed low. This presentation of

gifts would be followed by music and traditional dancing which would continue well into the evening. However, those of us from Ranwadi had a long walk back to our mission along the road so we had to leave. For the next four days the bride's aunties would remain with her in her husband's village to advise her. On the fourth day her new husband would take her to his garden. He would take some taro, call the girl and her aunties to him and present the taro to his new wife. This would be the first time that he would talk to his new wife after their marriage. Following the presentation of the taro they would make *laplap* taro. It is a special *laplap* named *logo*. After sharing and eating the *logo* the aunties would leave the house and leave the girl with her husband, returning to their houses in their own villages. The young couple would now be officially husband and wife.

As we made our way down the gravel driveway from the village to the road leading southwards, Silas explained that relatives of the boy would give the couple plain white mats at the wedding. Then over the next year there would be a special time for the dyeing of the mats with distinctive red patterns. At the birth of the first child these red mats would be returned to the boy's family and the name of the father's, eldest brother's, eldest child, in this case his daughter, who had presented money at the wedding, would be given to the infant.

Several days earlier two of my students had been discussing marriages and I asked them about adoption. Adoption in the islands is not the formal practice that it sometimes is in the west. In fact, it is a means of uniting and supporting kin. They told me that adoption is common in Central Pentecost and may occur when a family has too many children of one sex, (or in reality, not enough children of the other sex). In subsistence economies parents need certain numbers of children of each sex to assist with the various types of work. They may ask a parent of a newborn child for that child. On the other hand, if a family has to move to another location for work and is unable to take all of their children they may approach a family and ask them to adopt a child.

Adoption occurs after a period in which the adoptive parents have demonstrated that they can care for the child. When the child is adopted the natural parents lose control but should the child be badly treated by his adoptive parents it may be returned to his natural parents. Normally, a child is not told that it has been adopted and retains the same rights and privileges as the natural children of the adoptive family. Should some one be

indiscreet and tell the child of its adoption then that person would be required to present the child with a tusked pig as compensation.

The road from the village swept around a bend and led back towards the coconut plantation. We took a path that cut across the seaward side of the plantation down to the main road leading from the airport to Melsisi. The path wove through gardens and areas that had been left fallow by burning in the past in order to regenerate the soil. At one point Silas showed us the *laba* tree from which the precious red dye is extracted. It is from the roots of the tree that the dye for the precious red mats is made. The effort of extracting the roots and preparing the dye would ensure its scarcity and consequently its value.

I always enjoyed our journeys home from a day out. These were the nicest times as a group of us, relaxed and happy, would amble along the road chatting, singing and laughing. We would share stories about our families or our experiences, we would appreciate the sunset or the evening mists or the gentle rainfall. The students would point out herbs, island cabbage and the awful stinging nettle, or offer me sprays of little nuts to chew and chocolate pods from which we would extract and suck the seeds to enjoy the chocolate flavor. Silas would tell us of the history of the island, the coming of the Christian faith, the legends behind the natural landscape, and his concerns for the future of his students who would eventually confront the conflicting forces of a western economy with the needs of their own local communities. We alternately joked and teased and dropped into serious reflection. We lingered in our efforts to make the days stretch longer, to maintain the joy that we felt. But evening always fell, blurring our perceptions and reminding us that we would soon be back at the mission preparing for another day.



Chapter 9

Island Night

Saturday mornings were the only mornings that the *tamtam* was silent. There was no church service on Saturdays and usually we all slept a little later. But this morning was different. Today everyone would be preparing for this evening's Island Night. Shortly after sunrise soft voices could be heard behind my house and when I looked through my bedroom curtains I could see groups of boys setting out through the long pink sun's rays to the coconut plantation, bush knives swinging in their hands, to collect coconuts for this evening's *laplap*. Small clusters of girls carried loosely woven baskets with green island cabbage and huge cream and brown taro towards the girls' dormitory. The sound of dry wood being chopped for the earth ovens drifted intermittently from the slopes near the playing field and here and there small coils of white smoke drifted from various earth ovens around the mission.

At this early hour Charles and Rueben were busy unwinding a long electric cord near the volleyball court and Tom was carrying a large number of tools in their direction.

The sun had not yet risen when these busy people had begun their tasks. In the early morning I could see electric light bulbs strung around the volley ball court which was to be the center of the evening's performance. Tom, Reuben and Charles must have been busy setting things in order while we were attending the wedding. Now, several younger boys were collecting twigs from the bitumen surface of the court while two or three girls swept the area clean of curled, gold and russet leaves with brooms similar to those illustrated in European fairy tales.. Every now and then one of the younger boys would toss a piece of dry coconut husk through the basketball goal ring or jump to determine whether he was yet nimble enough to touch the metal circle. The girls would pause from their work to watch and offer encouragement or laugh joyfully at their attempts.

As the morning grew brighter and warmer the activity increased and the younger students fluttered here and there chatting, one noisy bunch swarming around Francois' house where the heavy sound of gospel music saturated the air. Others were armed with buckets and mops or brooms, which they swung carelessly as they wandered towards the dining hall. There was a sense of business, of anticipation and enthusiasm, that pervaded all of the mission that day.

To me the whole spectacle was amazing. When I set out for Pentecost I had hoped to have the opportunity to observe students performing *kastom* songs, dances or music during my visit but I had never expected that such a celebration as this would eventuate. I had hoped to learn something of the *kastom* of Central Pentecost but in fact I had been offered the chance to participate in that *kastom*.

I reflected on the wonderful experiences that I had enjoyed and which had made the whole tapestry of cultural or *kastom* life in Central Pentecost meaningful. I had attended a wedding and observed the rights and responsibilities of the families involved. The tusked pigs and precious red mats exchanged in the ceremony had meaning for me because I had attended the dyeing of the precious red mats at Lolwari village and visited Chief Resis at the *nakamal* in Waterfall village. My visit to the *nakamal*, which now seemed to be in the distant past, revealed the importance of the graded society in terms of male ambition and prestige in Central Pentecost, and the reason that so many items were significant, such as red hibiscus, the croton, red as a color, the *tamtam* and the *bubu*. The reason pigs of different curvature were presented on certain occasions and why the pigs with single or double complete curvatures of the tusk were so valuable could be understood.

It was clear. All of the exchanges of tusked pigs and precious red mats that commence on the birth of a boy and continue to his advancement to the highest point of attainment in the graded society are the warp and weft of the cultural fabric of this society. Marriages link people and villages together in alliances cemented by the children of that marriage. The responsibilities of immediate family kin of both the bride and bridegroom maintain the strength of the alliance and thereby support the children of that marriage. The practice of adoption ensures that every family will continue into the future and at the same time the aged parents will have young people to support them.

These obligations and responsibilities are acknowledged through gifts of mats and pigs of predetermined value. These are the visible recognition of social rules. These are the signs that are reminders of values - the real things that determine the importance of those agreed conventions with which they are associated. Accordingly, the manufacture of these visible signs is an important part of the work for the villagers. Everything is important from the making of baskets and mats, to the dyeing of the precious red mats and the

raising of pigs with tusks that could take up to seven years to complete a double tusk curvature. The repetition of songs, dances, tamtam beats, and stories or myths along with the 'language of the leaves', sustains and maintains the traditions of *kastom*. Meeting the challenges of changing global conditions that ripple down to the remote islands threatening the old way of life is balanced with the reinforcement of *kastom*.

The circled and double circled tusks worn by chiefs in national ceremonies, most memorably on the first Independence Day in 1980, was explained. The 'language of the leaves' explained the revered meaning of the national insignia of a curved tusk with a *namele* leaf seen on the national flag. The curved tusk represents the role of chieftaincy in the social structure. The importance and veneration of the chieftaincy is revealed by the *namele* leaf, the leaf that places a *tabu* or 'sacredness' around chieftaincy. Chieftaincy represents the management of the land and care of its people, so that role is also *tabu*, or 'sacred'. The jigsaw was complete for me. Everything in *kastom* has a place and for me everything had fallen into place.

Today would be the final *kastom* experience for me on Ranwadi. When Silas announced that there would be an Island Night to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of Independence he had placed a notice on the window of the staffroom immediately above the enormous *tamtam* used to summon students to class. The notice invited stories, poetry, songs and other performances from students to showcase the *kastom* of their islands. As it eventuated most of the students wanted to perform action songs or what they loosely called dance. Even though I have referred to the performances and rehearsals as dance performances, in reality they were more akin to action songs or mime. Dancing is not encouraged in the Church of Christ faith but many of the students at Ranwadi were not of that particular faith although they adhered to the values taught in the school. So dance, or rather, action songs, was a normal part of *kastom* to many of the students attending the school.

After a quick breakfast of rice custard and tinned pears I arranged my photographic equipment on the dining room table. The batteries for the video camera had been left charging the previous evening during the four hours of generated electricity. There were several power points in my little house so recharging the batteries was never a problem unless I forgot to do this chore the day before I planned to use the camera. I changed the

film cartridge and ruled up a notebook to document the contents of each video cartridge or film for my Pentax SLR camera. I decided to shoot for prints rather than color transparencies so that I could make copies to be returned to Ranwadi. I checked and double-checked my equipment before venturing outside to observe the preparations.

The school was divided into four team houses for sports and other competitive activities. Each of these houses was now responsible for preparing food for the evening feast. Just before dawn the pits in the ground, which formed the earth ovens, were cleaned of debris and the large volcanic stones used to store heat were spread evenly across the base. The boys brought dry timber and built a pyre over the stones. About midday the timber would be lit with a torch of coconut fiber and would roar and crackle into life, sending a wreath of white smoke into the air. When the fire subsided, heavy green leaves would be placed over the stones to retain the heat for the food which would be parceled in leaves and placed into the oven. This would then be covered by more heavy leaves to steam the food. The food would take about four hours to cook. The ovens would be opened about 5pm.

Although there were shelters with earth ovens around the mission, the students rarely used them during my visit. However, the families who worked on the mission each had an earth oven which they used daily, and often the scraping of the coconuts used to flavor the food could be heard in the wee small hours. This odd sound at about 3 am alarmed me during the early part of my visit. On one occasion when a visiting teacher was staying with me, we were so frightened by the strange noise that we woke Francois, the French teacher, next door and begged him to help us discover the source of the strange noise. Francois obligingly accompanied us but was obviously puzzled since all was silent by the time he responded to our cries for help and the racket we made pounding on our adjoining wall. Of course, as soon as all three of us began stalking noisily around the building with flashlights blazing the noise ceased. No doubt the innocent cook was also wondering why there was so much activity in the early hours and had stopped work to listen to our fuss. As soon as we returned to our houses and settled down to sleep the noise recommenced. The visitor and I were reluctant to disturb Francois again and too terrified to go outside so we made a cup of tea and speculated on what it might be. It was not until the following Saturday when some girls brought their coconut scraper to my house to make coconut milk for me that we understood the cause of the sound.

By late morning, as the day grew warmer, the senior students had congregated in their house teams at the four earth ovens scattered around the mission. The boys had brought beef from a bullock that had been slain during the week and were chopping it into small pieces with their bush knives. The girls were cleaning the taro and cutting it into slices to be mixed with the beef and island cabbage. Other girls were scraping coconut flesh and squeezing it into a bowl to make coconut milk that would be poured over the other ingredients before folding the food into packages.

Fleeting glimpses were all that I had of Imelda during the morning as she hurried to and from the food hall with a group of older boys and girls. She was so busy and so focussed that I was loath to interrupt her. Everyone else was banned from the vicinity. We could only speculate on the reason for the improvised drum kit being carried in that direction by Francois and his students, or why girls, with baskets of pink and white hibiscus, green, yellow and red crotons and huge shiny leaves from banana trees, hurried behind them.

At midday the *tamtam* summoned the students to lunch and their afternoon rest. The activity that had marked the morning subsided. By 2 pm all was silent on the mission. There were no voices, no hammering, chopping or scraping. All that could be heard were the clucking of the hens from time to time as two or three had a brief altercation, the rustle of the coconut palms and, a long way off, the sound of the sea. The air was warm and the sun bright. Heavy dark shadows under the mango tree gradually slid across the volley ball court. It was an afternoon for dozing and waiting.

The silence was broken by the beating of the *tamtam* at about 3 pm calling us to a service in the chapel. By the time we had all congregated in the little church, the population of the mission had almost doubled with visitors from nearby villages who were interested in the day's activities. Silas reminded the students of their responsibilities and then revisited the afternoon's program that he had placed outside the staff room. Immediately after leaving the church the students would move to the long grassy area leading from the grocery store to the volley ball/basketball courts. This area was flanked by flower gardens and staff houses to the north with the students' vegetable gardens and buildings housing the schoolrooms to the south. It was an area about 100 meters in length. Spectators were to keep to the sides nearest the houses and school buildings. There were several shady spots

under trees and in front of the houses where younger children could shelter from the sun, although by late afternoon in July the weather is no longer hot on Pentecost.

This area was selected for the boys' performances programmed for the afternoon. After the boys' performance everyone would assemble in the food hall for dinner at 6pm. After dinner, at about 8pm the girls would perform their songs and dances on the volleyball courts where the colored light globes strung around the top of the enclosing wire fence would illuminate the area like a stage in an outdoor theatre. Island Night would conclude at 9.30 allowing time for the students to return to their dormitories before lights out at 10pm.

Everyone hurried to the area outside the houses and school buildings and found comfortable positions. The women and girls clustered near the houses, especially Judith's house, and along the northern side of the newly designated dancing ground. Women with babies attached to their backs or fronts with long pieces of flamboyant calico, holding brilliantly colored striped umbrellas and accompanied by several tiny wide-eyed youngsters, placed mats along the edges of the dancing ground nearest the flower gardens. The male teachers and men from the villages and older boys from the school gathered around the generator on the opposite side of the dancing ground at the further most point from the women. Most of the boys had gone to the playing field to dress for their performance while the girls tended to huddle in giggling groups behind the women and smaller children.

The busy hum and laughter of the spectators hushed as a rhythmic percussion and a soft chanting was heard in the distance. Everyone became quiet and listened. The sounds became stronger. The rhythmic rattle of *wadodo* nuts circling the arms and ankles of dancers accompanied by soft singing and a thumping of stakes on the ground increased in volume as the performers made their way up the hill and across the school grounds from the playing field. At first we could only hear their presence but not see them. Every now and then some of the students broke into little giggles of anticipation and then all would become silent again except for the steadily increasing rhythm.

And then they appeared! A tight group of three long lines of boys painted in dark shades of brown and black emerged at the far end of the dancing area nearest to the generators and

my house. Their bowed heads, covered by large tan coloured wigs fashioned from coconut fiber, concealed their faces. Over their shorts they wore grass skirts decorated with green and yellow crotons stuffed in the waistband. They held aloft long staves with beautifully carved models of birds, fish, boats and planes. Around their bodies and limbs the *wadodo* nuts rattled in time to the rhythm of the song and the beat of their feet. Senior boys led this tightly packed group and maintained the rhythm, the song and the movement for the group. As they moved, swayed and chanted their way along the full length of the dancing ground the crowd watched in silent appreciation. Not a whisper was heard. The group advanced towards the store, or sea, end of the ground in a series of circles, always with their heads down and their staves held aloft. When the group reached a point about half way along the dancing ground a figure appeared from the back of my house and quietly began to follow them. The figure was a woman wearing a blue headscarf, a pale colored skirt and blouse. She supported a thin branch across her shoulders from which hung a basket. In the basket were sticks and dried palm leaves apparently gathered for her earth oven. The silence was broken by a whoop of delighted laughter bursting from the crowd as they recognized the figure as one of the year 10 boys. He made his way down the dancing ground gathering imaginary firewood, eyes downcast, apparently oblivious to the audience.

Suddenly, without warning, a masked figure sprang from somewhere near the dancers and scampered up and down the length of the ground chasing girls and younger boys in the audience. His movements were so quick and unexpected that the audience broke into shrieks of terror which were received with great bursts of laughter from other sections of the audience, who were then similarly terrorized by the dancer. All mayhem broke out amongst the girls as they shrieked and ran from the masked dancer, but the performers continued to sing and dance as though nothing had happened. The masked figure was supposedly an expatriate male given that the mask was definitely not that of a Melanesian. It looked to me a bit like an American Indian with long black hair streaming down to its shoulders but I suspect it was supposed to be either a 'devil' or an immigrant planter. The character was reinforced by the large fat abdomen which seemed to be a symbol of indolence or beer drinking – not kava which is the local preferred brew

The figure ran in and out of the audience, blowing kisses at various male teachers and students, in particular Francois the youngest teacher at the school, who was very amused

with the antics. But its main target was the female figure still gathering firewood on the dancing ground. He harassed her repeatedly whenever her attention was diverted by grabbing her basket, or her clothes, or attempting to plant a kiss on her cheek. Then amid the screeches of laughter off he would dart away to alarm various groups in the audience who flew off in all directions like bunches of startled kangaroos. This manipulation of chaos and control was fascinating. Of course, the older students realized the humor of it all but several smaller children were not so sure and needed maternal reassurance. The masked dancer was similar to the villain in a pantomime and as to be expected was captured and restrained by a hero. The universal value of goodness triumphing over evil was upheld. The breathless audience relaxed.

Throughout this pandemonium I attempted to follow the movements of the masked performer as he tore through the crowd, vaulted over hibiscus bushes and hurled himself back onto the dancing ground. With the video camera running I stumbled in pursuit back and forth along the dancing ground, up and over the gardens, through waves of near-hysterical girls, only to make sudden ninety degree turns, camera swaying, to relocate him as he backtracked or changed direction. All the while I dreaded the video that would result from this exercise as my camera tilted, rose and fell, and bumped around like a coconut swinging in a hurricane. I had an ominous premonition that my filming efforts were more likely to result in nausea than enjoyment for any future audience.

The dancers continued without pause. It became evident that they were the chorus for the mime theatre. The next performance was a more traditional theme of war between groups of men with bows and arrows, who stalked each other around the dancers. I think these weapons are used mainly for catching birds but it was an interesting performance as the weapons were beautifully made and effective. In fact, one arrow flew so high it was lost to sight against the sun and some confusion broke out amongst some members of the audience in their attempt to avoid its return to earth.

In another mime a group of hunters preyed on a pig. This apparently was a wild pig because they again used bows and arrows. In ceremonies pigs are dispatched with a blow to the head. These two traditional themes were followed by another contemporary mime. In this performance the group of dancers represented a ship. The individual performers were obviously the captain and his assistant for they wore western clothing, caps, sun-

glasses and held a wheel or a book over their rather swollen stomachs. They demonstrated the problems encountered by the skipper and navigator when piloting a cargo boat. The boat and the actors rocked sideways vigorously while advancing in a wavering direction along the dancing ground. This was received with delight by the audience who rely on cargo boats for transport to and from their islands. Their laughter seemed to have a base in the memory or fears of alarming encounters, which left me wondering whether sea travel is an adventure because of the vagaries of the sea or those who steer across her.

The actors and dancers were very professional. They performed faultlessly and maintained a detachment from the audience except in the case where they had intended to terrorize the observers. It was a very polished and well-rehearsed performance and when the performers had completed their mimes they began circling a retreat in the same manner as on their arrival. They circled their way to the end of the dancing ground, across the volleyball courts, down the hill and, lost to sight, along the edge of a trickling stream to the playing field. The monotonous hum of their chanting and the rhythmic rattle of the *wadodo* nuts grew softer until they were lost in the whisper of the coconut palms and the hush of the sea.

At 6pm as the sun slipped over the horizon towards the western island of Malekula and long shadows stretched over the mission and up the mountain that was still lit in shining emerald at its highest point, the *tamtam* beckoned us to the foodhall. Numerous figures were silhouetted against the silver and gold of the sea as they made their way eastwards. By the time we arrived at the foodhall the mission was in darkness and so we were startled by the brilliance of the light and the decorations inside the foodhall. The tables, now placed in long lines down the hall instead of their usual position across the room, were laid with long green leaves, pink and white hibiscus and colorful jugs of cordial. Food from the earth oven including taro, beef, fish and coconut cream with vegetables and salads from the school gardens were placed on shiny silver-colored platters in the center of each table. To the front of the hall was a space where Francois, in his usual red tennis eyeshade, and his music students had set up their drum kit and guitar complete with a microphone. But I could only discern these details in brief glimpses for the hall was crowded with students, teachers and visitors all dressed in their most colorful attire.

Numerous guests had been invited to the dinner including local chiefs, members of the school board, pastors, businessmen and other important guests who were readily distinguishable by the welcoming frangipani leis that they wore throughout the evening. I was introduced to several of the visitors but such was the hum and movement of the crowded room and the music of the band it was difficult to sustain any conversation. Through every window and on every window-sill local villagers observed the proceedings with wide-eyed interest and delight. Silas and several guests gave speeches. I was farewelled with the gift of a Ranwadi T-shirt and a Pentecost basket. I reciprocated with a small presentation to Silas, which I felt most inadequate when compared with the support and interest he had provided for my research. Following these formal conventions Silas said grace and we enjoyed our meal to the accompaniment of Francois' band and songs.

Approximately an hour and a half later we left the bright light of the foodhall and made our way into the blackness of the slope that led up to the level land where the boys had performed in the afternoon. From there the lights strung around the basketball court could be seen twinkling against the blackness of the enormous mountain. Once again we positioned ourselves to observe the performance but this time there were fewer village women as they had taken the younger children home.

The girls were shy but performed the dances they had been practicing over recent weeks. They wore their colorful *lava-lavas* over their skirts and garlands of leaves around their heads and waists. The leaders held carved and painted birds made by several boys while the others held sprays of leaves and flowers. Despite the efforts of Silas, Charles and Tom, I could not get enough light to make clear video of the dancers and was forced to rely on using my Pentax and flash for still photos. But this did not deter the dancers who by now were excited and absorbed with their performance, and in fact, this sense of excitement and release from the usual routine of school life was evident amongst all the students. As the girls finished their formal performance they continued to dance around the basketball court, now in a circle rather than the lines demanded by the formal dance, and were gradually joined by numerous pairs of girls and then the younger boys, laughing, singing and running until they were exhausted.

At this point Pastor Japhet quietly brought the performance and the day's activities to an end with a request for silence and a short prayer of thanks and a reminder that everyone

was to arrive at the church punctually at 9.30 the following morning for Sunday service. The students were accompanied to their dormitories by their teachers, the doors were closed and the lights on the basketball court turned off.



Chapter 10

Leaving

Wednesday 18 July 1990

I last wrote to you on Sunday night after the Island Night performance. I was very weary after the trek to the wedding on the Friday and then the performance on Saturday. I didn't really feel like four hours of church service on Sunday or school on Monday. We had planned to show the video of the performances on Monday night. Only a third of the video is any good because two of the three 20 minute tapes were shot at night with poor light. The sound, while quite good, is interrupted by the noise from the generator near my house which supplies electricity to the mission. Anyway everyone was very excited by the video of the performance but then the video machine broke down.

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The video machine was repaired yesterday so we showed the video last night. The kids went wild when they saw themselves. I think that might have been the first time they had seen themselves in a video film.

School will break up early for the 10th Anniversary of Independence celebrations so theoretically school finishes on Friday for two weeks. However, since the passenger boats to certain islands only come once a week a quarter of the students left yesterday for the islands of Santo and Malo. I went down to the beach with the students on the back of Stephen's truck. A small barge took the girls and boys out to the St Joseph, a boat owned by Melsisi, and they sailed away. Today Judith, whose baby is due very soon, and some students, took the plane to Port Vila. All the kids from Central and South Pentecost will walk home today – 3 to 4 hours of walking. North Pentecost and Ambae students will return home by plane or boat on Monday and Tuesday. I leave on Wednesday of next week all going well. That is if it doesn't rain to the point that the airport is flooded or there are no problems with ticketing.

Today there is no water in the taps. It's always difficult to predict what might happen because no one seems to think in future tense. I am filling containers from a nearby tank

but I keep finding the tap left on and a pool of water below. There is no water in the girls' showers either. I don't understand the problem as there has been plenty of rain recently. Extracting information requires a circuitous series of questions, so it seems. I still can't work out when the mail is supposed to arrive. Since it only ever arrives on Fridays and never on Wednesdays I asked did mail only come on Fridays and was told 'yes". But then someone volunteered that it comes whenever there is a plane. The plane arrives on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Still, I only ever see mail on Fridays.

It also takes a very long time to make a phone call on the school's radio phone. It can take two and a half hours or even a couple of days because the only times calls can be made are from 7.30 am to 9.30 am, 1.30pm to 2pm, and 2.30pm to 4pm. It takes at least one hour to make a connection. I only discovered these times because I kept ringing the agent at Lonorore for three days to confirm my flight from Lonorore to Port Vila. It is possible to ring Australia at about 8pm but it still takes half an hour to make the connection, and I also have to disturb Silas during his rest time as he is responsible for the phone. His house is about 70 meters from the office where the phone is connected.

The children sang a farewell song to me at church on Sunday. Like the students I too am looking forward to a holiday as I came to Ranwadi to teach at the end of my own school term in Australia and I will return to my teaching position in Australia one week after leaving Ranwadi.

This has been a wonderful experience. It's amazing how life turns out. It goes to show one should always grab the opportunity for experience. For me, this time at Ranwadi has been one of the most wonderful things that have ever happened to me.

I hope we can get some accommodation in Port Vila. The Director of Education, Mr Phil Matthews has been very kind. He checked my accommodation at the Solaise but found that I wasn't booked in although I have paid and have the accommodation vouchers. I have not yet met Mr Matthews who seems to be a most caring person for he is still trying to sort out this problem. Could someone just confirm my arrangements with my travel agent to ensure that my accommodation will be available?

I will write from Port Vila next week. All the best, Carlene.

The days following the performance dragged along slowly. The students were either restless or apathetic from the knowledge that the school term was almost over. On Monday the examiner from Malapoa College in Port Vila arrived to assess Year 10's spoken English. His visit was interesting as it gave the teachers an opportunity to discuss education issues. He departed on the Wednesday flight with Judith, and on the Friday Imelda flew Vila to attend a course for school librarians. By Friday afternoon most of the students had also left and only a few who were awaiting family members or were recovering from a bout of malaria remained. On the weekend Charles went to his home and Francois, who was awaiting transport to Santo the following week, visited relatives in South Pentecost.

Classes slowed to a halt by Thursday as the numbers of students in attendance were minimal. Little happened during that week. We spent our time chatting in small groups with the families working on the mission and occasionally Silas would invite me to lunch at Baravat, or a church service in one of the villages further south. But still the days seemed long. A cargo ship silently passing from south to north could hold our attention for forty minutes, or we noted the daily flight of a plane from Santo to Port Vila. One Friday, the following year, on a subsequent visit when I was again experiencing the doldrums of end of term, the plane did not pass by. We made slight mention of it but on the following Monday a message was phoned from Santo to Port Vila via Ranwadi that the plane had crashed on a hillside in the north of the island of Santo. All seven passengers, including the crew, had perished. This was indeed a very sad period in Vanuatu.

My final day on Ranwadi dawned. It was Wednesday 25 July. It was sunny with a slight breeze. I felt confident that the plane would have no trouble landing at Lonorore. I packed my bags early for I feared that I would miss my plane and remain alone on the mission, although in reality there was little likelihood of that. The last few days had been lonely as I was the only inhabitant at my end of the mission when the families departed during the weekend. My nearest neighbor was Reuben perhaps 100 meters away. Dorica, Silas' housekeeper, stayed over with me and accompanied me on walks to the beach or the store at waterfall, but without the students the mission became as silent as the mountain looking over it.

I was due to leave at 12.00pm but about an hour before midday Silas came to my house to say farewell. He handed me an audio-tape of the drum beats recorded by chiefs Resis and Cyrilow. It was only that morning that he had found time to make the copy. This tape was a very important recording, the only one available of the traditional drumbeats. It was imperative for Silas to keep the original and I felt honored to be presented with the copy.

Tom collected my bags from the coral verandah of my house. I made my way past the staff houses, the classrooms and the little store to the front of the mission and climbed into the back of Stephen's truck with several women and children. While we waited for Stephen to finish a conversation nearby, the truck, which did not have a very reliable hand brake but needed to be clutch started on a slope, responded to the weight of its passengers by rolling over the stone holding the wheels in place. We all shrieked as we could see that if it continued to roll it would gather momentum and we would head down the hill, over a cliff and either into the sea or eternity, or both. Stephen, with remarkable speed and agility, sprang into the truck, pushed his foot on the foot brake, and held the truck until everyone was aboard. Everyone giggled with relief.

The remainder of the trip to the airport was not without incident either. There were only two trucks that regularly used the road north of Baravat. That was the truck from Melsisi and the truck from Ranwadi. Occasionally a truck from Baravat or further south might visit the missions and villages to the north but the only other truck I ever saw during my visit was Jonah's beautiful truck from Baravat when he occasionally visited to Ranwadi. But on that morning, as we all enjoyed the warm sunshine as it threw silver lights across the sea, we rounded a bend composed of a huge rock protruding from the cliff from which the road had been cut. Through the cabin window I saw a brown truck approaching. Neither vehicle reduced speed. Neither had brakes equal to the purpose! Stephen pulled hard to the right but the advancing truck side-swiped our truck several times as it passed. I had just withdrawn my hand from holding on to the outside of the truck for balance, and so fortunately avoided having it crushed. Our truck came to a halt in the grass on the seaward side of the road. The other truck ended its lively journey by ramming into the large rock protruding from the steep cutting on the side of the road.

Stephen and Tom hurried to the cabin of the other truck where the driver was slumped over the wheel. He was the speed fiend from Melsisi, although in reality no one drove

faster than about 50 kilometers per hour along this stretch of road. They lifted him out gently and laid him on the side of the road. I was torn between my concern for the condition of the driver and my fears that this delay would cause me to miss my flight.

We were all of relieved when the driver sat up. He had only been winded when the impact of the collision had caused his stomach to hit the steering wheel. He climbed back into the cabin of his truck, backed up and drove away. Stephen and Tom returned and we continued our trip to the airport, bumping over rocks with such energy that the women on the back of the truck were forced to hold the smaller children tightly to prevent them from bouncing right out of the vehicle. However, life responds to contingencies in the islands. The plane was delayed by three hours. It was required to make a run to Maewo as the other plane servicing the northern smaller islands had been grounded for repairs. The other passengers returned to their villages for lunch and a rest while I sat in the shade of the small administration building until 4.pm when the plane arrived.

The flight took me to Santo where I changed to a 20 seater en route to Vila. By now it was growing late and the pilot was anxious to return by the remaining daylight so that he could follow the coastlines of the islands. Even so, as we flew over Malekula a single light could be seen to the south and by the time we arrived in Vila it was dark.



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I was feeling quite smug as I watched my luggage approach on the new conveyor belt at Vila's Bauerfield Airport. I was no longer just a tourist. I knew my way around. Or I thought so. There were a few people standing around, talking or waiting for their luggage and two little boys sitting on chairs much too big for them, observing everything around them. They whispered and giggled, their legs swinging above the floor. My bag arrived with my umbrella attached to the outside. Full of my newly acquired confidence, I dumped my shoulder bag of cameras on the floor, leaned forward, grabbed the bag off the conveyor belt and swung it towards me. As the bag curved through the air, the point of the umbrella swiped a green pandanus basket next in line on the conveyor belt. The green pandanus basket let out a shriek of pain and I got such a shock I tripped over the shoulder bag on the floor sending my luggage ahead of me. I tried to regain some dignity but when I saw that the green pandanus basket was carrying a small pig I knew I had lost it.

I took a taxi to the Solaise Hotel with only two stops - one for the driver to collect some groceries from a small Chinese store and the other to drop them off at a house which seemed to be in quite a different direction from my hotel. It reminded me of a taxi trip from Vila to Le Lagon Hotel several years earlier when the driver stopped the taxi beside an open air theatre to watch a Bugs Bunny cartoon. At the Solaise I found that my accommodation had been confirmed and later in the evening the Director of Education, Phil Mathews, checked in to make sure that I had returned safely and that my accommodation was satisfactory. This was a very busy period in Port Vila with many international visitors for the 10th Anniversary of Independence and all government officials had many responsibilities so I appreciated his concern.

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There was only one task remaining – to video the dancers from Lalbetaes Village who would be performing the following Saturday on the waterfront which had been set up with a stage, sound system, lights and stalls selling food, kava, soft drinks and colorful T-shirts and other tourist goods. The week long celebrations commenced on the Friday night and the little town was alive with visitors, string bands, car radios duplicating all the sounds on the waterfront, and numerous visitors both local and overseas, all enjoying the holiday.

There was no reliable timetable for the events and it just happened that I was in a taxi heading for town when I heard the familiar rhythm of the *wadodo* nuts and the song of the Lalbetaes dancers. The driver raced into town depositing me at the gas station just in time to see the dancers making their way onto the stage. In the rush I found myself fumbling as I set up my cameras at the front of the crowd of onlookers but I had arrived in time. The performers wore a 'uniform' of traditional red mats around their lower bodies, arm and leg bands, and *wadodo* nuts strung around their ankles. They carried small rods decorated with green and yellow leaves. The rhythm of the *wadodo* nuts, the feet beating on the stage and the chanting of the song were supported by a performer beating a type of drum or *tamtam* made of three long bamboo poles tied together and supported on timber tripods. It was a polished performance. After the performance the dancers disappeared into the crowd. My research had come to an end. I too became just one of the crowd.



(Well, just for a short time!)