

BEGINNINGS

Originally, there were no islands; there was only the sea. But, underneath the saltwater, the plates of the upper crust of the earth moved and collided. Volcanoes were formed and were pushed slowly upwards, breaking through the surface of the sea. They continued to rise. Then, their active centres died slowly. Once they had become extinct, coral began to gather and grow around their edges. As the coral, in turn, died, limestone reefs were formed. Movements of the earth uplifted the reefs so that they became part of the land mass, and today 20% of the land area of Vanuatu is made up of limestone. Faulting, subsidence and further uplift throughout the geological history of the islands plus constant erosion by the weather has led to the present shape of Vanuatu. These movements of the earth have not stopped; the islands continue to rise at the approximate rate of 1/2 mm. a year. In 1965, a major earthquake in northwest Malekula raised the ground there by 1 metre.

The islands were all created in this way but not all at the same time; Santo, Malekula and the Torres first appeared about 22 million years ago. They increased in area greatly about 7 million years later with structural movements of the earth. Maewo and Pentecost rose out of the sea about 4 million years after that. Aneityum, Futuna, Aniwa, Tanna, Erromango, Efate, the Shepherds, Epi, Ambrym, Aoba and the Banks have all been formed in the last two million years.

Once the major geological changes had ended, it became possible for plants and animals to live in the islands. Most species came from Indo-Australasia via Papua New Guinea, New Britain and the Solomons. Plants that could be borne on salty sea currents survived the voyage to Vanuatu and began to germinate. Other plants were carried in the stomachs of birds or among their feathers. Insects were borne by wind currents; birds and bats flew; small animals were carried by ocean currents, or driven over the sea by storms, on floating masses of vegetation or small pieces of timber. There are no large undomesticated animals, such as the cassowary, in Vanuatu because they had no means of reaching the islands. Certain birds (the Australian Goshawk, the sooty rail, cuckoos, the speckled ground skink, and the silver eared honeyeater) came from Australia via New Caledonia. When compared to the lands from which they originated, Vanuatu has a very limited number of plant and animal species. The number in Vanuatu is so small because of its great distance away from Indo-Australasia and its geological recency compared to the rest of the world. However, it is a particularly rich region for marine molluscs. There are about 4,000 species in the islands with many unusual patterns of distribution.

Before man came to Vanuatu, the islands were covered in forests. Tropical rain forests, or "bush", were especially developed in the

northern and central islands, dry forests in the southern ones, and Kaoris pine on Santo. Sandalwood, found throughout all the islands, was particularly plentiful on Erromango. The northwest of many islands are in rain shadow areas and have open grassland. The early inhabitants often cleared lowland rain forest which was later taken over by secondary growth.

Yams, taro, bananas, sago-palm, maize, breadfruit, sugarcane, pigs, dogs and fowls were all brought by the early migrants. It is possible that they did not bring coconuts, but that the coconut palm-tree evolved first in Vanuatu and the Solomons since the number of insect species dependent on the nut is greater in these islands than anywhere else in the world. Pineapple, avocado, pawpaw and manioc were all introduced in recent times from tropical America by European settlers. The sweet potato was brought from Papua New Guinea, where it had possibly been introduced by the Spanish and the Portuguese, also from tropical America.

There are no native amphibians in Vanuatu, though marine turtles use the beaches of the southern islands as breeding-grounds, frogs are found on Santo, Malekula and Efate now, and seawater crocodiles swim over from the Solomon Islands occasionally. They are found on Santo and Vanua Lava infrequently and are caught even more rarely.

There are 19 species of land-based reptiles in Vanuatu; five kinds of gecko, 12 of skink, the flowerpot snake which is found only in Efate, and the Pacific Boa which is found on Santo, Vanua Lava, Malekula, Efate and Erromango.

61 species of land-and water-birds are resident, five of which were recently introduced deliberately, or accidentally, by man; for instance, the indian myna bird first appeared in Vanuatu in the 1880s when a ship, the "Pikinini", carrying caged birds to Fiji was wrecked at Lenakel, Tanna.

Of the 11 species of bats, 3 evolved in, and are unique to, Vanuatu. The small polynesian rat arrived independently before man, but the larger black and brown rats came with the white man.

Perhaps the most recent immigrant is the giant East African snail. It was carried by ships from islands in the north Pacific to Vila about seven years ago. It appears to find the local environment satisfactory because it has spread to Santo and north Malekula where it is thriving.

CUSTOM

Prehistory

The Pacific Islands are the last area of the world that man has occupied. The first arrivals came about 4, or 5,000 years ago. About 2,000 years later some of these people migrated from the northwest Pacific and Papua New Guinea via the Solomon Islands to Vanuatu. Travelling in large canoes that could carry up to 200 people, a few animals and stocks of food, they arrived in a series of waves over a long period of time, not all at once. Vanuatu became the centre of a region where different peoples settled and multiplied. Traces of this mixing are still to be found; there is a very large number and great variety of languages and an extreme diversity of physical types in the islands. The languages of Futuna and Aniwa for instance, are practically a Tongan one and are unlike almost all other ni-Vanuatu languages. The recent arrival of Europeans and Chinese into the islands has only added to this linguistic and physical diversity.

Very little is known about the history and life of these early settlers. We can gain some idea of what happened, thanks to the work of archaeologists and linguists, though there are still many gaps in our knowledge.

The earliest known settlement is on Malo which was inhabited at least 3,500 years ago. The people of this settlement were part of a very quickly moving group which did not penetrate inland but based itself on the coasts of islands. They cleared areas of forest, grew yams and taro in their gardens, raised, pigs and fowls, gathered nuts, collected shellfish and were very skilled fishermen. These "Lapita people", so called after the distinctive kind of pottery that they made, were perhaps the earliest migrants into the Pacific. For one reason or another some of the Lapita people sailed away in their large canoes to other islands. They travelled eastwards colonising Fiji, Samoa, the Marquesas, the Society Isles, Hawaii and Easter Island.

About 2,500 years ago, other peoples sailed from the Solomons to Efate and Tongoa where they settled. They used stone tools (adzes in particular) and made a certain type of pottery with decorated incisions and applied reliefs. Unlike, Lapita, this kind of pottery, known as Mangaasi, is found throughout north and central Vanuatu. It is possible that the makers of Mangaasi pottery sailed onto Fiji and New Caledonia about 2,400 and 1,600 years ago respectively and settled there.

It is very difficult to discover when people first settled in southern Vanuatu and where they came from since no pottery has been found there. It is possible that they were colonised by people from the western Solomon Islands. Tanna was inhabited at least

2,500 years ago while Aneityum has a long history of complex agricultural systems with wet- and dry-bed terracing for different root-crops.

About the year 1,200 AD the culture of the Shepherds and Efate began to change rapidly; the making of pottery, the style of which had changed over the centuries, stopped suddenly, and the use of shellfish tools replaced that of stone ones. Some archaeologists have suggested that this was caused by the migration of peoples from the northwestern islands of the Pacific.

According to custom stories told in the Shepherds, many years ago there was a very important chief called Roy Mata who ruled over the people of the Shepherds and the coastal region of Efate. Every five years he held a feast to maintain the peace, during which everyone laid down their arms and celebrated their allegiance to him. When he died, his body was presented in all the villages he had controlled. Then, accompanied by all his followers, it was taken to Retoka Island for burial. On the burial ground, a great feast was held with dances and sacrifices. The close kin of Roy Mata were buried with him. One man and one woman from each of the clans he had governed were voluntarily buried, the men drinking strong kava before going to their grave.

After the funeral the participants left saying that, from now on, the burial ground was tabu, and that anyone who went there would die and that nothing would grow over the graves.

Jose Garanger, a French archaeologist, listened to these stories and decided to dig for the grave on Retoka. A few feet under the ground, he found a large number of skeletons arranged in pairs and a deeper pit containing five skeletons in front of two large stones. In this pit one male skeleton was placed in the middle with that of a young woman at his feet, a skeleton couple to his left and a male skeleton to his right. Garanger had discovered the grave of Roy Mata and his followers and shown that the custom stories were, at least, partly true. Using radiocarbon dating, he showed that the burial must have occurred about 1,265 AD.

At this time, Tongoa, Ewose, Valea, Buninga, and Tongariki were all one island called Kuwae. About 1475 AD there was a great volcanic eruption and large movements of the earth. People were killed by falling stones, suffocated by smoke or burned to death in the forests. Saltwater poured into the island, the volcano subsided, and Kuwae disappeared, leaving the present group of small islands. Custom stories told in the area speak of this event and of a man, Ti Tongoa Liseiriki, who survived it and went on to become a great hero. The stories say that when he died, he was buried with his wives and many men from his entourage. Ti Tongoa Liseiriki had worn four circular pigs' tusks, but he gave one of them to another chief when he gained his title. A circle of large shellfishes were left around the collective grave and dressed flag-stones were placed on top to mark the site of the grave. Garanger listened to these stories as well and dug for the grave. He found everything as it had been described to him, including the skeleton of a man decorated with three circular pigs' tusks.