

## CHAPTER 11

# A BODY OF POSTCARDS FROM VANUATU

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### Abstract

*A postcard collection dated primarily from 1970s and 1980s Vanuatu when mass tourism boomed in the archipelago speaks to the importance of island bodies in the tourism marketplace. Vanuatu's position as an exotic locale on the global tourist circuit stocks its gift shops with images of spectacularly decorated, painted, young, good-looking, sexual and generically naturalized people often engaged in ceremonial event. Certain body parts in particular-painted faces, eyes, breasts, penises and smiles-speak to touristic desires to experience the sexily romantic and the entertainingly exotic.*

The index web page of Vanuatu's National Tourism Office pronounces "Vanuatu: The Friendly Face of the Pacific/Le Sourire du Pacifique" (<http://www.vanuatu.net.vu/nto.html>). Computer images of two smiling faces, a hibiscus-bedecked woman and a young girl from Tanna Island decorated in paint and leaves, welcome webservers and invite them to click "any image to enter." These smiling faces and decorated bodies function as portals into the site and, beyond the web, into Vanuatu as a tourist destination.

Smiling faces and decorated bodies position Vanuatu within the global tourism market. They promise visitors a warm and friendly experience. The natives will smile. The National Tourism Office has also invented a new motto. *Long God Yumi Stanap* ("We Stand/Develop with God") appears on Vanuatu's money. But the Tourism Office website instead uses "The Friendly Face of the Pacific" which, in its French version, reduces down to the even more metonymical "The Smile of the Pacific."

Similar uses of smiling face and decorated body to represent and sell Vanuatu existed before the emergence of the Internet. When I first visited Vanuatu in the late 1970s, the shops and trade stores in its capital town, Port Vila, sold a limited number of photographic postcards. Some, mildewed and foxed, clearly had been on offer for a long time. Among these were a few landscapes and a couple of Port Vila urban views, but the majority of cards portrayed Islanders wearing what then passed for traditional dress and adornment. I bought cards whenever I could, some to send off to friends and others to keep because these images of people in their finery seemed, somehow, more anthropological than my own haphazard snapshots of island neighbors.'

### Postcards and Tourists

Postcards originated in 1869 and 1870 in several European countries and also in North America (Staff 1966), and were gradually accommodated by postal authorities. By the 1890s, sending and collecting postcards had become widely popular. Photographic images appeared on card faces by the mid 1890s when new photolithographic processes made possible their mass production, and addresses migrated to the card's newly divided backside. Postcards had also, by this decade, become a part of tourist experience, many offering "greetings from" popular 19th century sights and destinations (1966: 56).

A limited number of travelers and tourists made their way out to Vanuatu-then the colonial New Hebrides-on Burns Philp and Messageries Maritimes steamers before Pacific War airfields were cleared on Efate and Espiritu Santo islands. They purchased an earlier generation of postcards from Port Vila shopkeepers. Angleviel and Shekleton (1997: 164) estimate that

1. These postcards were obtained haphazardly during several trips to Vanuatu in the late 1970s and the 1980s. As such, I cannot provide a comprehensive overview of the universe of Vanuatu tourist postcards. For example, my claim that portraits are especially common images has not been quantified. Likewise, I have no sale figures to indicate which cards sell best in the market. And I am only presuming that this market consists largely of overseas tourists. Finally, I know little about how those who purchase these cards interpret and understand their imagery. Offered here is my (American) interpretation of postcard imagery and not that of the mostly Australian, New Zealander, Japanese, French, British, and other consumers of cards on sale in Port Vila. For quantitative analyses of postcard images that rely on sales figures, see Beard 1992 or Corkery and Bailey 1994.

around 800 postcards were published between 1903-when the first New Hebrides postcard appeared-and 1960, the year Max Shekleton's collection stops.

Most of these cards were produced outside the archipelago in New Caledonia, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere until 1945 when several Port Vila-based merchants began publishing cards locally. Before the Pacific War, overseas publishers drew principally on the work of traveling photographers who had passed through the New Hebrides. They sometimes also photographed New Hebridean immigrants in New Caledonia, or merely mis-labeled stock New Caledonian or Fijian images as "New Hebrides" (Angleviel and Shekleton 1997: 178).

Almost all early New Hebrides cards consist of black and white photographs. Some are actual photographs developed or mounted on card stock, while the majority are commercial reproductions of some island view, photographed in situ (Angleviel and Shekleton 1997: 170). Only a handful of cards are studio productions, photographed in Noumea (New Caledonia) studios (Angleviel and Shekleton 1997: 171). Angleviel and Shekleton suggest that this "lack of diversity combined with the limited use of improved backs, ornamentation, logos, or specific text signifies the limits of the market and the absence of competition" (1997: 170). Despite their monotony, enough New Hebrides postcards passed through colonial networks, postal and otherwise, to survive as contemporary collectibles, often turning up for sale on [www.ebay.com](http://www.ebay.com). Sixty-eight percent of Shekleton's collected cards, notably, were never mailed, suggesting that many travelers who visited the archipelago commonly purchased and preserved postcards as photographic souvenirs (Angleviel and Shekleton 1997: 173).

Modern forms of tourism did not extend into the archipelago until the late 1960s and 1970s when two tourist-class hotels and regular air connections between Port Vila and Fiji, Australia and New Caledonia were established (Douglas 1996: 269-70). By the 1970s, picture postcards featured bright colors (Angleviel and Shekleton 1997: 170) and the market had expanded. Local merchants and photographers began to produce a series of cards to sell to the growing numbers of tourists arriving by air at Bauerfield, a Pacific War airfield near Port Vila refitted for civil and tourist aviation. The body of postcards I discuss here, on sale for the most part between 1975 and 1985, comes from the first two decades of modern (if not quite mass) tourism in the archipelago-the years during which New Hebrideans also established political independence (in 1980) and renamed their new nation Vanuatu. Although my casual collection of 30 postcards is much smaller than Max Shekleton's 657 card archive, it discloses, nonetheless, an album of favored poses.

## Poses

Postcard images of exotic locales such as Vanuatu are one strand within larger practices of colonial and contemporary tourist photography (see Quanchi 1997; Moors and Machlin 1987). They are cousin to the snapshots in missionary and administrator family albums, to the illustrations in popular magazines such as the *National Geographic* and to ethnography's various photodocumentaries. Angleviel and Shekleton, noting that postcards are "viewed as the poor relatives of iconography" (1997: 166), argue that card imagery is nonetheless informative. Shaped by the same conventions that govern 20th century representations of otherness, tourist postcards are distinctive in that they are made only to be sold. And because they seek a mass market, they more clearly reveal popular conceptions of exotic locales (Albers and James 1988: 136, 1990: 344; Prochaska 1991: 40; Corkery and Bailey 1994: 492). These popular conceptions are visible both in the various subjects and poses that cards feature, and in those they omit. What one does not see is as telling as what one does.

Much of Lutz and Collins' (1993) extensive analysis of *National Geographic* photography applies as well to the postcards on sale in Port Vila and other South Pacific towns (see also Nordstrom 1992). Lutz and Collins (1993) track several themes through a century of magazine images of the non-Euroamerican world:

The people of the third and fourth worlds are portrayed as *exotic*; they are *idealized*; they are *naturalized* and taken out of all but a single historical narrative; and they are *sexualized* (p. 89).

These photographic poses illustrate the magazine's social evolutionist master narrative. They reiterate, page-by-page, "how far we've come" (1993: .19) and also how far others have lagged behind in a global evolutionary race. Pictures of exotic and naturalized others help confirm that the self is, in fact, civilized and many readers of the *National Geographic* happily accept its essential evolutionism. Lutz and Collins asked fifty-five Americans to respond to a selection of recent *National Geographic* photographs. They discovered that even where obvious pictorial cues thavevoke social change (e.g., juxtapositions of local and Western clothing or other artifacts) are absent, viewers often figure the photograph to be about change nonetheless: "Ideologies of social evolutionism are not always clearly *in* the picture, but are read *in*" (1993: 238). These enduring Western interests guarantee that our images of others are always incomplete. We focus particularly on what sparks those interests, leaving much else in shadow.

Many others have commented on the gaps and silences of colonial photography—the fact that the camera's view was always partial. Examining sixty years of postcards from colonial Senegal, Prochaska (1991: 44), for example, identified a limited number of photographic subjects (see also Albers and James 1990: 349 for categories of Great Basin Indian postcard poses). The majority of Senegal cards depicted ethnic/racial types, places, women, the world of work, social life and political/historic events.

Vanuatu postcard views are even more restricted: no images of work, no social life except ritual celebration, only occasional places and landscapes and no political or historical events. Angleviel and Shekleton (1997) present a typology of postcard sites and subjects represented in Shekleton's pre-1960 collection, noting that these sites and subjects, taken together, tell one story about ni-Vanuatu and another story about European colonials:

... two main areas seem to emerge in the collection: one relates to the indigenous world and the other to the expatriate colonial world. On the one hand, the camera lens registers indigenous events and freezes the presumed authenticity of the location. This is a permanent and fixed world inhabited by men and women and characterized by their dwellings and activities.... On the other hand, the expatriate world takes shape through the symbols of its involvement (monuments, buildings accommodating institutions) and through technical, economic, or educational achievements suggesting change and progress (p. 175).

New Hebrides Postcards exposed the standard colonialist narrative of native stasis versus European progress.

"Indigenous" postcard views outnumber "expatriate" scenes in Shekleton's collection by more than four-to-one (Angleviel and Shekleton 1997: 175). In the post-1960s touristic era, this indigenous domination has intensified (although one can still buy occasional urban views of Port Vila). Photographic suggestions of the "permanent and fixed" indigenous world have also intensified. Rather than portraying unusual or even everyday events, tourist postcards abstract Vanuatu scenes from their wider surroundings. Postcard Vanuatu is timeless and unchanging. It is also free of poverty, political strife and other sorts of unpleasantness that could complicate the tourist experience:

A significant characteristic of portraiture is that it places its subjects in pictures devoid of a historical context. When historical context is lacking, as provided by scenes of people engaged in activity or surrounded by features of their local environment, it becomes much eas-



**Figure 1** Custom dress of the Island of Tanna, Vanuatu. (The Drug Store, Port Vila)

ier to project metaphorical meanings onto photographs that have no basis in the lived, historical realities of the picture's principal subjects (Albers and James 1990: 357).

I came across only one postcard whose subjects have much of a visible context: a view dated July 30, 1982 (Vanuatu's Independence Day celebration) labeled "Greetings from Vanuatu," and captioned "Custom dress of the island of Tanna, Vanuatu" (Figure 1). This card is unusual in that it also shows men wearing ordinary dress in the background behind its featured decorated dancers. Another idiosyncratic intrusion of reality appears in the photographic date that the studio neglected to erase. Only one other card is dated by a copyright year, which appears on its reverse.

Angleviel and Shekleton report that the large majority of pre-1960s cards also were undated—these pictures, therefore, float in time. Only five card captions in Shekleton's collection include a date denoting some specific

© 1982 The Drug Store, Port Vila, Vanuatu

the opening of a World War I memorial in November 1924; a Port Vila fire in February 1928) (1997: 173). This timelessness serves several interests. It is, first, the touristic equivalent of anthropology's "ethnographic present" (Fabian 1983), a narrative tense that casts the exotic other outside of real time. The postcard native, as a sort of ageless ethnographic subject, exists beyond the

everyday reality of the observer, whether tourist or anthropologist (see Lalvani 1993: 463). More prosaically, cards marked with copyright dates may age themselves out of the market. Postcard imagery is timeless but so are postcards themselves if they are not to appear too stale to sell.

## Bodies, Romantic and Picaresque

Vanuatu's most common tourist postcard image is a portrait of a young local man or woman in traditional dress, or of groups of men and women sometimes engaged in exotic ritual dance. Portraiture is the dominant genre in post-1960s tourist cards. In Shekleton's pre-1960s collection, similarly, "Standing portraits of one, two, or a group of men dominate the cards featuring men-148 of 207 cards" (Angleviel and Shekleton 1997: 178). Contemporary cards feature images of islanders with spectacular faces and bodies. These bodies are both friendly and exotic, as the Tourist Office website promises. Not much has changed over the years. In the pre-1960s collection, too, "New Hebrideans are shown as being primitive and gentle" (Angleviel and Shekleton 1997: 175). The particular ratio of these two basic characteristics defines two broad themes of postcard portraiture. Where the friendly and gentle outshines the primitive and exotic, the view is romantic. Where the ratio is reversed, the image is picaresque.

Postcard portraiture differs from earlier ethnographic traditions of anthropometric mug shots, where "if possible the human subject was to be naked and photographed from different sides (front, back, side)" (Schmidt 1997: 40). Card portraits more closely descend from photographic views, both academic and popular, of "native types." This genre of portraiture presents a man or woman in characteristic dress, adornment and setting as typifying some people, race or nation. Swiss anthropologist Paul Wirz, for example, compiled a large archive of these sorts of "physiognomical" photographs from New Guinea during the first half of the 20th century: "By portraying individuals and groups, Wirz tried to fix anthropological and ethnographical information, such as physique, decoration, or clothing" (Schmidt 1997: 40; see also Lalvani 1993).

Port Vila's postcard views of decorated islanders recall such native type imagery, although they have lost much of the latter's physiognomical intent. Postcard bodies, unlike physiognomic records, are characteristically decoupled from ethnographic or historical context. Although often captioned something like "The Man from Bunlap," the photographic focus has, in fact, narrowed down to the body itself leaving the ethnographic setting in shadows.

Card imagery reveals little ethnographic information (about Bunlap or wherever) beyond the body which typically is posed before a fuzzed or blurred background. These postcard bodies recall *National Geographic's* style of foregrounding native while backgrounding context. Such bodies, decoupled from reality, evoke "a world of happy, classless people outside of history but evolving into it, edged with exoticism and sexuality, but knowable to some degree as individuals" (Lutz and Collins 1993: 116). If there is a discernible background, it is likely to be leafy and green. Islanders pose before curtains of forest or bush. Literally (or rather visually), they stand close to nature (cf. Lutz and Collins 1993: 109; Peterson 1985: 179).

Moreover, nobody has a name (see Peterson 1985: 168; Prochaska 1991: 45). Nameless faces and bodies represent the archipelago as a whole (e.g., a card labeled "New Hebrides" with the generic caption "N.H. customs dance"). Or, more commonly, cards only identify a subject's home island-this, again, a postcard reflex of racial/ethnic typing (e.g., "Tanna Woman;" or "Pentecote: The Man from Bunlap"). Given different measures of ritual spectacle and the pattern of tourist flow within Vanuatu, Port Vila gift shops mostly offer views of people from just a few of the country's regions, notably Tanna, Malakula and Pentecost (see Albers and James 1988: 153). (Shots of Port Vila and Efate dominate Shekleton's collection, which also archives lesser numbers of views of Malakula, Santo) Ambrym, Tanna and the Banks Islands (Angleviel and Shekleton 1997: 174)).

The portrayed postcard body is spectacularly painted and ornamented. Again similar to a good deal of *National Geographic* imagery, Vanuatu's postcards display "people in brightly colored, 'different' dress, engaged in initially strange-seeming rituals or inexplicable behavior" (Lutz and Collins 1993:89). These people, however, must not appear *entirely* strange (Lutz and Collins 1993: 96). Instead, the bodies depicted on cards are both like and unlike the tourist who buys them. They intimate both sameness and difference. A theme of common humanity tempers postcard exoticism. Postcard portraits focus on exotic individuals who nonetheless appear to be knowable: strange people whose pose and behavior tourists should still be able to grasp. For example, the mother/child couplet (Figure 2), a ubiquitous motif, was on sale widely in Port Vila shops. (see Lutz and Collins 1993: 168). Empathetic tourists selecting these cards purchase homely portrayals of maternal love (see Webb 1995: 193).

The combination of body difference and sameness, of individuality and generality, may boost the commercial appeal of a card. Beard (1992), along these lines, suggested that the odd popularity of postcard images of Egyptian and Iron Age mummies in the British Museum's gift shop reflects an overlapped similitude and dissimilitude-the sense of body continuity that is yet "perilously fragile":



Figure 2 Mother and baby of Tanna Island. (Vila Duty Free Gifts, Vila; C. S. Cheng, photographer)



*snnra-wlrile and 716 seven. Ae.-wrdnnies*

Figure 3: "Snow-White and the Seven Pickaninnies" (Stinsons, Ltd., Suva, Fiji)

Just as we *know* that we can share the human body with all creatures of the past, so too we *know* that their bodies (just as their cultures) are deeply foreign, remote and strange (p. 515).

Mummies, like natives, are both weird and familiar at once.

A juxtaposition of bodies-tourist and local-on the same postcard is another device that evokes themes of shared yet unshared humanity. This sort of card was on sale in 1970s Fiji. One postcard front-captioned "Snow White and The Seven Pickaninnies" depicts a small naked blond white girl sitting merrily among seven grinning naked little Fijian boys (Figure 3). Its back caption reads: "Children the world over are fascinated when confronted with one of another race. These happy little Fijians gaze with delight at the dainty fair maid:" There is much, obviously, at work here: snow whiteness and dwarf blackness; the stereotype of happy islanders-that Pacific smile again; the cross-dressed white child in beads and hibiscus; the displacement into the safety of childhood of black male/white female sexuality.

This is a picaresque juxtaposition of tourist, and native, a pose that presumes as much inequality and difference as it does universal humanity, such as shared childhood fascinations. The exotic/friendly ratio shifts, here, to the numerator. Whereas romantic views (e.g., "mother and child" reunions) find common humanity beneath the exotic face paint, the picaresque converts

sameness into difference. More than the romantic, picaresque views have affinities with earlier racial/ethnic type imagery; both tap into and circulate popular prejudices and stereotypes. In the United States, for example, a fashionable genre of cards once offered jokey portraits of African-Americans. Early 20th century "card manufacturers sold photographic cards which almost exclusively portrayed menial, comic, or disreputable facts of Black life" (Baldwin 1988: 19).

Popular notions of the South Seas have also populated these islands with savages, both noble and ignoble. Pacific versions of menial, comic and disreputable island lives circulated earlier in the century. Peterson (1985<sup>x</sup>, for example, reviewing early postcards featuring Australian Aborigines, suggested that:

The predominance of images in the realistic framework showing impoverished run-down shanty dwellers may have been obscurely consoling, bolstering ideas of racial superiority... (p. 179).

But picaresque cards were not on sale in 1980s Vanuatu. My guess is that such views had lost much of their market value by the time Vanuatu was incorporated within global tourism networks. Images of the savage South Seas had faded—at least in Port Vila whose shops carried no views of traditions of warfare, cannibalism, widow strangulation or any dubious cultural practice at all. In fact, the only place in the world one could still buy postcards of savage Vanuatu was in the small town of Chanute, Kansas. Here, at the Martin and Osa Johnson Safari Museum, the gift shop still sells postcards copied from Martin Johnson's early studies of the archipelago (see Johnson 1922), including a shot of "New Hebrides native drying head for display in tribal headhouse, 1919."

Back in Port Vila, no cards on sale were quite *this* exotic. Rather, postcard bodies are romantic rather than picaresque. Like *National Geographic* pictures, they are idealized, timelessly naturalized and sexual. As Vanuatu positions itself as a stop on the cultural tourism circuit, the smiling, romantic body is certainly more marketable an image than are savagely drying heads.

## Body Parts

Vanuatu's postcards highlight, and often eroticize, certain key body parts. The camera favors certain parts of the Vanuatu body that are more evocative than others.

## Painted Faces

The painted face, especially the painted female face, is a common postcard subject (e.g., "Toka Fair: Ritual Painting," Figure 4). People on Tanna, for example, once used powdered volcanic clays of various colors, and also imported red ochre from neighboring Erromango Island. Today, women oil their faces with baby oil and then dab on imported powdered dyes. Designs vary, although most involve colored planes created by first bisecting the face horizontally, and then vertically. Black or yellow lines start at the ears and cut across the cheek to the bottom of the nose, separating an unpainted lower face from a painted upper. One or two vertical lines run upwards along the ridge of the nose, again bisecting the upper face into at least two planes that are colored in red, or sometimes yellow (Lindstrom 1996: 126).

Paint (Vanuatu women's makeup) calls attention to the lines of the face and universal femininity at the same time as it marks the face as alien. Painted faces, like postcards that feature mothers and children, carry the double message of sameness and otherness. Tourist women wear make-up, but in Vanuatu the brightly painted blues, yellows, red and blacks overrun the face. The decorated face is familiar and accessible, but paint makes the Vanuatu face different.

## Eyes

Lutz and Collins note that people gaze at the camera in twenty-five percent of *National Geographic* photographs (1993: 197). Postcard subjects similarly frequently stare outwards. This gaze suggests possible intimacy tinged with sexuality as appears in other views of face-painted Tannese women (Figure 5). Lalvani notes that the "head-on stare" in European photographic tradition often connotes lack of sophistication, disparity and even criminality. This eyes-forward pose is "to be read in direct contrast to the cultivated asymmetries of aristocratic pose, for pose is a function of leisure, and frontality signifies its lack" (1993: 449). Only the poor and working classes, the insane and the criminal are forced to look into the camera and, with women, this would also include the sexually forward.

Cards showing people with eyes downcast or askew can also invoke an implicit sexuality -insofar as the subject more easily becomes the object of the viewer's gaze. This is perhaps apparent in another image of a Tannese women, "New Hebrides: Tanna Girl in Preparation for Dance" (Figure 6) who is a doubled object. Her face is a canvas for a painting hand and this initial objectification itself has been captured and sold in this postcard form. We look at her being looked.at.



Figure 4 Nouvelles Hebrides, Fete du Toka: peinture rituelle; Toka Fair: ritual painting. (Les Editions du Pacifique; Bernard Hermann, photographer)

## Breasts

Sexualized views of island women are notably popular postcard fodder (as they are in the pages of *National Geographic*). Port Vila postcards reveal more

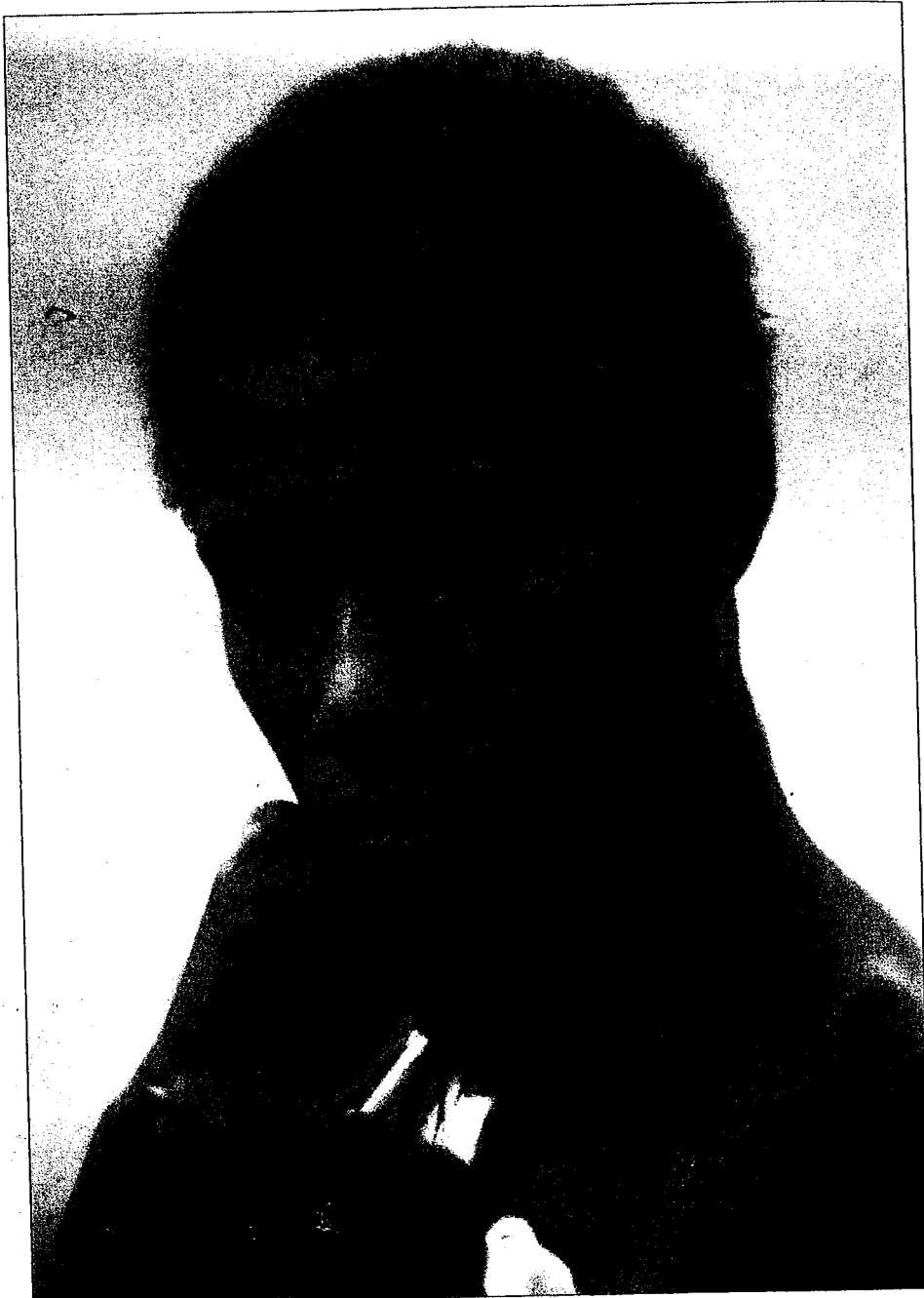


Figure 5 New Hebrides, Tanna Girl with Dance Paint. (Vila Duty Free Gifts, Vila; C. S. Cheng, photographer).



Figure 6 New Hebrides, Tanna Girl in Preparation for Dance. (Vila Duty Free Gifts, Vila; C. S. Cheng, photographer)

breasts than tourists are likely to encounter in the country (apart from beaches near the major hotels, of course, where female tourists themselves often sport topless swimsuits). As Lutz and Collins (1993: 115) and many others (e.g., Peterson 1985: 175; Prochaska 1991: 46) have noted, postcard-buying tourists may thereby, photographically at least, access local female sexuality. Semi-nude women become objects of tourist consumption. "The commodification of women, already prominent in photography, was exacerbated by posing non-European women as though they were sexually available beings who existed solely for the pleasure of European males" (Webb 1995:187).

The dusky breast efficiently evokes idyllic Pacific sexuality and romanticized nature, free from the constraints of civilization. Maxwell records that New Zealand photographer Alfred Burton was disturbed, professionally, that the Fijian and Samoan women he had set forth to photograph in the early 1880s were wearing shirts. He insisted "that the local women remove their blouses before having their likenesses recorded" (Maxwell 1999: 153). Maxwell suggests that these bare breasts simultaneously sexualized island women and desexualized European: pictures of naked island women "underline the higher moral reputation of Anglo-Saxon women and afford the European male voyeuristic pleasure" (1995: 153).

Postcard photographers, still today, have demanded that female models remove their blouses. The subtext of this nudity, if probably no longer bespeaking higher European morals, certainly continues to afford voyeuristic pleasures. One postcard portrait from the 1970s generated much local criticism in Vanuatu. An enterprising photographer managed to convince six young Futunese women (who were good Presbyterians, every one of them) to doff their shirts and pose topless before a strand of coconut palms (Figure 7).

My guess is that critical response to this card ("Beautiful girls at Holiday Resort, Tanna Island, New Hebrides") echoed what nowadays might be called the "Margaret Mead Effect." This card's focus on the breast was particularly rude in that the stereotypic beach and coconut background naturalized the women, and being obviously half-dressed sexualized them. The card looks like realism; - but it is too visibly posed. It is probably also significant that Futuna is a Polynesian outlier (even though the Futunese look about the same as their Southern Vanuatu-speaking neighbors). This Polynesianesque pose was the closest that 1978 Port Vila postcard sellers came to their counterparts in Waikiki. Almost nobody anymore expects to encounter nude Hawaiians strolling about Honolulu. The postcard images of such, available in airport and beach shops, therefore, are obviously a sort of softcore or touristic pornography. But in less-developed Vanuatu, possibilities of actually running into traditionally semi-clothed Islanders are easier to imagine, and postcard',



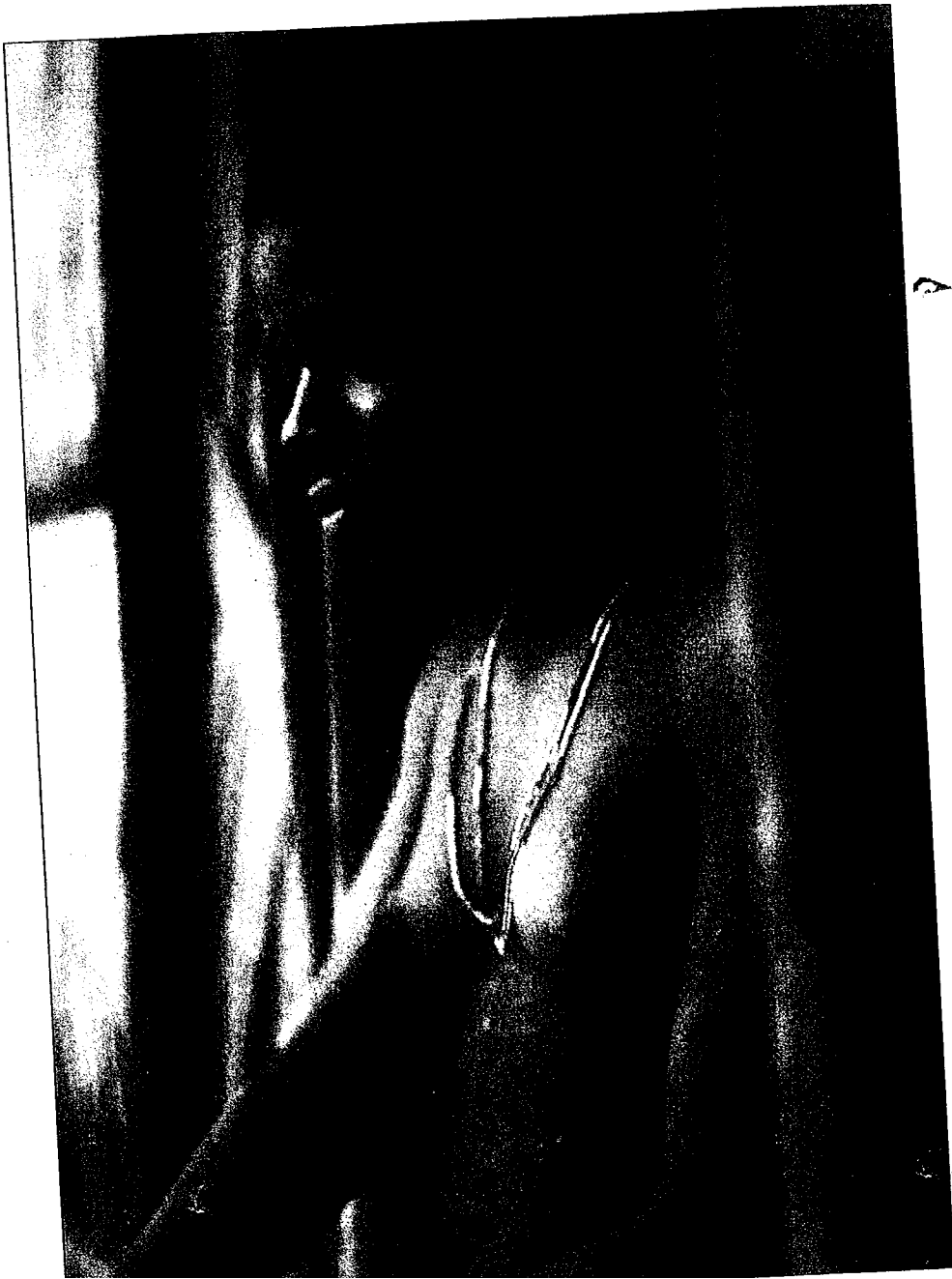
Figure 7 Jolies Filles au lieu de vacances, Tanna a Vile, New Hebrides; Beautiful girls at holiday resort, Tanna Island, New Hebrides. (Trade Winds Ltd, Port Vila)

depictions of nude men and women from Port Vila shops thus can pass as more ethnographic than pornographic.

A second postcard breast-shot ("Young girl from Interior of Pentecost, Vanuatu," Figure 8) remains more safely romantic. The young teenaged girl's eyes are closed; she is (traditionally) nude rather than half-dressed; and she sits in what appears to be the doorway of a village house.--although this background is softly blurred enough to decontextualize her body. Nudity, here, passes as traditional and therefore escapes the critical reaction evoked by the Futuna card, the breasts of whose subjects were starkly naked rather than softly nude. Nonetheless, most postcard consumers are not innocent enough not to experience some voyeuristic pleasure sparked by those firm, Lolita-like breasts.

### Penises

Port Vila postcard racks in-the 1980s, unlike what was the case in colonial Senegal, offered numerous images of island men. Lutz and Collins note that *National Geographic* illustrations from Melanesia often depict decorated men, no doubt because male ritual dress throughout the region is even more spectacular than female (1993: 145). Postcards that feature decorated men dancing (e.g., "Tanna Chief and Men in Custom Dance" Figure 9) or engaged in



Young girl from interior of Pentecost, Vanuatu. (Burns Philp (N.H.) Ltd., 1980;  
Figure 8  
Ronald van der Plaat, photographer)



Figure 9 New Hebrides, Tanna Chief and Men in Custom Dance. (Vila Duty Free Gifts, Vila; C. S. Cheng, photographer).

ceremonial exchange (e.g., "New Hebrides, Toka: Killing of Pigs (Tanna Custom Ceremony)") illustrate the exotic differences in body and behavior that justify Vanuatu's claims as cultural tourism destination.

Postcard fondness for male bodies may reflect more than the fact that, in Melanesia, men enjoy decorating themselves. Vanuatu postcards, in fact, have long favored male portraits, as evident in Shekleton's pre-1960s collection:

As a reflection on the place of women in the New Hebrides, only 47 cards depict women, and very few are of young women. The few images of young girls (20 cards) and the larger number of images of young men (74 cards) might reflect the colonial interest in young men as a potential labor force (Angleviel and Shekleton 1997: 175).

There may be something to this guess, insofar as difficulties in acquiring labor weighed on the minds of the archipelago's plantation community. Boosters of the colony probably appreciated images of working island bodies. Lutz and Collins, however, note that *National Geographic* images infrequently have portrayed Pacific Islanders working, presumably because no one ought to work in paradise (1993: 136). The long-term reoccurrence of male bodies in post-1960s Vanuatu cards must reflect different, more touristic desires.

The photographic "warrior" pose is the counterpart to the "native belle" throughout the archive of Pacific imagery, postcard and otherwise (Webb 1995: 189; Maxwell 1999: 158), and handsome warriors remain on sale in Port Vila postcard displays. These men, posed with clubs, represent the exotic savagery of the old days. Their naked bodies, however, also invite a more salacious gaze, as do those of their sisters, those "native belles." Maxwell argues that images of virile, muscular warriors "served as a pretext for the restaging of European fantasies about black physical and sexual prowess and therefore sometimes served as a locus for homosexual as well as heterosexual desire" (1999: 158) -and presumably heterosexual desire as well, as some of the market for these cards consists of overseas female tourists.

Postcard men are painted, decorated, shirtless and muscular. Most wear lavalava-waistcloths that most ni-Vanuatu men usually change into in order to signify that they are engaged in a *kastom*, or traditional, occasion. Vanuatu postcard sellers go far beyond where the *National Geographic* fears to tread in that they also sell images of men wearing traditional penis wrappers. (This is a dress style that has persisted, or has been revived, only in a few isolated villages in the archipelago). "The man from Tanna" (Figure 10) portrays a nude dancer wearing ceremonial feather headdress, *tapa* belt and penis wrapper. A second card, "Pentecote: the man from Bunlap" (Figure 11) -a classic native warrior-also displays an attractive youth in penis-wrapper wielding a club.

Like their female counterparts, these island men visibly are posed as sexual objects. The blurred backgrounds decontextualize and naturalize their bodies. Theirs is, however, an ambiguous sexuality (see Lutz and Collins 1993: 180). Downcast eyes permit viewers to stare at them safely. Their masculine seriousness, club, dance stick and erect penises are countered by feminine face paint, feathers and flowers, as well as by objectified nakedness itself. The penis here corresponds to the breast. Port Vila postcards sexually objectify Vanuatu men as much as women. Like the smile, this feminization opens up male bodies to touristic consumption. The primordial warrior, despite his club and erect penis, wears flowers behind his ears.

### Similes

Painted faces and bodies, naked or not, are even more accessible when these smile. This brings us back to Vanuatu's Internet claim to be the "smile" of the Pacific. Lutz and Collins counted smiles and noted that Pacific peoples portrayed in the *National Geographic* smile more often than those from any other continent or region (1993: 136). But actually not many postcard faces from



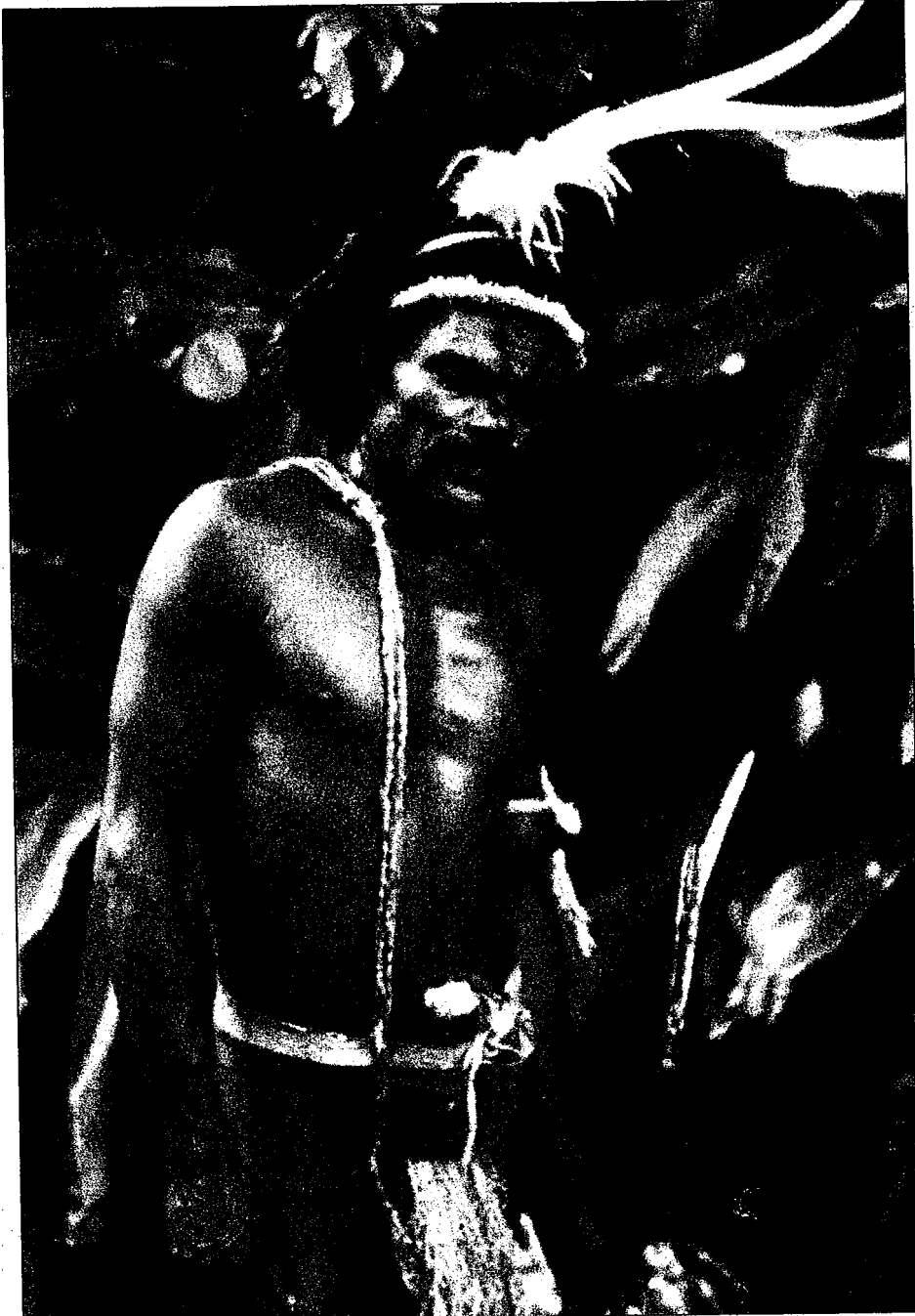


Figure 10 Nouvelles Hebrides, Homme de Tanna; The man from Tanna. (Les Editions du Pacifique; Bernard Hermann, photographer)

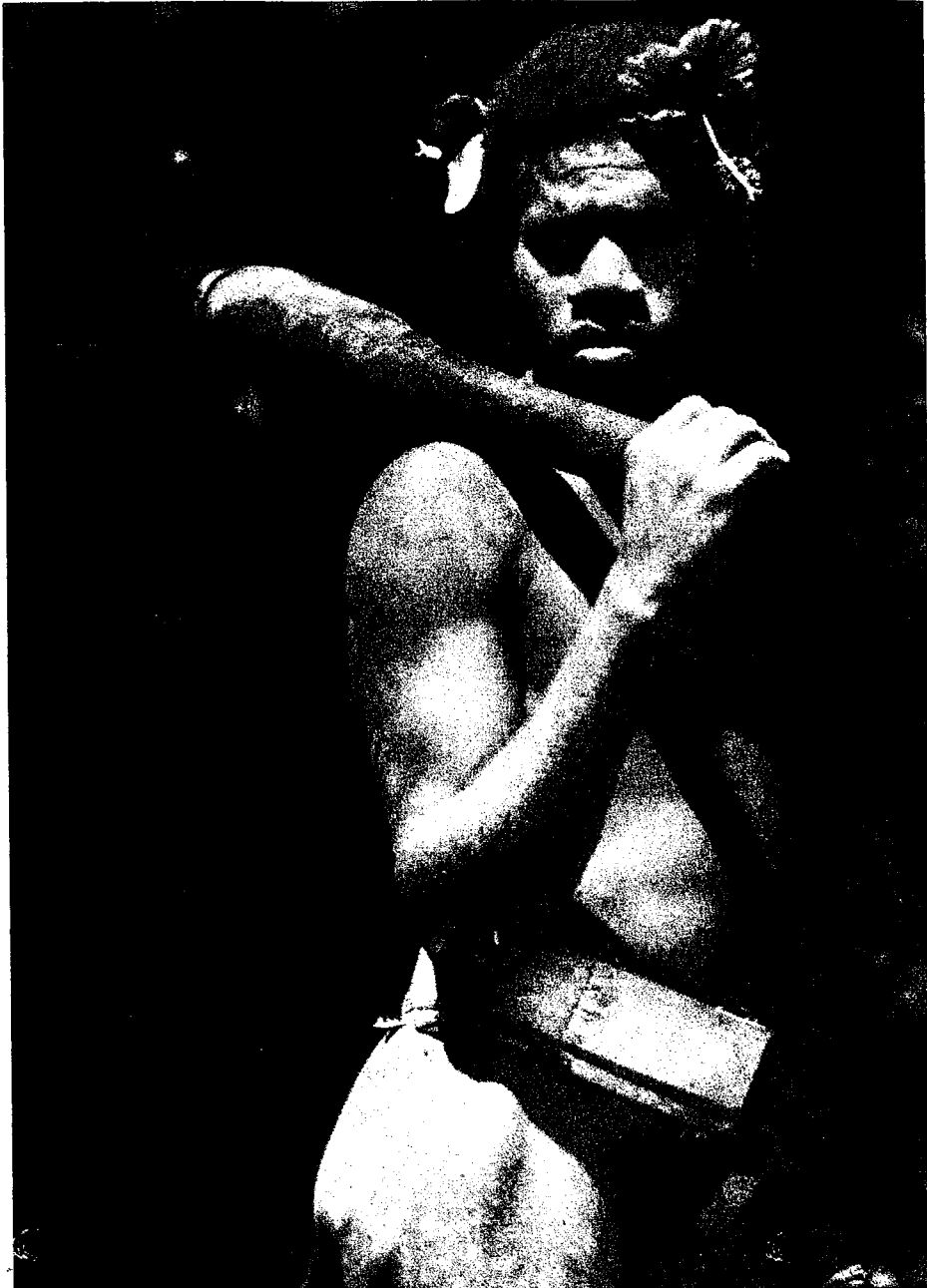


Figure 11 Norvelles Hebrides, Pentecôte: homme de Bunlap; Pentecote: the man from Bunlap. (Les Editions du Pacifique; Bernard Hermann, photographer)

the 1970s and 1980s are smiling. Smiles would diminish and undermine the painted body exoticism that these cards feature.



Figure 12 Vanuatu. (World of Wonder, Port Vila; Philippe Metois, photographer)

Tourism promoters did not seize upon the smile until the 1990s, as competition in the Southwest Pacific tourist market accelerated. Four magnificent smiles, for example, shine in one late 1990s card (Figure 12).<sup>2</sup> The boys' grins, winks and thumbs-up recall and parody the National Tourism Office's motto. The card captures a complicity between local boys, who pretend to smile, and tourists who pretend that the images they buy truly portray Vanuatu reality. These smiles are as imaginary as the naked belle or the eye-catching warrior.

### Postcard Mirrors

Most postcards purchased in Port Vila get d'ailed off and end up somewhere else. This was also the case before the 1960s. Of 169 mailed cards in Shekelton's

2. This is a photograph glued onto folded cardstock—a greeting card rather than a postcard. It is one of a large series created and sold by Port Vila photographer Philippe Metois. Although not identified as such, it depicts four Tannese youths. I am grateful to Janet Dixon Keller who purchased the card in Vanuatu in 1999 and who passed it along to me.

collection, only seven (four percent) of these circulated internally (Angleviel and Shekelton 1997: 173). Numbers, today, are unknown but the large majority of postcards, purchased by tourists, leave Vanuatu for overseas addresses.

Still, cards do attract a limited local clientele. People from Tanna who travel up to Port Vila, for example, are interested to see pictures of themselves sold in tourist shops. They know that visitors often buy views of *kastom*, including images of their own decorated bodies. Postcard views, in local perspective, are exotic in a different sense. The colorful ritual, the nudity and the face paint are all familiar.

What is strange are postcard poses of the decontextualized body, timeless youth and personal anonymity. Islanders want to pull these images back into their temporal, local, family and community contexts: "Aue! That's my cousin Kamti! He looks so young! Why is he smiling? Where is he standing?" They dislike those blurred backgrounds.

Some have warned of the subversive effects of tourist images on those who are represented:

When taken to its extreme, the limiting representation of ethnicity in the travel media may lead to situations where the subjects themselves transform their own appearance to conform with tourist expectations

(Albers and James 1988: 137).

And, true enough, local rumor has it that men from one region of Tanna only revived their penis wrappers in the late 1960s at the urging of a *National Geographic* photographer who was put off by their tattered shorts and dusty t-shirts. Those social evolutionist expectations do not leave much room for maneuver (Lutz and Collins 1993). Tourists take one to be either sexily romantic or oddly exotic, and it is a short continuum between these two situations. Those four grinning boys, similarly, must have been both cooperating with and resisting the photographic command to "smile!"

But it could be worse. Vanuatu's position as an exotic locale on the global tourist circuit stocks its gift shops with images of spectacularly decorated, painted, young, good-looking, sexual and generically naturalized people engaged in ceremonial events. Darker sorts of island imagery still circulate in arenas beyond the Port Vila postcard shop or the Internet. The display and sale of island bodies goes on in some surprising places. A birthday card I discovered on sale at the University of California Berkeley Student Union, to give just one example, features a man from the highlands region of New Guinea. He stands barefoot and traditionally garbed, his chest and legs bare and his middle coiled in fiber, with a hefty stone adze on his shoulder. His eyes catch the viewer with a faint smile. And jutting forwards, he sports a

three-foot long, thin and pointy penis gourd. Open the card, and one is wished a Happy Birthday: "Congratulations on sticking it out another year." Here, once again, we are back into the picaresque. At least the postcard bodies of Port Vila have romance.

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