

Chapter 1

Introduction

Exact dates for the first human settlement of Vanuatu have never been established, however, present archaeological and linguistic evidence is suggesting that it was around 3,000 years ago that skilled seafarers of mixed Papuan and Southeast Asian ancestry left their homelands on the north-eastern coast of New Guinea and neighbouring islands and set off to settle the islands to the east, which included Vanuatu.

The initial move to populate the Southwest Pacific occurred when these people set out from their homelands, and sailed and paddled their canoes east along the Solomon Islands archipelago, setting up coastal fishing and garden villages along the way, before continuing on to occupy the hitherto uninhabited islands of Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and New Caledonia. These people were adept at inter-island travel and trade, fishing, horticulture, and the making of stone and shell tools and pottery, and were well stocked with domestic animals and planting stocks of tuber, fruit and tree crops¹.

These first settlers are now referred to as the Lapita people and they represent a particular cultural group which produced, amongst other things, a distinctive style of pottery originally discovered at Lapita, New Caledonia, and later found at archaeological digs in various coastal sites across Melanesia and western Polynesia. Kirch indicates that²:

Over the course of several centuries, many cultures developed over the islands of the Southwest Pacific, but most of these can be traced back to an ancestral Lapita pattern that began in Near Oceania [eastern mainland New Guinea and archipelagoes just off its east coast].

The dentate-stamps of the Lapita potters are thought to have been applied according to a set of artistic rules, constituting a 'grammar' of Lapita design, indicative of a common culture, at least in the earliest stages³.

The finding and dating of various Lapita pottery sites gives some idea of the chronology and rate of spread of the Lapita culture from a homeland in western Melanesia, for example, in Mussau in the Bismarck Archipelago the distinctive Lapita style of dentate-stamped pottery first appears with an age range of 3,500-3,300 B.P. (before the present, that is, before 1950), at To'aga, Ofu Island, Samoa, the age range is 3,000-2,500 B.P., at Natunuku, Viti Levu, Fiji, 3,200-3,100 B.P., at Moala's Mound, Tongatapu, 3,000 B.P., and at Lapita, New Caledonia, 2,900-2,400 B.P.⁴. Future findings of Lapita ware may well be made at other sites or may lead to some changes to the above dates, and a reappraisal of the sequence of human occupation of Vanuatu and other islands of Melanesia may need to be made.

While many of the Lapita people may have adapted to and settled permanently on the coasts of the islands of Melanesia and western Polynesia their distinctive pottery did not survive much more than six hundred years in any of the archipelagoes. Around the middle of the first millennium B.C. the Lapita pottery gave way to partially decorated or undecorated pottery.

Some of the earliest recordings of non-Lapita sites in Vanuatu include: Ifo, Erromango, 2,500-2,250 B.P., Pakea, Banks Islands, 2,200, 1,500? B.P. and Aneityum, age range 950-recent (B.P.)⁵. While the pottery style may have changed this does not necessarily mean that wholesale changes to the prevailing culture of the Lapita people occurred, or that the islands were suddenly overrun by a major influx of new migrants from the west, however, it does possibly indicate significant changes to village lifestyles.

The Mangaasi Culture of Efate, which also existed on the islands of Tongoa and Makura, produced a distinctive pottery which spanned the period between 700 B.C. and 1600 A.D. on Efate itself, however, on Tongoa and Makura the same pottery disappears about A.D. 1200⁶.

Hiscock, reporting on his archaeological work in Vanuatu in 1996-7, concluded that⁷:

During the first millennium of our era, the potters of Sinapupu [on Tikopia, Solomon Islands] settled in the islands from Santa Cruz [also in the western Solomon Islands] to Aoba. Their painted and incised pottery was most likely produced in north-west Santo. They were truly pioneers, the first agriculturists in the north of the archipelago, like the potters of Mangaasi Culture further south.

While it is widely accepted that the Lapita people are the ancient ancestors of modern-day ni-Vanuatu, only a sketchy pattern of the nature of the ancestral societies can presently be formulated. Kirch suggests that originally there were

...small-scale societies, in which individual communities ranged from perhaps only two or three households at the most. But while they incorporated relatively small numbers of people, they were not egalitarian. Reconstruction of early Austronesian and Proto Oceanic kinship terms make it clear that there were critical distinctions based on gender, birth order, age, and affinity (marriage). The birth-order distinction between older and younger siblings of the same sex is noteworthy, for this suggests a key element of *ranking* within Lapita societies⁸.

Over the last 3,000 years the many settlements that sprang up across Vanuatu, while continuing to draw on the foundations of the original Lapita culture, became isolated from one another in many cases, as their respective environments demanded unique adaptations to food production and sea harvesting, and ownership of land and protection of its borders became important. Increases in populations led to the evolution of greater sophistication of agricultural, political, military and social structures, and new languages arose to suit the respective island environment and social conditions. Quite a profound change to many of the island communities of Vanuatu and neighbouring archipelagoes

appears to have occurred around 1,200 A.D. when it is thought that Polynesians carried out back migrations from islands groups such as Tonga, resulting in the establishment of new cultural groups on such Vanuatu islands as Efate, Mele, Mae, Futuna, Aniwa and Tanna. Polynesian influence may have occurred in other Vanuatu islands as well, for example, George Forster, while a member of James Cook's second exploration of the Pacific in 1774, visited Big Bay, Espiritu Santo, and on meeting with some of the indigenous people, started counting the numerals in the dialect of the Friendly Islands [Tonga], only to find the islanders immediately interrupting him and finishing counting to ten in that language⁹:

Polynesian influence in Tanna was first noted by Forster who wrote¹⁰.

...several tribes of different nations have peopled the island of Tanna, and may have disputed the possession of the ground with each other. Besides the common language of the island, and besides a dialect of that of the Friendly Islands [Tonga], we collected some words of a third language, chiefly current among the inhabitants of its western hills; and we particularly obtained the numerals of all the three tongues, which are indeed totally distinct.

Vanuatu, like the rest of Melanesia and unlike Polynesia, has spawned, since its beginnings around 3,000 years ago, a remarkable diversity of societies and languages, which led D.R. Swindler to suggest¹¹:

Melanesia's populations as seen today are the products of generations of racial churning, in which the evolutionary processes of mutation, migration, natural selection, genetic drift, and selective mating have effectively contributed to the racial diversity so demonstrable there today.

Evidence of a long era of separate development for many of the peoples of Vanuatu is seen in the number of languages spoken in the archipelago today - around 110 across Vanuatu's 80 islands - however, despite this great range of languages (which have arisen from the base language that originated with the fusion of Austronesian and Papuan languages over 3,000 years ago) there remains much across the archipelago that is common regarding the material culture, subsistence practices, and the reliance on a supernatural power or influence.

With the evolution of civilisations along the length of the Vanuatu archipelago there arose the formation of various sets of neighbouring islands that formed their own trading links; networks in which material and social exchanges took place. Specialised products such as dyes, clays, barks, pigs, yams, taros and other food stuffs, fish, masks, mats, shell money and manufactured articles such as pots and clubs, some of which could be found only in certain places, were some of the items of trade. Circular mobility patterns of trade developed with islanders rarely being involved in long absences from their permanent homes¹².

The long process of settlement of Vanuatu has not lacked a range of life-threatening natural disasters and diseases which have provided a stern test for ni-Vanuatu over many centuries; the principal threats have come from violent summer cyclones and tidal waves, and malaria, a disease resulting from infection by *Plasmodium falciparum*, which is spread

by the anopheles mosquito.

Vanuatu, along with the Solomon Islands and the low- to midlatitude districts of New Guinea have been, for a long and indeterminate length of time, subjected to the ravages of *P. falciparum*. Malaria, and a wide range of other infectious and parasitic viruses, protozoa, bacteria and other disease-causing micro-organisms, were well entrenched in Vanuatu when Europeans first arrived, and no doubt all were having a telling effect on the population growth, vigour and social activities of the people of the archipelago.

What did ni-Vanuatu know of their own origins prior to the arrival of Europeans at the beginning of the 17th century A.D.? R.H. Codrington, a missionary who spent time in the northern islands of Vanuatu between 1863 and 1887, and recorded the customs, beliefs and languages of the islanders, made this observation about Melanesians generally¹³:

The origin of the Melanesian people, in their various seats and in their various divisions, may be taken to be unknown; as they themselves have apparently no traditions and no opinions about the matter, and in the stories that pass among them represent themselves to have been created where they are. There are not wanting some myths of origin, over and above the stories of creation told of Koevasi, Qat, or Tagar.

George Sarawia, of Vanua Lava, Vanuatu, who saw Europeans for the first time in 1857 and later became a friend of Codrington's, visited New Zealand with missionaries soon after 1857 and on returning home told his people of the great number of islands he had seen, and wrote¹⁴:

Until now we had known of the existence of only six islands, Maewo, Aoba, Marina [Espiritu Santo], Vava (Torres), Vanikoro and Tikopia. These were the furthestmost islands in the world, and there were no more.

Sarawia, it seems, had no concept of his people originating beyond the islands he mentions.

When Europeans first arrived what did the people of Vanuatu make of them? Again we may turn to Codrington and Sarawia and consider their observations on this matter. First, Sarawia¹⁵:

When we saw ships come sailing and our people went out to them and saw men who were all white, we did not know where these very white men had come from. We thought that perhaps they lived on the rim of the sky, because we saw them wearing red clothes, and thought they had made them red with something out of the sun, because the sun is red when it rises and sets. And some people in olden days who had seen ships said they were floating islands, and had the mistaken idea that the white men were not men at all, but spirits or ghosts.

Codrington¹⁶:

The first vessels they [Banks Islanders] remember to have seen were whalers, which they

did not believe to have come from any country in the world; they were indeed quite sure that they did not, but must have been made out at sea, because they knew that no men in the world had such vessels. In the same way they were sure that the voyagers were not men; if they were they would be black. What were they then? They were ghosts, and being ghosts, of necessity of those of men who had lived in the world. A very short acquaintance with white visitors shows that they are not ghosts, but certainly does not show that they are men; the conjecture then is that they are beings of another order, spirits or demons, powerful no doubt, but mischievous. A ghost would be received in a peaceful and respectful manner, as European visitors have always in the first instance been received; a being not a living man or ghost has wonderful things with him to see and to procure, but he probably brings disease and disaster.

Vanuatu's first recorded European visit was made by a Spanish expedition in 1606, led by a Portuguese, Pedro Fernandez de Quiros. Quiros sailed in from the north, made sightings of several northern islands of the archipelago and had contact with the indigenous people on two of them, Gaua and Espiritu Santo. Following this visit Europeans did not return to Vanuatu for another 162 years, some five generations on, however, the next visit, by the Frenchman Bougainville in 1768, heralded the start of a wave of European visitors, at first explorers and then whalers, sandalwood traders, missionaries and beachcombers.

James Cook of England arrived in 1774, and explored, mapped and laid down the general outline of today's Vanuatu, missing only the Banks and Torres Groups on his visit. Surprisingly Cook appears to have had no knowledge of the existence of the Banks and Torres Groups, however, these Groups which were eventually to become a part of Vanuatu, were soon revealed to the outside world by William Bligh, who made two brief visits, one in 1789 and another in 1792. Bligh's visits were followed by French, Spanish and American (two) expeditions, all brief and occurring around the turn of the eighteenth century. Completing here the set of the first European expeditions to visit Vanuatu, as well as signalling the end of the initial period of European visitation to, and exploration of, this archipelago, is the visit of the Russian, Vassily Golovnin, who spent a brief, but significant time in Tanna in the south of the archipelago in 1809. This visit marked the first occasion on which Europeans visited the same Vanuatu island community a second time, and at the same time became one of the last opportunities for Europeans to observe the culture of the indigenous people prior to the advent of profound material and social changes brought about by the European whalers, traders, missionaries and beachcombers who were soon to appear in the archipelago.

While the ethnological data recorded by the earliest visitors may be judged by some to be of a prejudiced and unscientific nature, it is all we have to work with in terms of first-hand written accounts of the period between 1606 and 1809. Many of the earliest European explorers did seek to be objective in laying down their impressions of all that they saw in Vanuatu, however, their views were no doubt under the influence of a strong belief at the time in the superiority of their civilisation.

This book deals with a total of ten expeditions which are set out in six chapters. The major European visits (by Quiros, Bougainville, Cook, Bligh, and Golovnin) are dealt with in

separate chapters, each of which includes biographical notes on the leaders of the respective expeditions and the historical context, as well as the specific passages of the journals which relate to the visits to Vanuatu. The four minor visits (by Malasyina, d'Entrecasteaux, Nichol and the ship *Herald*) to Vanuatu, are dealt with in the one chapter and here the journal excerpt relating to the visits to Vanuatu is presented with little additional comment on the leaders or the historical context.

Chapter 1 contains the accounts of both Quiros and Luis Vaez de Torres, the second-in-command of Quiros' Spanish expedition of 1606. The two separated before leaving Espiritu Santo and ultimately both provided differing perceptions of their visit to the archipelago. Quiros' journal features the belief that his expedition, on reaching Big Bay, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, had reached *Terra Australis incognita*, the 'grand continent' of European imagination thought to exist somewhere in the South Pacific region. As a result he gave this land and other lands he observed to the south which he believed were connected to Espiritu Santo, the grandiose name *Australia del Espiritu Santo*'?

Chapter 2 deals with the French expedition of 1768, led by Antoine de Bougainville, who sailed from east to west through the central north of the archipelago and gave the group of islands visited the name *Archipelago of the Great Cyclades*. Chapter 3 deals with a British expedition of 1774, led by James Cook, who mapped the great majority of islands that now make up today's Vanuatu, and in so doing gave it the new name *New Hebrides*.

Chapter 4 deals with the two separate visits of the Englishman William Bligh to the far northern islands of the archipelago in 1789 and 1793 respectively, when he charted some of the Banks Islands and three of the Torres Islands; chapter 5 covers the brief visits of Antoine D'Entrecasteaux (French) in 1793, Aledjandro Malasyina (Spanish) in 1793, Captain Nichol (American) in 1800, and the ship *Herald* (American) in 1805; and chapter 6 deals with the Russian expedition of 1809, led by Vassily Golovnin, who made significant observations while visiting Tanna in the south of Vanuatu.

It should be noted that in the lengthy accounts of the Quiros and Cook voyages to Vanuatu, some passages dealing with wind and weather details have been omitted. Where reference to a *league* occurs in the journals of Quiros' visit, it is the measure used by the Spanish and Portuguese of the period, which was about 3.43 geographical or sea miles, while the league referred to in the journals of the succeeding visits of the British and French was equivalent to 3 geographical or sea miles. Where imperial measures are encountered and conversion to a metric measure is desired the following equivalents may be helpful: one land mile equals 1.6 kilometres; one inch is 2.54 centimetres; and one pound in weight is equivalent to approximately 454 grams.

Note that where reference is made to the indigenous people of Vanuatu the modern term *ni-Vanuatu* is used where appropriate.

Footnotes

1. Kirch 2000.
2. Kirch 2000: 102.
3. Kirch 2000.
4. Kirch 2000: Tables 4.1, 4.2.

5. Kirch 2000: Table 5.1.
6. Bellwood 1979.
7. In *Archaeology World*: 'Dating of Excavations from 1996 and 1997', Peter Hiscock (ed.) <http://art.alpha.anu.edu.au/web/arc/vks/htm> (4 June 1998).
8. Kirch 2000: 114-15.
9. Forster 1777: 371.
10. Forster 1777: 359.
11. Bellwood 1979: 48.
12. Bedford in Brookfield 1973: 187.
13. Codrington 1891: 20.
14. Sarawia 1968: 13
15. Sarawia 1968:13
16. Codrington 1891: 21.
17. Quiros changed the spelling of 'Australis' to 'Austrialia' as a compliment to his king, Philip III, who was also Archduke of Austria.