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KAIO, KAPWIER, NEPEK, AND *NUK*

Human and non-human agency and 'conservation' on Tanna, Vanuatu

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PERSONAL STATEMENT

One cannot travel anywhere in Vanuatu without encountering the deep green of the tropical rainforest, what local people call '*dak bus*' ('dark bush') in Bislama, the country's Pidgin English lingua franca (which is now rapidly creolising). Our interest in the concept of conservation on Tanna comes from different but linked disciplinary backgrounds. James Flexner is an archaeologist interested in long-term transformations of human-ecological relationships in Oceania. Lamont Lindstrom is an ethnographer and linguist interested in relationships between speech, power, performance, and history (and a fluent speaker of Tanna's Nafe language, which we use in this paper). Francis Hickey has works for the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in the realm of traditional resource management, particularly of marine and nearshore environments. Chief Jacob Kapere was added post-humously to this paper, as he has been inspirational in all of our work on Tanna. Jacob was a long-time champion of Tannese *kastom* and directed the Vanuatu Cultural Centre's film and sound unit as well as the TAFEA Provincial Cultural Centre based on Tanna. Jacob passed away unexpectedly at his home village of Imaki in 2017 during a customary dance. We come to this discussion from a perspective of both scholarly interest and concern for the future shared with our friends on the island. Tanna has always been a dynamic island, but its engagements with the outside world have not always been happy ones (see: Adams 1984; Guiart 1956, for example).

ABSTRACT

Tanna is a small island in Vanuatu, a nation of eighty-three islands in the South Pacific. There are, at present, no active officially designated protected areas on the island. Nonetheless, there are spaces in which conservation takes place through making specific areas or resources tabu. *Personal*

titles govern rights to land on Tanna. Land and more broadly 'nature' are inspirited, which makes difficult any establishment of government-sanctioned conservation or protected areas on the island. Indigenous approaches to governance and management under the umbrella of 'kastom' *(tradition) follow an alternative path to environmental conservation—one that raises certain challenges as well as opportunities to rethink orthodox Western assumptions.*

Lukaotem gud envaeronmen blong yumi (Care for the environment)

Intensifying incursions of foreign capital, non-government organisations, and missionaries—combined with some evidence for deterioration of customary roles, leadership, and family relationships—give cause to worry about a sustainable future on Tanna. Yet there is a deep foundation of customary land and marine resource management practices and more generally traditional practices in Tannese society—described under the umbrella term '*kastom*' (Lindstrom 1982). Thus, we come to this chapter from a place of hope that our friends on Tanna will recognise the great wealth of knowledge already in place that can help them find a way to negotiate contemporary concerns using the strength of their *kastom*, as they have throughout the island's history.

Protecting 'nature' in Vanuatu

Vanuatu's eighty-three islands (Figure 17.1) have been inhabited by human beings for roughly 3,000 years (Bedford 2006), during which time the land and sea have been transformed by a variety of human activities—foremost among them are shifting cultivation, animal husbandry, and fishing. Colonial encounters over the course of the 1800s resulted in a period of intense transformation, particularly as a result of depopulation because of introduced diseases (McArthur 1981) and the transformation of relationships to land (Van Trease 1987). The islands were ruled under a joint British-French colonial government for roughly 100 years. During this time, there was no successful attempt at establishing conservation areas in the archipelago. Considerable environmental damage did occur during the colonial era as a result of large-scale land clearance along the coastal areas for establishing coconut plantations.

When independence was achieved in 1980, Vanuatu's constitution returned most land (except urban plots) to 'custom owners', requiring these to be Indigenous citizens of the country. The constitution established a National Council of Chiefs (known as the Malvatumauri) and recognised that Council's "general competence to discuss all matters relating to custom and tradition" and that Parliament "may" consult the Council about these matters. Parliament significantly strengthened chiefly powers over land in 2013. The *Customary Land Management Act 2013*, and amendments to the *Land Reform Act (1980)*, established that Parliament now *must* consult with the Malvatumauri about further revisions of land law and created processes for identifying custom land owners who gained greater control over their lands and for settling disputes among themselves (Forsyth 2009, 2012).

Traditional resource management strategies throughout Vanuatu were many and varied depending on the cultural linguistic group—of which there are more than 100. Customary land and marine tenure systems everywhere gave clans, traditional leaders, and families exclusive rights to inhabit and use resources in local lands and marine areas, to exclude outsiders, and to regulate activities in these areas (Johannes and Hickey 2004). Families often also possessed usufruct rights (basically, the right to use resources in a non-damaging or

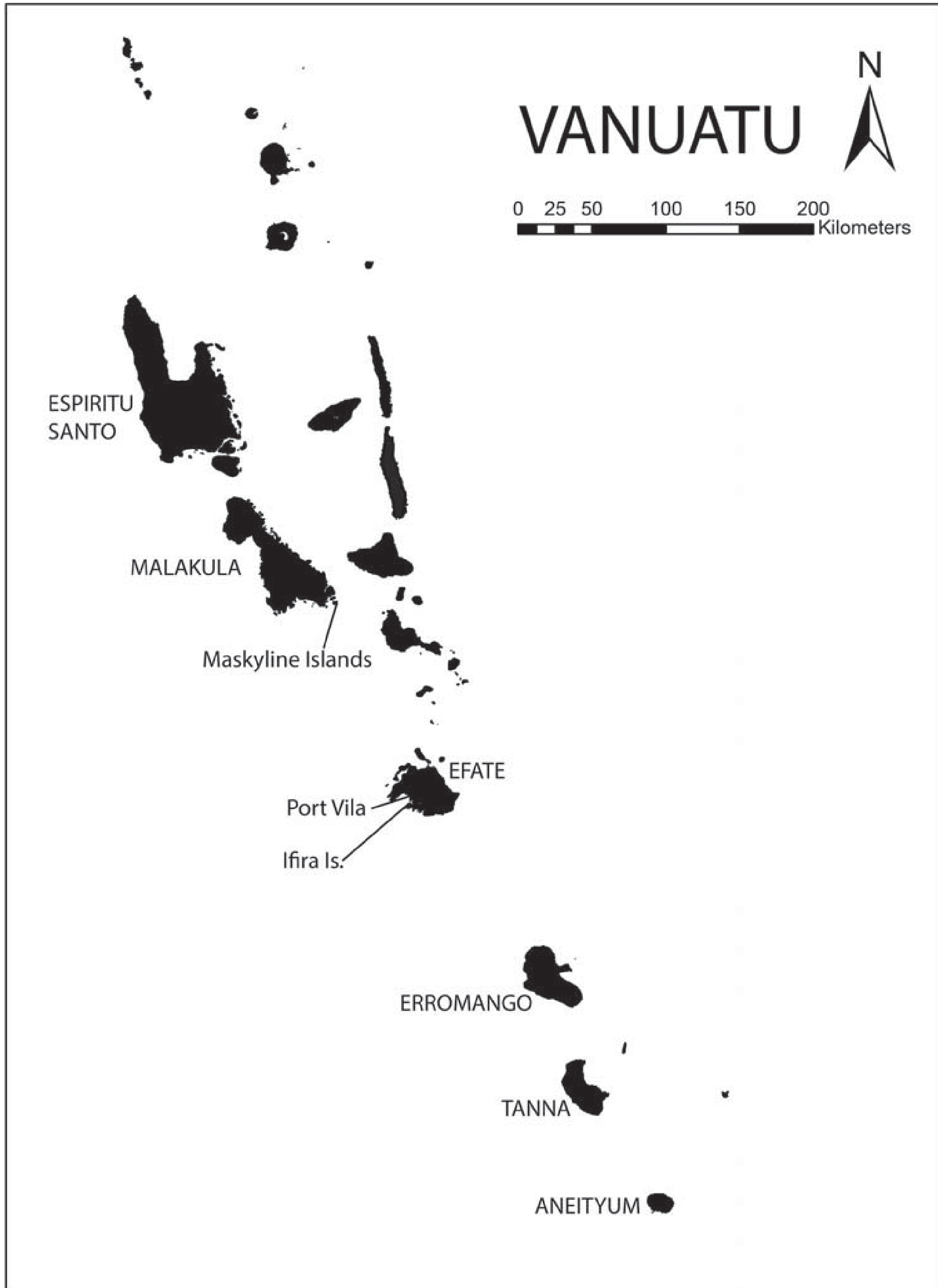

FIGURE 17.1 Map of Vanuatu showing the main islands mentioned in the text.

Source: The authors (2017).

extractive manner) to lands controlled by others. Community-level resource management remains possible as the government of Vanuatu recognises and supports customary tenure in the constitution of the Republic, and traditional leaders and resource custodians continue to see the introduction of village-based prohibitions as their traditional right and responsibility. Other management strategies (Hickey 2007) include species-specific prohibitions; seasonal closures of land and marine areas; traditional calendars; food avoidance (of clan totems, for example); behavioural prohibitions (sexual abstinence prior to fishing, for example); spatial-temporal refugia (*tabu* that rotated with the death of traditional leaders or family members); grade-taking ceremonies in which junior men purchase titles and a series of rights from their seniors; traditional leaders' ordination; yam season reef closures; and preparations for specific feasts or other traditions. Sacred sites or *tabu* (lit. 'taboo'; sacred, restricted or forbidden) areas also form a mosaic of spatial-temporal refugia across marine, coastal, and bush (forested) areas that—in Western ecological terms—contribute to biocultural diversity of all islands.

Identification of land ownership remains problematic, as is determination of the exact membership of land ownership groups that 'are mostly dominated by Chiefs' (McDonnell 2014). Throughout much of Vanuatu—including Tanna—it can be as difficult to identify generally accepted chiefs as it is to determine membership of land ownership groups. People's claims to both chiefly position and landowner status overlap and conflict in many places. Although local leaders in Vanuatu are today dubbed chiefs (*jif*), chiefly authority and status varies throughout the archipelago (Lindstrom 1993b). Through the central and northern islands of the archipelago, men claim leadership status based on patrilineal or matrilineal descent from previous chiefs or from their rank in men's 'grade-taking' systems. On Tanna, having a chiefly personal name and enough grey hair (that is, being an elder) can be more important than descent when claiming local leadership status.

Many chiefs assert rights to proclaim temporary resource extraction '*tabu*'—blocking community access to land, reef, or sea resources (Johannes and Hickey 2004: p. 19; Lewell 2004: p. 22). In central and northern Vanuatu, *namele* (*Cycas* spp.) leaves tied to trees, or otherwise posted, have signalled a chiefly *tabu* on harvesting fish, bêche-de-mer (sea cucumber), Trochus (sea snails), sea turtles, yams, and so on. Swiss ethnographer Felix Speiser (1996), who traversed the archipelago between 1910 and 1912, reported:

> Anyone can impose a taboo but it depends on the mana [spiritual and political power] of the person concerned whether his taboo will be heeded or not. An important man who has quantities of mana can proclaim very effective taboos because everyone fears punishment. But the punishments threatened by a man possessing little mana can easily be neutralised by countermagic.
>
> (p. 316)

High-ranking men, conversely, "can forbid admission to a whole district or stretch of the coast or prohibit dancing, the eating of coconuts, trading with neighbours, and the like" (ibid.). Speiser also noted the use of Cycas/*namele* leaves as taboo markers, "for which reason the cycas palm is also known as the taboo palm" (ibid.; for similar description of *tabu*-marking *namele* leaves, see Codrington 1891: p. 216; Deacon 1934: p. 188; Rivers 1914: volume 1, p. 62, volume 2, p. 228; Harrisson (1937: p. 428) displays a drawing of a portable tabu marker with *namele* leaf from Espiritu Santo).

Late 1800s bêche-de-mer, Trochus and other resource exploitation for the mostly Chinese export market may have spread the practice (Hickey 2007: p. 155). Jimmy Stephens' adoption of the *namele* leaf in the 1960s as a key symbol of the Nagriamel Movement—an Espiritu Santo-based independence movement on Vanuatu's largest island—certainly boosted its popularity. Nagriamel supporters frequently brandished *namele* leaves to block colonial plantations from expanding onto movement-claimed 'dark bush' land. Marked by *namele* leaves or not, temporary chiefly *tabu* on land and marine resource use are widely accepted throughout much of Vanuatu, although not always honoured (see: Johannes and Hickey 2004). For instance, Ifira Island's Council of Chiefs banned harvesting of all marine resources along much of Vila Bay in late 2016, with "namele leaves strategically placed along the entire sea boundary" (Cullwick 2017)—without much apparent success. This is a consequence of Vanuatu's capital being inhabited by people from many other islands who do not identify with or feel they fall under the authority of Efate Island chiefs. Urban land is in a different legal category and customary land tenure systems increasingly no longer apply effectively in town.

The current laws of the Republic of Vanuatu allow for the establishment of conservation areas, with the caveat that these areas must be created with the permission of local landowners. Customary landowners may retain certain rights, for example, to collect specific resources at different times of the year (Techera 2005). These Community Conservation Areas (CCAs) are currently administered by the Department of Environmental Protection and Conservation. CCAs are an attempt to blend customary land-use practices, environmental protection, and community economic development in their ideal form, though they rarely work this way in practice. Major CCAs include a Kauri forest reserve on Erromango, Vatthe Conservation Area on Espiritu Santo and the Ringhe te Suh marine reserve in the Maskelyne Islands off Malakula (Vanuatu Ministry of Lands 2014).

Vatthe Conservation Area is a good illustration of how the process for establishing CCAs works (Techera 2005: pp. 114–115). The initial idea for protecting the area was proposed in 1993, led by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program. Thus, this proposal was led from the outside and top-down, which led to a number of misunderstandings within the local community of Espiritu Santo. It took many years to settle a land dispute and for people to understand the meaning of this CCA designation before it could move forward, and the official inscription did not occur until 2004. While certain species are protected, the community retains hunting rights to others. For example, Pacific flying fox and imperial pigeon can be hunted during seasons permitted by local chiefs within limitations set by the Department of Environmental Protection and Conservation—thus, there is overlapping authority. The community also retains the right to collect forest resources for traditional purposes—such as gathering medicinal plants or timber to be used for canoes. Any changes to specified management plans of a CCA, however, requires the consent of the Department of Environmental Protection and Conservation, which effectively removes a community's autonomy over controlling access to resources. So far, the concept of the CCA has yet to gain traction on Tanna, though this may change in the future as island society is transforming rapidly—particularly in response to the burgeoning tourist economy.

Chiefs, spirits, and magic on Tanna

According to a recent dictionary, there is no word for 'nature' in Tannese languages (Nehrbass 2012). This reflects the fact that Tannese people do not recognise any distinction between

'human', 'natural', and spirit worlds. Their island has always, in local reckoning, had people on it. The island's life—from the reefs, to the magic springs, to the enchanted yam gardens—derives from magical sources connected to the world of spirits and ancestors. Land is actively cultivated, most spectacularly in the *takwu* (yam mounds), which can reach 2 metres in height and 20 metres in diameter. 'Aristocratic' yams (*Dioscorea alata)* from these mounds can reach 1.5 metres in length and weigh more than 22 kilograms (Turner 1861: p. 87).

These gardens, which are also used to grow sugarcane, bananas, vegetables, and the intoxicating kava plant, are powered by magic stones (discussed below). In coastal areas, the primary source of protein is fish, shellfish from the reefs, and occasionally fish from deeper water. Marine resources are also controlled by stones. Pigs are raised—though generally only butchered on special occasions, such as the *nakwiari* festival (known to tourists as *toka*)—during which hundreds of dancers exchange pigs and kava. Pigs may also be sacrificed to settle disputes.

The island's power stones (*kapwier*) guarantee fertility and reproduction, but they can also provoke natural catastrophe and calamity. Tannese also recognise various kinds of non-human actors in their environment. These include *ieremha*, the spirits of dead ancestors, and also non-human spirits associated with significant places including Iasur volcano, the mountain peaks, creeks and rivers, and rock and coral formations (see also Studley and Horsely, Ch. 5, this volume). Encounters with spirits of any sort can result in illness and even death, and there are magical specialists responsible for managing relationships between the human and the spirit worlds. Trees, springs, stones, and birds can and do have spiritual power, efficacious in the human world (Bonnemaison 1994: pp. 170–182, for example).

Cultivated land can lie fallow for many years, allowing the tropical rainforest to regrow as planters rotate through the plots of land that they have the right to clear. Garden plots are linked to small hamlets where people live, as well as the all-important kava drinking and dancing grounds (*imwarim*)—cleared spaces enclosed by enormous banyan trees (*nepuk*). People—including those living in the larger towns of Lenakel and Middle Bush—will have connections to multiple garden plots, and while men will have a 'home' *imwarim*, they often visit neighbouring kava grounds (and increasingly, commercial 'kava bars') to drink with friends or family members. This is combined with Tannese marriage practice that presumes virilocality—new wives move to their husbands' place of residence. Thus, one's mother almost always comes from a different place from one's father, further creating a network of ties linking hamlets, garden plots, and *imwarim*. Another layer of social complexity is added through the two 'moieties' on the island, *Koyoweta* and *Numrukuen*, rival groups that are likewise spread across Tanna's landscape (Bonnemaison 1994; Brunton 1989; Guiart 1956).

On Tanna, chiefship is contested and heterarchical. There are various rankings of chiefs: *ierumanu*, the chief who ostensibly leads the land division; *iani neteta*, a kind of 'talking chief' who has the right to wear the feathers of the *kweria* (hawk) during certain ceremonies; and various *tupunas* or magicians who manage power stones that govern weather, crops, and marine resources, among other phenomena. The larger land divisions (*neteta*; literally 'canoe') on the island reflect this complexity. Compared with the neighbouring island of Erromango, which has six main divisions, and Aneityum, which has seven, Tanna has close to 120 *neteta* (the number varies as some divisions remain disputed). Because of the complex chief structures, Tannese society has been described as 'atomistic' (Brunton 1979), with the daily kava ritual on the island serving to unite men together.

The chiefly situation on Tanna, and also resource taboos, are complicated insofar as possession of certain personal names, which a boy may receive from his father, his father's kin group, or from any man wishing to adopt him, also justifies claims to chiefly status (Lindstrom 1985). Most local groups, which are typically fairly small in number, include people who possess several chiefly titles of the two main sorts: *ierumanu* ('ruler') and *iani neteta* ('spokesman of the canoe'). Anthropologist Jean Guiart (1956: p. 9), in the early 1950s, counted 601 'chiefs' when the island's population totalled just 6,937, or one chief for every 11 followers. Tanna still boasts a remarkable plethora of chiefs, some of whom gather in official and unofficial Councils of Chiefs—the largest being the 'Nikoletan Council of Chiefs'. Neither of the two main chiefly titles, however, gives rights to ban resource use. Rather, these come with ownership and knowledge to deploy the pertinent *nukwei nari* (power stone) that controls and commands that resource. These stones often look like the resource they are meant to control (Figure 17.2). Stone masters, *tupunas*, may or may not also be chiefs.

Many men, and most families, have rights to one or two of these stones. Stones engage spiritual governance of many aspects of the environment—including the fertility of cultigens, pigs, fish, turtles, sharks, and other sea creatures, and the rains, winds, cyclones, and volcanic eruptions. Public observance of stone magic—and stones themselves, many of which new converts destroyed or surrendered to Christian missionaries—fell away between 1900 and

FIGURE 17.2 *Nukwei nuk*, yam stones, south Tanna.

Photo credit: Vanuatu Cultural Centre Photo Archives.

1980. After Vanuatu's independence, a resurgence and pride in *kastom* encouraged many local groups to find lost stones and revive their use—except for fearful *nukwei nahak*, sorcery stones once used to kill people. Some stone masters can and do enact temporary taboos on resource extraction. No family in some communities, for example, can harvest new yam gardens in March/April until the yam stone master offers up first yam fruits to Mwatiktiki or other significant local spirits. Access to most other edible cultivars including fruit and nut trees is also controlled by the relevant stone masters. This also acts as a resource management strategy to ensure that fruits and nuts fully mature before people may harvest them.

Several men in the same community may control stones with similar powers (over rain, taro, kava, and the winds, for example). Frequently, no one has undisputed authority to control any one particular resource. Still, stone masters—particularly those who look after important cultigens—do proclaim calendrical and, sometimes, occasional bans on resource harvests. *Tupunas* on Tanna can mark a *tabu* but typically with wild cane (*ning*) rather than *namele* leaves. British explorer James Cook's crew, for example, landing at Port Resolution in 1774 helped themselves to wood and water, ignoring a line of wild cane markers that Pavegin (also sometimes called 'Paowang') and other Port Resolution leaders had set into the beach to protect themselves from strangers. It is possible that Cook and company had been identified as *ieremha* (ancestral spirits), and there is some indication that the line of reeds marking the *tabu* offering was meant to determine whose ancestors the white sailors embodied (Beaglehole 1969: pp. 484–485, Note 4). That the *ierehma* did not behave as expected in relation to the offering—insisting instead on behaving as men—may have been disturbing for the people on the beach. Speiser (1996: p. 316) also documented these wild cane "twigs tied together in a special way", citing Presbyterian missionary William Gray (1892) who had earlier described "*tubuhaner*" [*tupunas*] preparing reed [cane] *tabu* markers "stuck in the earth, wherever wanted" (p. 652). As Speiser remarked, these *tabu* are variously effective.

Marked *tabu* may be less common than in the past, but they continue to supplement more general avoidance of certain spiritually animated *tabu* areas (sacred sites). Temporary *tabu* and ongoing disputes both limit land use and resource exploitation. On most areas of Tanna, the nearshore reefs are closed to harvesting with the planting of yams around September and October and remain under *tabu* until New Yam the following March/April (Hickey 2007). As these hot months are the time when most marine organisms are at their reproductive peaks, this annual 6-month closure has significant management value in maintaining marine resources. The hunting of wild pigs is also traditionally closed during this period, and, as it is also the time for their reproduction, again management value is apparent. Timing resource *tabu* in this way is unsurprising and reflects a deep and abiding understanding of Tanna's ecology by the local people.

Other island areas (land and shore) can remain abandoned and unused for years if a serious tenure dispute prevents people from exploiting resources there. Island lands are personally, not communally, owned, although a landowner has no right to sell or alienate territory but rather must pass this down—along with his name—to a namesake (typically but not always a son). Ideally, every male personal name is a land title. Should a man die without a namesake, other men in his 'canoe', or landowning group, then step forward to give his name and other names he may control to some other child or adult who, thus named, is entitled to associated lands and other rights to power stones, to chiefly title, to tapa (barkcloth) belt designs which denote chiefly status, and more (Lindstrom 1985).

In an oral society that relies on memory and stories for information storage, however, rival and overlapping claims and disputes are common. Land rights often are argued over multiple generations. People have long memories, and if they are unwilling for some time to bring forth a land claim against powerful rivals, they may hold this in reserve for several decades until their arguments and levels of community support improve. Islanders typically avoid public use of land under dispute, and such disputes may last decades. The land tenure system and its expected, regular disputes and revisions effectively remove significant pockets of land from cultivation and other uses—often for many years. Land's deep connection with personhood makes it difficult for islanders to consider surrendering any land to the state as some officially protected area such as a CCA, even if these are believed to attract tourist income. Ironically, the perception that CCAs attract tourists may be misguided, as the show-casing of *kastom* has proven to be remarkably successful on Tanna, as for example with the Yakel 'cultural village'.

Considering land's personal and spiritual foundations, it is unsurprising that there are no officially protected areas on Tanna. As Tannese have always taken care of their island, it has always taken care of them. So long as the proper measures are followed to maintain the health of the magic gardens—and to organise the relationships with the spirit world appropriately—there should be no need for government intervention in island affairs. On top of this, the complexity of chiefly relationships and customary land titles would render attempts to create a CCA anywhere on the island difficult—if not impossible—as it requires declaration over tenure and boundaries as part of the process. Looking to the history of the period immediately preceding independence, one could also point to the 'rebellious' and fiercely independent nature of Tannese people, who once considered establishing their own nation outside of the Vanuatu government (Bonnemaison 1994: pp. 276–301).

Iasur: The lone exception?

Looming over the southeast of Tanna is the active volcano Iasur, the spiritual centre of the island (and arguably for some Tannese, the world), turned into a major tourist attraction after independence. Iasur volcano is Tanna's foremost *kwopen ikinan*, or sacred, spiritually animated place. An active 361 metre high cinder cone on Tanna's eastern coast, the volcano erupts every few minutes, shooting lava bombs and ash into the sky (Figure 17.3). An ash plain and, until 2000, a freshwater lake spreads around its base. As one of the world's most easily accessible active volcanoes, Iasur attracts an escalating flood of overseas tourists to the island. Traditionally, the home (and former earth oven) of spirit women Sapai and Moaga, in recent years people have imagined the caldera also to be the abode of John Frum and his spirit army. John Frum is a latter-day culture hero whose messages sparked a social movement in the late 1930s, which has since institutionalised into a church and political party (see: Lindstrom 1993a, for example).

Although not actively designated a protected area, Iasur and its surroundings are guarded space. When James Cook arrived at Port Resolution in 1774, he and his naturalists expressed the desire to ascend the volcano to local traditional leaders and set off a number of times only to be led in circles back to the beach (Beaglehole 1969: pp. 491–493). As it was *tabu* to take the newcomers to this sacred place, they were unsuccessful in their desire to ascend the active cone. Like other inspirited places on the island that many avoid, some islanders, too, hesitate to ascend the cone, even though dozens of tourists are taken by truck up to the caldera rim

FIGURE 17.3 A group of Tannese children on the ash plane below Iasur volcano.
Photo credit: Vanuatu Cultural Centre Photo Archives.

every evening. The rain of lava bombs sometimes spills over the crater's rim, and a few visitors have been maimed or killed by falling magma. Islanders who ascend to the rim occasionally leave offerings or passage markers of stones, which are often wrapped in leaves, as they may when traversing other inspirited zones, although younger, cheekier visitors occasionally shout "*aue ata keikei!*" ("alas, father dear!") into the crater.

Iasur has remained protected by ongoing land disputes—conflict that tourism and its revenues have occasionally exacerbated. Surrounding communities stake overlapping claims to the area and to the crater itself. As noted, people avoid obvious use of disputed lands as they do spirit places, in that both rival land claimants and spirits can cause trouble. When the Presbyterian Mission hired a lands surveyor in 1914, he mapped the volcano area dividing this into ten land parcels (although Bonnemaison (1994: pp. 149–151) situated the caldera within the currently depopulated Iankahi 'canoe' or land division). Persistent dispute about which group has best claim to Iasur has waxed and waned over the years since it was surveyed. Before Vanuatu's independence, the New Hebrides Anglo-French Joint Condominium Court, which dealt with land disputes in the colonial territory, unsuccessfully attempted to mediate one of these cases, suggesting that the volcano might be set aside as a national park. Given fierce local attachment to land, none of the parties agreed to surrender the volcano to the state: A 1993 listing of the volcano as a cultural reserve likewise fizzled. Rivals have since established working arrangements to manage Iasur jointly and to share

income derived from tourism. Visitors currently pay about US $70 to be transported by truck to the caldera rim. Different villages rotate in assigning young men and women to collect visitor fees and to serve as tourist guides.

Local wariness about competing claims to Iasur, and respect and nervousness that attend all inspirited places, sustain the area's protected status. The volcano's increasing fame as a tourist spectacle also animates this status—its spirit draws tourists to Tanna, and local communities and entrepreneurs are motivated to protect the site. Increasing tourist numbers, however, are a new source of environmental stress. This is a repeating theme within Vanuatu as tourism development presses onward. Respect for sacred sites or *tabu* places diminishes in the face of economic development, and our observations suggest that this is possibly accompanied by attendant loss of biocultural diversity.

Traditional governance and the protection of nature in a changing environment

Is it possible in the 21st century to protect 'natural' areas without government intervention? Tanna presents a useful example of some of the ways that this might happen. On the one hand, there is much to be concerned about. Many chiefs on Tanna explicitly worry about natural disasters, particularly after Cyclone Pam ripped through the island in 2015, with winds exceeding 280 kilometres/hr. They are likewise concerned with climate change that could result in rising seas, deplenished reefs, and disturbances to the crop cycle. The incursion of the cash economy has also caused various and serious social disruptions. At the same time, Tannese people also point to the strength of their *kastom* as a foundation for resisting the unwanted change and external sociopolitical and economic pressures.

What strikes us most about Tanna and its inspirited lands is that the idea of a 'natural' conservation area makes little cultural sense. For Tannese people, environment—marine and terrestrial, cultivated or not—and spirits all comprise the known world. It is difficult to overstate the complexity of social, spiritual, and ecological relationships on the island, and island biocultural resilience reflects this complexity. That resource *tabu* are timed to maximise efficaciousness reflects Tannese peoples' knowledge of their island. They have been learning from it and managing it for some 3,000 plus years. In many ways, we argue, the best course of action to 'conserve nature' on Tanna is to let *kastom* continue to take its course.

This is not to say that there is no space on the island for officially designated conservation areas in the future. Vanuatu is changing rapidly, and in some parts of Tanna—particularly those where traditional points of authority and relationships are strained—something like a CCA might be appropriate and necessary in the future. In many ways, the CCA model is designed to mediate between *kastom* and introduced forms of governance, allowing traditional practices to lead the conservation process. However, because CCA legislation calls for the state to take authority over an area, this can be a problematic relationship. For local people, it may seem counterintuitive to put a Vila-based civil service in charge of 'nature' on Tanna. It may also create uncertainty as to who is in charge—the Tannese? Or a civil servant able to enforce resource restrictions using legislation? This would remove the ability to declare places or resources *tabu* from the realm of the spirits to the courts—from the sacred to the profane (Hickey 2007). How this would work in relation to Tannese *kastom* is a matter to be resolved in the future. We also note the option of listing cultural sites in Vanuatu under the *Preservation of Sites and Artefacts (Amendment) Act 2008* to officially protect it, which

is another alternative, though somewhat beyond the scope of this paper. In the end, the inspirited nature of the island may convince Tannese people to choose official protection for cultural reasons as much as ecological reasons.

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