

## Myth and Social Control: Extending a Tannese Case

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### INTRODUCTION

Myths and “stones” are both fundamental to the understanding of the beliefs of the Nvhaal speaking people, on Tanna in Vanuatu. In their beginning, the people in this region of Tanna regarded their diverse foods as “like men”. After the time of “darkness”, the various foods gradually transformed to first wood, then stone. The foods were no longer men, nor like men, but the stones were “like a brother to men”, and men could “work” these stones to insure success in growing particular foods. Men learned to talk with these special stones to affect particular foods, and did the same to influence those variables that could help or hinder the growth of foods, including the rain, sun, or wind.

More recently, on Tanna, many men still know special magic that affects the production of particular foods, or controls the weather. Each man who knows such magic is obligated to the others of the island to play his role in assuring good production. Unless the stones are appropriately “worked” and the spirits pleased, the harvest might be poor. Indeed, when a particular harvest of some traditional crop is poor, people may accuse or blame the man who has responsibility by virtue of his name that is associated with that particular food, for not carrying out the appropriate rites or rituals correctly.

In addition to being the friend of men, the stones are feared, for the strong spirits residing in the stones have the potential for both good and for evil, a good harvest or hunger and starvation. Fortunately for us, the spirits of these stones are only suitable for Tanna and cannot be transported to other places. But, even after years of missionary and government interventions, the belief in and use of stones for ostensibly food production and covertly, social control, remains, particularly among those who follow “Kastom” or customary traditions.

The following complex myth deals with the origin and distribution of the different varieties of foods. This tale is used to explain the role of “stones” in the production of food and in the

control of weather. This story belongs to and was told to us by the “man for foods,” Yoma. He claimed that it was proper that he tell the story, for the name, Yoma, and the accompanying story have been passed down from generation to generation.

### THE STORY OF THE MOUNTAIN

In the time of Noah, Kalbaben rolled up Tanna like a leaf to protect it from the water. Kalbaben pinned Tanna together, and held Tanna in his fist. Then all became ocean, yet Tanna was safe. Later, Kalbaben talked with his first-born son, Nasabl. Kalbaben told Nasabl to marry the daughter of Karapennum, Kommas.

Nasabl saw the rolled up Tanna, like a leaf held together with a pin. Nasabl made very strong kava one day and gave it to his father, Kalbaben. Then, Nasabl went and got the leaf, and pulled the pin out. Tanna spread out then, but there were no trees, no fowls, and no men. After pulling the pin, Nasabl went to America. America too, had no trees, no fowls, and no men. Now, there is a big hill named for Nasabl.

Kalbaben sent word to Karapennum, his brother-in-law. He asked him to come to meet him at Yabungeebenyabungowda, down from Mount Tukosmeru. There, Kalbaben said, “Karapennum, make the food roll out here and spread it out.” The man for Yabungowda is James. Food started to come out there at the land and place that belongs to James.

The sun stood still, stopping at one place in the sky. Kalbaben went forth to make the sun start working. He made it go around to make both light and dark. Kalbaben said to Karapennum, “you make food, and I will make the sun go around. That way at night you can rest, because it will take hard work to make food.” Karapennum then made the food, and Kalbaben made the sun produce both light and dark.

Then Karapennum sent out people to take food to all the islands and lands. The food came out from the spot at Yitap, where a banyan tree, Kapeeta, now stands. Kapeeta means take all things around the world. Food went in this way

to Paris, to America, and to all parts of the world. The men for Karapenmum went down to the sea via Yelgus. They went to Black Beach along a trail, and then they went forth by boat. Kalbaben planted the banyan tree during this time, the "kablilau."

While they were gone to various places in the world, Yoma began taking food to all parts of Tanna. Kalbaben asked Matiktik, the brother of Karapenmum, "I would like eight men to take food around Tanna." But some men did not want to do this, because it was a different world outside, and they were frightened.

So Yoma went with Ialeetin, whose name means leader. Yoma went around Tanna three times in three years, one time per year. Yoma took some men around too, and spread them out, as there were no men on Tanna. Then Yoma and Ialeetin built a house in the little mountain. He put things there to store them until they were ready to go out, like a storehouse.

At the center of the storehouse, or the mountain for food, was the power and energy that gave life to food. Power for rain and wind and thunder and other things were also found here, for these too were needed to make food. The power began to work there, at the center of the mountain. Yoma put leaves and stalks of wild cane up as a taboo marker, as a symbol. These leaves and stalks of wild cane began to turn to stone.

The people who went out in the world began to return. On the boat, some of the people saw North Tanna, but the wise man in the boat said "no, we must go on." Then after this place called Etane, they went on, and the people saw Loanbakel. Again they said, "Let us go ashore here." But the wise man said, "no, we must go on."

Then near Loseeyen, the people wanted to go ashore. Again, the wise man said, "no, we must go on." Then at Imlao, the people on the boat said, "we want to go ashore here." Nittup, the wise man, saw the little house of Yoma's in his mind, and said again, "we must go on."

As the boat approached Yalkilikuk, again the people said, "aha, we go ashore now." Again, the wise man said, "no, we must go on." At this point they had seen Etane, Loanbakel, Loseeyen, Imlao, and Yalkilikuk. They went on.

Then, they saw Yoma's mountain, and there they dropped anchor. They went ashore and for the next three years they stayed in that place.

They had plenty of food to eat there. When they went to the toilet, their excrement turned into white coral. This added to the mountain.

The captain of the boat, Nowhanwhella, made his boat sink under the water. This left the power for taro under water at that spot. The people for taro, then, to make taro magic, must go out in the water by canoe to that spot and dive down to get a proper stone to make stone magic. Even now, when you eat the taro called "nowhanwhella," it has a strong and hot taste, because of the salt water.

After the people stayed for three years, they went around Tanna to spread the magic to make food grow. The power stayed in the little storehouse way down inside the big hill that belonged to Yoma and Ialeetin.

Now, when a man and a woman pray and make magic, power flies out from the mountain to where they are. Then the seeds for the plants, when it is time to plant them in the gardens, will obtain and hold the power until the food is ripe. Then the power returns to the mountain like a spirit.

When yams are planted in August, the spirit of Nittup, the wise man on the boat, flies forth from the little mountain and enters the yams to make them grow. The spirit of his wife, Nungien, comes forth to enter the taro plants and make them grow. Then when the foods are ready to eat, the spirits fly back to the mountain. There they remain until they are called forth again.

At the mountain, there are eight doors, through which the many different foods pass on their way. The eight doors are named for eight men, one for each door. They are: Koka, Sewil, Nurap, Namthingus, Yoma, Kwanwhy, Yowbeyyowbey, and Tiba. In addition to such plants as yams, taro, bananas, and sugarcane, the spirits for wind, rain, and thunder too, come forth through these doors.

Thus, this little mountain holds life for all of Tanna and for the world. This is why the men of Tanna hold this place to be sacred.

### ANALYSIS

This myth teaches that the spirits (or power) for foods come from the little mountain on Tanna, and therefore explain why that mountain is the source of life for Tanna and the world. Power is held fast in the mountain and is released only when certain men call upon it by their use

of the proper magic, to come and fulfill the needs of particular foods so that they will grow properly and be fruitful. Each food has a named man or men of particular lineages to work the proper magic. The spirits that make the foods grow reside in these magic stones, but there are also stones for many other things, including the weather, fertility, and witchcraft.

The stones, according to the Presbyterian missionaries and then the government, however, were regarded as the basis of witchcraft, and they sought to eradicate all of them. Warships cruising in the area under British command physically took many away in 1906. An order was issued 18 November 1918 to give up, destroy, or throw into the ocean all stones used for witchcraft. Anyone caught in possession of stones after that time was to be punished (Nicol, 2 October 1922). More recently, the issue re-mains in dispute. "Tanna... presents the greatest problems to the geologist . . . because of Tannese opposition to European intrusion, especially if they wish to remove 'stones'" (Carney and MacFarlane, 1976). Most aspects of stone magic are maintained in almost complete secrecy. There is much suspicion about stones and stone magic and often much fear.

When white men first arrived, some of the Tannese doubtlessly wanted to learn their magic. They reasoned that white men too must have special magic that enabled them to have boats, muskets, and other material goods. The attractiveness of the missionaries was probably at least partly due to this desire to learn about their forms of magic. But the Tannese were disappointed, for the missionaries kept their secrets and English language hidden, and they did not share. Tannese men who worked in Queensland (Wawn, 1893) presumably saw and experienced enough of Australia to understand that entirely different production methods existed, those used by white men in the Western world. Possibly discontent formed upon realizing that the white man's "magic" was altogether different and useless to the Tannese, given their limited resources, and helped lead toward the later disillusionment with the Presbyterians in 1940 or so (Gregory and Gregory, 1984).

Fragments of this and similar myths and Presbyterian teachings were woven together in the John Frum Cargo Cult movement in 1939 and thereafter. The imprint of Presbyterian beliefs is heavy on Tannese myths and legends

now, as is quite apparent in the above myth. Occasional bits of Seventh Day Adventist philosophy, or the teachings of the Roman Catholics, the Bahai, and the Assembly of God have also been incorporated in myths and stories. New additions are frequent, but the traditional beliefs on Tanna date back many generations. Knowledge of the roots of beliefs is important, particularly to those seeking to return to former traditions, for example, see Guiart (1956) who provided an excellent exposition on myths on Tanna.

At another level of analysis, the kinship system on Tanna, Dravidian Iroquois (Casson and Gregory, 1976), serves as a base to the prime actors in this story, which include a man, his brother in law, their two wives, his son, and the daughter of the brother in law. Their roles and relationships may be regarded as the core and initiators of the existing social or kinship system. Upon their urging, food and then men were sent forth to explore the larger world, then subsequently food and men were distributed throughout Tanna itself. Eight men worked to spread the foods, and then other humans, toward the periphery. Eventually, the people who went off to other lands began to return to Tanna, back to the core. Since those early times, the spirit world operates similarly, so that inherent powers, carefully controlled by those at the core, would go forth and support men and food.

Upon arrival on Tanna, anthropologists or sojourners are sometimes greeted as returning home, for they are thought to be the descendants of those who once long ago went forth. Those who return may have forgotten some of the traditions or *Kastom*, and therefore must be taught "the proper way to live," i.e., proper *Kastom*.

In a parallel fashion, other nation states, corporations, religious groups, and even communities can be regarded as having a core of those with power, status, and knowledge of history, whereas other members are peripheral. These latter persons perform the operative work, subservient to those at the core of power and decision-making. Those who join and seek to support the leadership have finally "seen the light." They are indoctrinated and trained to appreciate those at the core, and the history and ways of the group. Deviants are frequently punished. The core-periphery divide studied by world-system theorists (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991,

1997) fits well as a model of how hier-archical social or political systems actually function, whether on Tanna, the Western world, in legend and myth, or in practice.

### REFLECTIONS

Myths serve many purposes, but of particular interest here is the way in which people who are powerful use myth to control those who are less powerful, socially, economically, politically, legally, and otherwise. A myth is like a parable, corporate charter or a national constitution, stating the inherent and underlying rules of an organization of humans, or the setting of an agenda that circumscribes the limits and styles of debate. The Tannese case illustrates how a few (the core) benefit from a myth, while others (the periphery) “accept” and then live in accord with those constraints dictated by the promulgators of the myth.

In the American culture, the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights serve as one type of myth, just as certain abbreviated forms also serve, for example, George Washington’s dictum, “I cut down the cherry tree, I cannot tell a lie” statement. Today’s governments and leaders may stray far from those beliefs and values, the degree of disparity creates a tension between what should be by virtue of those sayings and what is. Another is Abraham Lincoln’s popular saying, “government of the people, by the people and for the people,” which was obviously neither the intent of the Constitutional Convention nor that of the present government (Farrand, 2003, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lwfr.html>). Similarly the statement attributed to Benjamin Franklin, “a penny saved is a penny earned,” represents a myth, broken by the passage of time and the US Federal Reserve Banking system that assures inflation reigns. In India, Bhattacharya (2001) writes of the use of *katha* or *Pravachan* as means of promoting social health, and in New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi offers a way to guide (and control) human behavior. In the Christian religious scene, the Ten Commandments serve as a set of premises upon which human behavior is judged, and the judges invariably are primarily persons with power or who seek to hold power. Corporate charters, with extensive and intensive legal and financial complexities, enable some to rule, and

force others to do the work. Myth then, and related premises, parables, commandments, wise sayings, and charters are one way for some men to seek, gain, and hold power over others, and to then control those others when, if, and as, they fail to comply with the “principles” or “rules” inherent.

**KEYWORDS** Myth. Tanna. Power. Social Control

**ABSTRACT** Humans array themselves into a wide variety of social and other organizations based on power. One means of creating such hierarchical arrays is through crystallizing the substance or content of values and belief systems into myth, commandments, parables, constitutions, charters, or other statements, in which some are fluent and some are not. Those who are skilled and knowledgeable use the myths or statements to judge and thereby rank others who are less fluent. In this instance drawn from Tanna in Vanuatu, a myth incorporates many cultural beliefs, and helps facilitate rule by some over others. Those who agree with and accept the myth thereby subordinate themselves to those who promulgate the myth (or statement), creating a status hierarchy.

### NOTES

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