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Put Something in Their Basket : Indigenous Trading Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT In the present paper barter and informal and formal networks for trade among the "Kastom" people who followed ancient traditions has been reported.

On the remote South Pacific island od Tanna, Vanuatu, back when it was still known by the pre-independence name, the New Hebrides, my wife Janet and I carried out a research project funded by the US Public Health Service. We wanted to live with the people of the interior, to understand their way of life, and to conduct research on use of the drug kava and any relationship it might have had in history and at present with the John Frum Cargo Cult. The trading post manager and his wife put us in touch with the "Kastom" people who followed ancient traditions, and we began negotiating with them for permission to join them. The trading post manager cautioned us when we started out by saying, "Remember, always put something in their basket." We hiked deep into the jungle with that warning fresh in our minds, although we still did not understand its implications.

It took only a day or two for our first lesson. When we offered a village chief some of our grant money to teach us the language, he politely suggested we should depart, and go back home, sooner rather than later. Renegotiating, we learned about an intriguing phrase, "give something of yourself, not money." We subsequently found that in the Kastom area of the island, use of money is an insult equivalent to the insult of not putting something in a person's basket.

In fact, we soon noted that people were constantly exchanging gifts and goods, carrying various items in their baskets woven from plant fibres and coconut palm leaves. We came to live in an area where traditional customs remained strong. And we learned to live according to "Kastom" as tradition is referred to in the Bislama trade language. Kastom requires that you put something in the basket of your partner - trading, political, marriage, village, whatever, almost everyone was a partner to everyone else in some way to Tanna.

One reason for these partnerships was because fortunes could turn with the power of nature's whim. Earthquakes, malaria, cyclones, poor food harvests, an active volcano, and all sorts of natural disasters could change one's abilities and resources overnight. When fortune shifted, the relationships of people became important, for survival, for food, for privileges and for opportunities.

In exchange for teaching us their way of life, the Tannese accepted our offer of medicines and a daily clinic, under the supervision and guidance of the physician some six miles away at the local British Hospital. In the next few months, we gradually learned to depend on others, and therefore to be interdependent. Interdepndence was not appreciated, for no one was or wanted to be truly independent. To these people the concept of independence was ridiculous. And in that context, we soon came to agree.

Gradually, we came to realize that the value of a person on Tanna lay not at all in his or her possessions, for physical resources and material goods were fickle. They could be lost, broken, or subjected to the wear and tear of the tropical climate. The value, rather, was in what you had done for others, and especially in what you had given away, for then others owed you help, resources, or support in the future. Some of the very "richest" people had few posses-

sions in hand, but they had helped so many others, so often, that others looked to them as being the significant leaders.

In our 15 exciting months of life on this tropical paradise, we encountered many fascinations trades and exchanges. For example, we helped an older woman, Rose (a pseudonym) some distance away with some medicines. Rose told us that her family was going to kill a goat to celebrate her husband's recovery with these medicines. She would be sure to give us a piece of fresh goat's meat, a delicacy in our protein deficient diet. The day came, but a tropical storm hit, leaving the afternooon as dark as night. Rain poured down at a rate of two or there inches per hour, making travel out of the question. We figured the goat meat might arrive the next day, or later, or not at all, given the conditions.

The rain, however, slowed down just slightly after darkness at about 8 PM. We went to sleep early. Then a small knock at the door signaled that someone was present. Rose appeared at around ten PM, soaked, but with a basket of meat for us. How she travelled three miles through extremely rough terrain and foreboding jungle, without any light, in the midst of an electrical and wind rain storm, we never found out. After a hot cup of tea, she insisted on returning home, so we gave her our flashlight, rain gear, and best wishes. Of course, we filled her basket back up again. Over the years since, we have often thought about the giving and taking of gifts, in fact, exchanges of any sorts. We frequently recall her honoring of her pledge.

Subsistence, gardeners, the Tannese raised a variety of staples and delicacies, as well as foraged, and used virtually all parts of the jungle and seashore for foods and resources. Rather than just consume however, an elaborate scheme of exchanges, trades, and swaps kept everyone busy, and in touch with each other. Wealth was not accrued, but obligations enabled everyone to survive even after destruction from cyclones. When surplus food was available, it was "banked," by giving it away to others, or by feeding chickens and pigs for consumption or more likely, exchange in the future.

I marvelled when my fone man's fruit tree had a spectacular crop, but without refrigeration, without effective means of preserving the food, the only recourse was to share with others who would in their turn, give something different back at another time. The Tannese distribution system worked so effectively that they could not understand that how someone could be hungry in the Western world. I described slums and ghettoes and poverty, as well as wealth and industry and business. "Why," they would ask, "if some have food, don't they share?" I have often wondered about such questions too.

The lessons were clear, Barter and informal and formal networks for trade operate extremely effectively, minimizing waste and resulting in viable and sociable communities of people who would mutually support each other in times of hardship as well as in times of plenty. The contrasts with Western society were many. These opportunities to learn from indigenous systems are available to us, if only we listen, – do put something in their baskets, indeed.