

Breaking Equilibrium: Three Styles of Education on Tanna, Vanuatu

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INTRODUCTION

A broad, ecological perspective offers opportunity to examine the big picture events and activities occurring in a society, including social change and adaptation, and contextual surrounds. Tanna, Vanuatu, an island with a society and culture bound by a common evolution, experienced relatively limited contacts with the larger world. A major impact was the introduction of material goods by early and subsequent traders and the conversion efforts of Presbyterian missionaries. These two influences brought about social change and resulted in conflict and rapid social change.

The thesis developed in this paper is that on Tanna there was and is a tri-modal adaptation, both on cultural and educational levels, as a reaction to this conflict. Three subcultures and therefore, three different educational approaches have evolved. The idea of modal behaviours attempts to explain the large variances that exist between these three groups. After the modal behaviors are identified, one then can look at other levels of explanation or analysis for variance within that mode. The socialization/education choices of children on Tanna are greatly affected by these modal adaptation patterns.

This article addresses the question of how the cultural modes of adaptation affect the educational and socialization of children on Tanna. A brief overview and history of Tanna views the evolutionary origin that binds it as one culture. The way in which the three modes of adaptation evolved after the coming of the John Frum Cargo Cult is developed in the next section. This part may be of special interest to those in Melanesia, and for those in locales where external forces impact on a society, for there are similarities. Each of the three modes of adaptation, the "Retreatists", the "Conformists", and the "Rebels" is briefly discussed.

OVERVIEW AND BRIEF HISTORY

Tanna, Vanuatu, is a volcanic island in the

Southwest Pacific. Inhabited by about 14,000 indigenous Melanesian people, Tanna had been under the colonial rule of the Condominium of the New Hebrides, a joint government of both Great Britain and France since the early 1900's. Independence was attained on July 30, 1980, when the new nation of Vanuatu was formed. The history and literature about this island are dealt with only briefly for the focus of the project does not involve that rich past or the era since independence. However, understanding the culture of the people does require some awareness of the studies and historical record.

Tanna was settled by about 420 B.C. (Shutler and Shutler, 1967) according to radio-carbon 14 dating. Probably because of the rough terrain and traditional inter-village rivalry, at least five separate languages formed, and in addition as many as thirty dialectical variations exist now. These different languages separated from each other between 1500 and 1000 years ago according to linguistic evidence (Lynch, 1976). Travel on the island was, therefore, limited, as fighting among various tribal groups was presumably a typical situation.

Early contacts with the West followed the discovery of Tanna by Captain James Cook in 1774. Whalers, sandalwood traders, and a brisk Australian labour trade (Wawn, 1893) gave the indigenous people reason to fear and reject visitors from far away places. Subsequent early missionary visits were rejected, with strong hostility toward them and their teachings plainly evident. As attempted contacts continued, waves of epidemic sicknesses, including measles, flu, colds, pneumonia, and others, swept over the island and its people.

Eventually a few missionaries, through the strength of their extreme fundamentalism, settled on Tanna. With deep dedication and persistence, they taught their brand of Presbyterianism to a few disciples. Reverend Gray published the first paper that dealt with the customs of the people in 1892. He included a brief description of children's

games, and some observations on the daily life of the people. Reverend Nicholson, a physician, and Reverend Watt, among others, had a deep impact on the people and converted many in the 1910-1930 period. By virtue of their leadership, "Tanna Law" followed, during which the newly converted Presbyterians sought to convert all others to their beliefs. Resistance to this religious fundamentalism led to conflicts of the converts and missionaries with the rest of the people, the government, and other religious groups such as Catholics and Seventh Day Adventists.

The initial agent of the Condominium, a Mr. Wilkes, was relatively neutral toward the customs of the Tannese who chose to follow their own ways. As a result, he aroused the ire of the Presbyterians at about the time of World War I. His replacement by James Nicol followed, and the government then carried out routine administrative duties, largely under the influence, even the direction of the missions.

The missionaries wrote little about the customs of the people during the early 1900's. One American anthropologist visited and lived with the missionaries in the mid-1920's. Humphrey (1926) was positively oriented to the missions, and managed to record much about the remaining way of life as he saw it. Humphrey included some description of children and their play, duties, and behavior. Schools, of course, were unknown at the time, except for the outposts of the missions. The missionaries called these outposts "schools."

In the early 1940's, the John Frum Cult swept the island (Guiart, 1956). The Tannese people rejected the Presbyterian mission and sought to reverse the administrative role of the British and French authorities. Various clashes led many of the John Frum leaders to prison and exile for long terms. American involvement in World War II led to a strong feeling of alliance with the United States, a feeling that continues today.

THREE CULTURAL MODES OF ADAPTATION

According to Merton (1968, 185-214) one of the main functions of social structure is to provide the basis for predictability and regularity of social behavior. The lack of coordination of the goals and means parts of the social structure leads to anomie. As elements of the social structure

become disassociated, predictability is minimized.

In the analogous tectonic plate theory, constant shifts and movements enable the continental plates to float on the earth's surface. If there is an earthquake, a volcanic eruption or other violent disruption in the plates in one part of the earth, there are adjustments, movements, and shifts in other plates in many areas over a period of time until a balance is reached. Then a period of relative calm may exist until another build-up of forces or disruption occurs again. Similarly when ecological perspectives are taken, the focal topic of interest may be buffeted by changes emanating from outside (or on occasion internal to) the system, but at least a partial return to balance will occur, given the history and same environment.

The analogy seems applicable to the situation on Tanna and to the idea of anomie in the social structure of societies. When there is little coordination between the goals and means of a society, a force builds and disruption occurs within the social structure. Adjustments occur that affect many people, sometimes over long periods of time or in places far removed, who were not directly related to the disruption. The people on Tanna are still being affected by adaptations made in response to cultural conflict by past generations.

An internalized cultural theme for the Tannese seems to be to maintain a balance in their social relationships. Their means to this balance are the intricate, complicated, and myriad number of exchanges that are ingrained in their everyday life. If someone gives a gift to another, the receiver must in turn return something to the giver. A balance is maintained through this series of exchanges. A good example is marriage. For a marriage to take place, an exchange of a woman and pigs must occur. The drug, kava, is often given as a symbol of sealing agreements or as a penalty to balance a bad deed (Gregory, 1995). The idea of balance is a philosophical view as well as a daily practice, vital to the people of Tanna.

The Tannese culture is made up of a number of autonomous villages each having its one "big man" serving as political and social leader. A number of villages within a day's walk of each other make up a language area designated by a particular tribal name. Sahlins (1970) described

the phenomenon of these rather closed political systems found in Melanesia as tribal with autonomous kinship-residence groupings. The local clusters of houses or families are self-governing and self-sufficient, so that they are essentially independent units.

Most traditional villages are located away from the sea-coast. A series of vertical ravines and rivers run like fingers from high mountains in the interior downward to the sea. To travel from village to village in the interior means traversing these steep ravines which separate the villages. A day's travel is about three rivers. Also, approximately three rivers in either direction mark the extent of a language area and the limits of marriage exchanges.

Beginning as early as Captain Cook in 1774, the people of Tanna, even in the remote interior, have been affected by the material goods brought by outsiders. These goods were interpreted as "cargo" coming from another land, presumably produced by magic. The Tannese used magic to produce the Tannese goods, namely, their garden produce. The idea of magic was so fundamental that they could not visualize alternative means of production. They had never witnessed factories, production lines, or manufacturing processes in the Western world. Each garden product, and virtually every fruit or nut tree, is linked to a special role filled by a man who is taught the magical means of "working stones" to insure a good harvest. The products of the foreigners, the Tannese felt, must have a similar origin.

New items, such as guns, tobacco, knives, and calico, were introduced through the trading ships and the men who came for sandalwood. These goods produced many changes in the Tannese culture, for example, guns drastically changed the style of warfare.

The Tannese viewed "white man" with his materials as an opportunity to transform their lives. They felt that the white man must have "strong magic." They believed that if they could do the "right things," and learn the "right way," then white man's magic and his cargo would come to them.

In the 1800's Presbyterian missionaries came to Tanna. Initially the Tannese rejected attempts of conversion, sometimes with violence. But, with time and persistence, the missionaries succeeded

in converting some people. These first converts were probably the misfits and malcontents, the marginal men and women who were perhaps more willing to try a new "white man's" magic in pursuit of "cargo."

Following these successes, the missionaries increased their efforts. The promise of heavenly rewards, earthly goods, and the actual provision of clothing and medical assistance (some missionaries were medical doctors); as well as the "spread effect" of the new converts bringing in their family and friends, soon led to a growing church population.

The goal of these missionaries was clearly to convert all the Tannese people to a belief in Presbyterianism. Total conversion did, in fact, occur on smaller neighbouring islands. The means to conversion rapidly became very punitive. Anything that was traditional Tannese was denounced as "heathen" and evil and among other names, the people were referred to as "pagans." Restrictions and prohibitions were enforced so that none of the Tannese could carry on their traditional way of life. The restrictions and prohibitions became known as "Tanna Law", and were applied to all Tannese people. The new converts acted as policemen and served as spies to the "fallen" or the "heathen". "Tanna Law" was enforced with penalties, fines, work sentences, and other punishments. The British, and then the Condominium Government, generally supported the efforts of the missionaries to "civilize" the "heathen natives."

The prohibitions affected the activities and events vital to the maintenance of balance in the Tannese social structure. Use of kava, which men used as a vehicle to the spirit world, and almost constantly exchanged as a bond between men and villages, was forbidden. Dances and the songs that serve as the repository of much of Tannese history, were prohibited and renounced as vile, pagan, and sinful. Arranged marriages, which bond families and villages into alliances, were forbidden. Magical stones that assured good crops and controlled the "big winds" were searched out and thrown into the ocean.

Land, vital to Tannese subsistence, was sometimes donated to the church to prevent others from taking it. The power base became the church and the church leadership. The village "big-man" no

longer directed and led his people. This radical imposition of new political forms of organization caused much discord. The church leadership sought to unify the small villages in the guise of religion and pacification.

The traditionally dispersed small villages in the highlands were consolidated and relocated near the sea so that the new converts were close by for daily church services. New houses were built close together, perhaps contributing to the rapid spread of disease and epidemics that killed many Tannese during this era. The ecologically sound quonset-shaped huts were replaced with taller, square-shaped "white-man style" houses that were not able to withstand the seasonal cyclonic winds. These new mission settlements were, interestingly enough, called "schools" and the lay pastors were called "teachers".

In effect the missionaries sought to destroy the traditional Tannese social structure and way of life, and tried to replace it with their own preconceived ways. The basic patterns of life for the Tannese were severely disrupted. The missionaries had arrived with their own goals and means, with little regard for those of the Tannese. Indeed, they sought to convert every person even if it had to be done by force. Today there are no "custom" areas left in the Southern District except on Tanna.

Around 1937 or 1938, amidst the cultural chaos, arrived a man, a spirit or a myth-John Frum. Whatever it was or whoever he was, this being united many of the Tannese people against the church and the government. Many theories abound as to who John Frum might have been. Most informants and accounts agree on the following account:

A man "appeared" at Green Point, along the Southwest coast of Tanna. He wore thongs, and was dressed in white. The man could speak many languages and frequently asked for special foods, as a legendary spirit man might. He began to invite men from different villages to come and drink kava with him. He "appeared" only at night. Initially he did not speak against the government or the missions, but as time went on, he talked more and more against the missions until finally he advocated that all Tannese should spend their "white man's monies", and then leave the churches. And, on one Sunday in 1941, the formerly full churches were virtually empty.

The reaction of the government was repression. They jailed and punished those leaders and advocates they could locate. One was reportedly hung in the nude by his heels near the government office. Many were sent to Vila, the Capitol City on Efate, an island about 150 miles north. Some of these men were confined to Efate for cult activities up to the mid-fifties. In the mid-fifties the government changed its policy, and began to view the cult as a religion. The government policy became more lenient. The John Frum cult is still a very active part of "Man-Tanna's" life.

The John Frum cult was the Tannese reaction to the breakdown of their social structure, brought on by the church and government supported prohibitions of their cultural foundations. The cult was the mechanism they used to begin to restore order and balance to their world. With the coming of John Frum, some Tannese institutionalized new goals, norms, and means. For many the traditional goals and norms were no longer appropriate yet neither could they accept the goals of the missionaries. The cult generated new goals, norms, and means.

Various interpretations of John Frum and his teachings emerged. Three major or broad adaptations occurred in response to the cult (Diagram 1). Two of these adaptations greatly frustrated the missions and the government. The three adaptations closely follow Merton's model of modes of adaptive behaviours.

One group of people, those in Southwest Tanna, chose to retreat from any intervention of the government, missions, and, indeed, any outside influences that they could control. This group was least affected by the mission influence. They were geographically more isolated, and had not been subjected to the new ways. Although the mission efforts pushed into some of the interior, the inaccessibility of villages and the distance from the main church site slowed their progress.

These people sought to maintain and strengthen their traditions and customs as they existed prior to white men's invasion or influence. They believed John Frum's message called for them to go back to custom or hold "custom strong". This, of course, meant they should act the "right way," so "cargo" would come to them. They view themselves as the rightful inheritors of tradition, and see John Frum as one of many, who called for

them to retain their beliefs and customs.

A second adaptation was the group who stayed with the church or came back to the church and conformed to the ways of the church and the government. They accepted the goals of the church, that is, to sacrifice in this life for the “cargo” in their afterlife. These progressive people have accepted and sought to promote the new Western ways.

A different adaptation occurred on the Eastern side of the island, near the Sulphur Bay area. These people, after being significantly influenced, finally rebelled against the missions. Those who chose rebellion as an adaptive behavior were geographically located in an area of high mission activity. In this area, too, the Seventh Day Adventists had moved into a previously established Presbyterian territory, so there was bitter conflict between opposing religious groups. The people near and in Sulphur Bay formed their own “church,” developed their own rituals, including worship of a red cross, and worshipped John Frum as a deity. To them, John Frum’s message was to follow and mimic within their own creative fashion, the western ways, so that the “cargo” could come. However, they did not directly follow, but set up their own political, economic, and social direction, and retained some independence from the West. They resisted Western leadership, the British and French governments, and the churches.

CONCLUSION

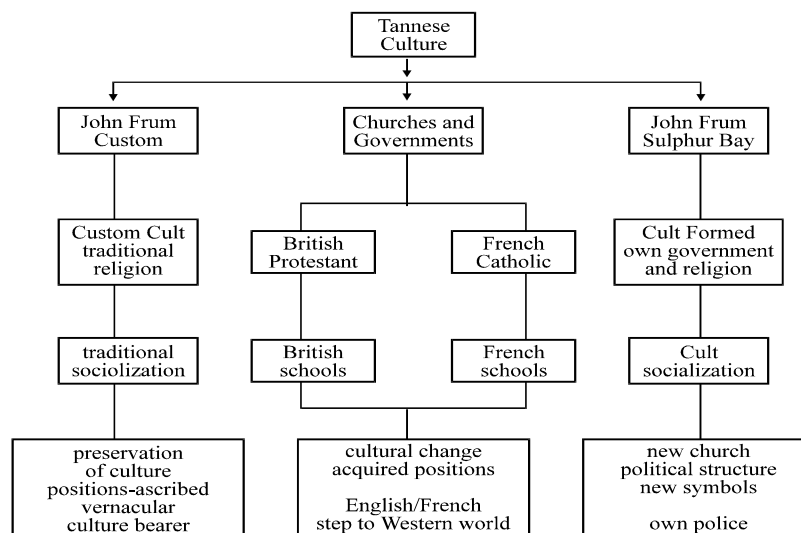
An ecological framework provides some understanding. Continuity in a culture may break, when outside influences or environmental changes are powerful, resulting in a rather chaotic social, political, and economic situation. The people affected may seek to adapt in varying ways: retreat to original customs, adopt the new models available, or be caught somewhere in the middle.

In summary, the first and third modes of adaptation are both anti-Christian and anti-government by the expression (polar and antithetical) that the modes take. “Custom” people use John Frum as a means to strengthen and renew their traditional values and beliefs. Guiart (1956) found a return to the cult of the ancestors. The people retreated and sought to revitalize their traditional religion, political, social, and economic systems. They accepted neither the goals nor the means of the church and government.

The John Frum Sulphur Bay group, on the other hand, became openly anti-Christian. However, they took many of the symbols of the church, the cross, the singing, the village style, and then with more western style politics created a new religion and political system, complete with marching army.

Those who have conformed to church and

Diagram 1. Tri-Furcation of Tannese Culture



government educate their children in the new government schools that have a strong religious influence. Both the John Frum Custom people and the Sulphur Bay John Frum people have kept their children from attending schools. Only more recently have both begun to seek schooling opportunities for their children. This trend may or may not continue.

In conclusion, when new and different internal or external forces impact on a society or culture, the existing harmony may break so that equilibrium disappears. In brief, the members of that original grouping may react in quite divergent ways. The choices made in the reported situation resulted in attachment to and belief in Western ways, to a retreat into customary and traditional ways, or a flight into something new and yet caught up in parts of the past. The latter two arrangements have been regarded as cults, one a cult that returned to tradition, and another that adopted new and divergent activities.

KEY WORDS Education. Socialization. Adaptation. Social Structure. Tanna. Vanuatu.

ABSTRACT Education and socialization are influenced by the larger surround provided by historical forces and social structures. Cultures and societies exist in a relative state of coherence within an environment, unless and until internal or external changes occur and break that equilibrium. Field work in Tanna, Vanuatu revealed that education and sociali-

zation depended upon and were significantly influenced by social structure and a historical split in the culture created by the impact of missionary activities and the emergence of a subsequent cargo cult. Breaking equilibrium: Three styles of education on Tanna, Vanuatu

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