

A Remembered Elder: Old Age on Tanna

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ABSTRACT An opportunity during fieldwork in a remote location (Tanna, New Hebrides, now Vanuatu) in Melanesia led to a case study of an elderly man. Luwah (pseudonym) was over 100 years old, and his memories of life as a young man were insightful into the history of people on this island.

"Bob and Janet, this Sunday morning, we will go visit an old man," our friend and chief informant Yelman (pseudonym) said. Back in 1976, on the remote Melanesian island of Tanna in what was the New Hebrides, my wife Janet and I worked as anthropologists, recording and trying to understand the intricacies of a very different culture. The old man we were going to see had witnessed history even before the formation of the New Hebrides by agreements between the French and British in 1906 and 1914. Later, in 1980, this island and its chain became independent and were renamed Vanuatu.

"Luwah (pseudonym) is his name. He is a Presbyterian," Yelman said to us in the Nvhaal language, with a bit of mystery as we made our way along a steep, dark and narrow jungle trail. After a couple of kilometres, we emerged into a bright sunlit clearing, and saw a small, but neatly constructed, hut built of traditional bush materials. Rather than proceed to knock on the door, or cough gently to announce our presence, Yelman cautioned us to go to the edge of the clearing, where we sat for a brief rest under a large banyan tree.

We basked in the heat, happy that the perennial rains of the tropical forest abated for at least a few minutes. We waited patiently, knowing that Yelman seldom failed to enrich our knowledge with almost daily journeys and events. Soon, a couple of family groups emerged from other trails and joined us. Not long thereafter, Luwah strode forth from his hut, spotlessly dressed in a cool white suit. He advanced slowly

with the aid of a crooked wooden cane. Shaking hands with each person present, he proceeded to open an old, tattered, and well worn bible, then began a full scale Sunday church service with a song. He delivered a brief sermon in Bislama, the trade language of the island group, citing Presbyterian beliefs, British history, and contemporary events in his story. His voice rose with emotion, and we realized this man was both knowledgeable and passionate. He then asked us to join in the readings, and sang another song, then gracefully retired. The group broke up, and we wandered back home with Yelman.

Janet and I continued to marvel at still another of the many wonders that Yelman found or arranged for us to experience in our quest to learn. Obviously very old, Luwah was intriguing, for he was obviously a unique person in an unusual setting. On the way home, we asked Yelman to help us work out his genealogical relationships to understand kinship ties to others in nearby villages. Eventually, we became more curious about the old man's history.

A few days later, we encouraged Yelman to take us back, to interview the old man in depth. As he lived in another area where the language was different from Nvhaal, and because we were not sufficiently fluent in Bislama, we asked Yelman to also serve as a translator. We set forth, again early in the morning before the heat of the day set in.

Soon, Janet, Yelman and I were seated under the same banyan tree, listening or as the Tannese said, "storying-on." Luwah indeed shared insights about his early conversion to Christianity, and told us about the Presbyterian missions, beginning in the 1890's more or less. "I was the first convert," he stated, with pride and dignity. He also proudly claimed to be the first native Tannese person elevated to the position of lay preacher.

Luwah recalled clearly how as a very young man, his father and other men would hand him a loaded musket, to stand guard, while the elders indulged in drinking kava. Kava, outlawed by the missionaries for they assumed it was like liquor, was only for older men, so Luwah himself never indulged. He did stand guard, but did not find occasion to use a musket.

Some of his childhood memories extended even before the missionaries, back to the terrible time of open musket warfare. The guns were rewards by captains of calling ships, for catching and then sending someone to work in the sugar cane fields in Queensland. Preferably in that day and age, the enemy were the ones sent and the rewards were given to the senders, who in turn, then used the guns against the enemy.

Life then was not simple or easy. Food resources were extremely limited, according to Luwah. It was not a time of plenty, like more recent times in Vanuatu and Melanesia generally. The quantities and range of food were extremely limited. Foods regarded now as undesirable, such as the roots of the ti tree, were staples then. Some yams and taro were available, but many other foods, such as mangoes, breadfruit, fish, and so on were simply unavailable. Pork was a very rare delight. Growing of gardens was often aborted, for people with muskets could come along and take freely from those who lacked muskets. Cannibalism, or the eating of "long pig" was practised by those in cer-

tain lineages, not by all.

Janet and I soon realized that it was not just information that Luwah shared with us, although he willingly gave plenty. His gentle manner quickly put us at ease. This man was at peace with himself and his environment. He had no need to prove himself, to push his religion or beliefs, or to tell elaborate stories or make boasts. To us, he seemed as solid as a rock, for he had a simple and workable faith and a personal and deep sense of history. Possessions mattered not at all, for he was highly respected, even revered by kin and others throughout the island. Luwah shared his serenity freely, and taught us many other perspectives on early days of the island.

Later, from archival records, we worked out that Luwah was at least 100 years old, obviously the oldest person on the island. Remarkable in being able to conduct religious services at that age, he not only believed, but lived as close as possible to the ideals of the life the early missionaries prescribed.

Janet and I took away a new sense of history, an insight into early life on that island obtainable from no where else, and a serenity of our own. We knew that we met a remarkable man, whose age and accumulated insights were an asset to him, his family, and the people of his island. A resource for the visiting anthropologists, the man was a cultural treasure to his people for a unique perspective, a long term view, a deep and well earned serenity and a voice of moderation.