

An Early History of Land on Tanna, Vanuatu

Robert J. Gregory

INTRODUCTION

Tannese history can be divided into traditional time prior to Western contact and the subsequent historical era. Earlier times can only be inferred from myths, oral history, songs, present day traditions and conjectures, and archaeological evidence (including radio-carbon dating) which shows that people lived on Tanna as early as 420 B.C. (Shutler and Shutler, 1967).

The present account deals largely with early Western records about land on Tanna, Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides) plus experiences of the author during fieldwork in 1976 and 1977 (see Gregory and Gregory, 1996). The historical records are sketchy and sparse, with additional difficulty owing to the long-standing hostility of the Tannese towards those who would alienate or take away land. Missionary influence also prevented some alienation of land by traders, colonists and adventurers. Consequently relatively little land has been lost by the Tannese due to contact with the West. Thus without active transfers of land, little was recorded.

The origin of the name Tanna occurred when Captain Cook landed in 1774, apparently lifted up some soil and asked what the soil was called. A man replied in the Nufai language used near Port Resolution, "Tanna," or "soil." The name the Nufai speaking people used for the island itself was "parei," but Captain Cook did not understand that subtle distinction.

Cook (1964) did however note the reluctance of the Tannese to permit access to land. He wrote, "a desire they on every occasion shew'd of fixing bounds to our excursions." He added,

I cannot say what might be the true cause of these people shewing such a dislike to our making little excursions into their country, it might be owing to a natural jealous disposition, or perhaps to their being accustomed to hostile visits from their neighbours or quarrels amongst themselves . . . (p. 507).

Missionary contact

The following sordid era of contacts by

whalers, sandalwood traders, and slavers, proved that the Tannese were not about to surrender their land, even under duress. However, in 1842, Reverend Turner and Nisbet of the London Missionary Society purchased a site at Port Resolution. They were forced to abandon the site in seven months because of the bitter hostility of the Tannese. In 1858, Reverend John G. Paton had a house built on this site. In 1862, he and Mr and Mrs Mathieson fled for their lives to Aneityum. In 1866, Reverend Thomas Neilson arrived, was thrown off, then returned in 1868 to settle until retirement in 1883. Cheyne (1852: 35) described the Tannese as, "a wild and ferocious set, exceedingly treacherous, and great thieves..." He cited still earlier history and added, "I purchased a piece of ground from the chiefs, in September, 1846, on the east side of the harbour, into water frontage, contiguous to the London Missionary Society's allotment, on the north side." This was at Port Resolution.

Initial contacts were undoubtedly filled with misunderstandings. The Tannese were presumably offering temporary use of land, whereas the Western visitors assumed they were purchasing permanent title. Subsequent purchases were made with money, whisky, guns, and trinkets, valued by the Tannese because of their novelty and potential use.

The missionaries typically sought long-term residential sites for their religious purposes. With a fierce fundamentalism, they managed to hold on and eventually flourish. At Kwamera in the south, Rev. William Watt and his wife settled in 1869. He stayed until he retired in 1910. Gray established the Waesisi station on the East coast in 1891. In 1896, Rev. Frank Paton, Mrs Paton and Mr Hume landed at Lanatul on the West Coast while MacMillan went to Weasisi on the east, where he retired in 1936.

The Colonists

After these initial mission settlements, a number of people sought to establish plantations and colonize. Ross Lewin, probably the most famous, began operating on Tanna in

1868 (Hagen, 1893: 29). MacLeod subsequently bought his property and made a fortune using Tannese labour. He also bought many other plots of land that he resold at great profit.

An elderly informant recalled the story his parents told about how Ross Lewin stood at Isangel, pointed his finger in the direction of Imaki near Lenaknal, and said, "My Land." Then he pointed to the sea. In practice, Lewin went further. He shot at people who approached his land and he himself was eventually killed in 1874. His death, investigated by Commodore Goodenough, was due to his "encroaching on land which had not been sold to him" (Giles, 1968: 115).

The Tannese, being self-subsistent gardeners, generally refused to work on the plantations that were attempted. Not only that, they discouraged others from neighboring islands from coming to Tanna by their fierce reputation. Giles (1968: 181) noted that the New Hebrides planters inability to obtain labour was evident by the late 1870's judging from their abandoned estates.

Overall

The 19th century in the New Hebrides was a time of troubles. The Queensland labour trade took an estimated 40,000 people of whom about 75 percent returned. Epidemics of measles and dysentery probably reduced Tanna's population by more than 75 percent, and new beliefs and contact with "white men" altered forever the traditional way of life (Wawn, 1893).

Slowly however, the contacts that took place gave each side some new understandings about the other. The assumptions about ownership of land were becoming evident because of cultural contact and sometimes, bitter experiences. Wawn (1893) related "a curious circumstance in condition with the sale and purchase of land" in 1870. Thomas Davis purchased land at Port Resolution, then went to put up a building. However, he cut down a tree. When the seller complained, Davis discovered that he did not own trees growing on his land. Ownership of land does not necessarily confer ownership of trees on Tanna and some other places in Melanesia.

In comparison with the long range goals of the relatively successful missionaries and the unsuccessful plantation owners, the traders

operating from ships sought to secure a deeper hold. An example concerned the sulphur trade. Charles M. Deane and Peter Patterson drew up a memorandum of agreement on 20 March 1874. Patterson was on his way to Tanna to secure signatures of chiefs to obtain the land on which sulphur could be mined, in the vicinity of Port Resolution. Many ships took away sulphur in trade, but he had an interest in ownership.

The initial British colonists failed in their attempts to settle. Ultimately, however, because of the influence of British missionaries who sought to protect their own foothold, other British subjects were blocked from colonizing. An opportunity developed then for people of other backgrounds to move in. Wawn (1893: 25-26) remarked that, "to Black Beach, nearly 15 miles of coast and a mile or so back from it, the land was purchased by British subjects with the intention of settling on it and growing cotton." McLeod, the Bell Brothers, and Ross Lewin cleared land and Lewin had already shipped a cargo of cotton. He claimed that the missionaries sent word through a captain of a warship to Great Britain demanding that all British subjects return labourers to their homes. Plantation owners were supposed to hire only natives of the island on which they lived.

This meant that for Tanna, the plantations were essentially abandoned. One of the Bells and Ross Lewin were murdered at this time too. The influence of Great Britain did not extend to other nationalities, so "many of the British subjects in the New Hebrides transferred their allegiance to France." A result was that "the sweepings of the French penal colony" came to the New Hebrides. Further, "a larger company - the Compagnie Caledonienne des Nouvelles Hebrides - was formed in 1882, and now owns all the most desirable land in the group."

As added incentive, in the early 1880's the French wanted to recoup their cost for New Caledonia, and the way they chose to do that appeared to be to set up an "outlet for settlement of the convicts and emigrants." Because the New Hebrides was close by, it was only logical that France should annex the New Hebrides. And of the New Hebrides, they considered that Tanna was the richest and most beautiful island.

In 1882, John Higginson founded la Campagnie Caledonienne des Nouvelles Hebrides, to ensure French interests bought

native and British land. Bourgeau (1955: 111-149) reported that by 9 March 1905 there were 401 French and 228 English residents. The French Society of the New Hebrides held 780,000 hectares of a theoretical total occupied by Europeans of 1,067,000 hectares. The French interest in land was centred on agriculture, for little else of value was found (Bourgeau, 1955: 126). Governor E. Picanon (1904: 14) visited the New Hebrides in 1902, recognizing the value of the land as an ideal basis for French agriculture, and remarked that no French people lived in the Southern Islands where agricultural possibilities and fields for cattle could be found.

Picanon's visit may have sparked the growing interest by the French in owning more land. Rendle's 1905 memorandum sought to clarify a land commission to better enable the British and French to control the land of the New Hebrides. Political difficulties resulting from earlier agreements were making it difficult to equitably annex land. The powers involved wanted, "an equitable partition of territory," with the British in the North and the French in the Central and Southern Islands.

Etienne, in a speech in the French Chamber of Deputies on January 21, 1902, stated that French subjects owned 800,000 hectares (1,900,000 acres) of land in the New Hebrides - practically half the territory. Among the British claims was 100,000 acres, placed at the disposal of the Australian Commonwealth Government for settlement purposes by a private firm, but which did not imply ownership or territorial sovereignty. There were 20,000 acres claimed by the Presbyterian Missions (vide Victorian State Paper on the New Hebrides, 1891, p. 21). The Melanesian Mission (Church of England) only claimed very small areas.

Conflicts

The French interest in New Hebridean land led to deep seated resistance by the British missionaries. Rev. Nicholson (1905: 15), on the West Coast of Tanna, brought land specifically to block the French efforts to take control:

We have further secured our work and station by taking over from the natives here about 800 acres of the best garden land on this part of Tanna. The people, heathen and Christian, gladly put it under the Mission to be reserved for their own use ... we are now safe from the possibility

of having undesirable neighbours, such as ungodly traders or French priests.

Nicholson claimed that the 800 acres of land was acquired because, a man would sometimes under the influence of grog or in a fit of bad temper, part with the land that only partly belonged to him, and in consequence the rest of his people were deprived of their ground and might be driven elsewhere. They had no court of appeal. Because of this situation, the natives sold land to the Mission, for a nominal price, and such land became common gardening ground for all people at Lenakel.

Nicholson claimed that other Tannese people asked him to control their land, just as he did his 800 acres, but he tactfully refused. He felt interest in such sales would prevent the French from annexing the land.

Nicholson (1913) had troubles, however, in maintaining the Presbyterian hold over Tanna. "One report was spread that the French were going to take complete control of the Southern Islands . . ." The claim was that Tanna belonged to the Loyalty Islands near New Caledonia, not to the Northern Islands of the New Hebrides. As a result, "The heathen said if that is so, there will then be no worship on Tanna, and some half adherents of worship on that presumption went back to heathenism." The French apparently urged their home government to demand that the British Government require Nicholson's expulsion from Tanna.

The British and French influences in the New Hebrides differed so greatly that the political, economic, and social situation in the islands was chaotic. As a result,

if a white man wishes to take a native's land, he can do so with impunity. The only way in which the native could prevent the white man remaining on his land would be to turn him out by force . . . It will thus be seen that the apparently favorable position of the native as the recognized owner of the soil is, in reality, far less favorable than it would seem to be at first sight. He is absolutely at the mercy of any unscrupulous white man who chooses to annex a piece of land, and neither administration nor court provide him with present protection or remedy (Jacomb, 1914: 136).

The Societe Francaise de Nouvelles Hebrides (French Society of the New Hebrides) offered

its claims on land in the group, including 600,000 hectares and in Tanna 2,000 hectares to British interests as of 25 June, 1921. In a letter from John Hannitin (1921) "There is now a plain opportunity to establish British control in the New Hebrides..." The asking price was 25 million francs. Interest in pursuing the British claims in the New Hebrides was evident. Winston Churchill (1921) wrote a secret letter dated 15 August 1921 to the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, "I undertook to consider further whether it would be practicable to buy out the French Society, whose title would, of course, have to be examined, and if so, how funds could be provided..."

The secret deal was apparently channelled through Australia as the nearest British nation in Empire. The amounts of money and land discussed by the French (*Societe Francaise des Nouvelles Hebrides*) in trying to sell its claims in the New Hebrides to the Australian Government, were 500,000 pounds for claims for one and a half million acres.

An appeal was made 28 March 1922 by the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland to the League of Nations concerning land. "Under specious forms of alleged law, land is being filched from its proper owners." The appeal was to have the French removed from the New Hebrides (Maxwell and Hunter, 1922).

However, the French continued to push for more colonists and increased purchase of land. In 1925 the Catholic Mission, Saint Therese de l'enfant Jesus, was able to purchase 100 hectares between Lenakel and Black Beach on Tanna for 885 francs (records of the Roman Catholic Mission - Vila, New Hebrides, 1934). The French sought to increase the number of French colonists by publishing a booklet (*Agence Generale des Colonies*, 1926) that described history, government, administrative problems, the climate and population. A caution about not seeking a chicken that lays eggs of gold is followed by statements about vast fields of rich soil and statements to the effect that a settler would need to learn to boss indigenous and Asiatic workers in a year long apprenticeship. The French state would give 50 hectares of the best coastal land free to a prospective settler. A budget was presented, focusing on the riches that would quickly accrue.

With many problems and conflicting claims about land, the Joint Court of the Condominium

established a Land Claims Commission in 1926. The British agent on Tanna, James M. Nicol, had planned on a much needed leave of absence. However, Resident Commissioner Joy wrote to postpone Nicol's leave primarily because of the decision of the Joint Court to deal with the Southern Islands land claims. He stated that the Court would dispatch a British and a French surveyor to Tanna. Interestingly, he added that the British surveyor might not be able to come, but "there would be two French surveyors..." The ability of the French surveyors has at times been questioned..." The Resident Commissioner estimated the survey would take 5 months and stated that Nicol could take his leave immediately afterward (Nicol, 18 August 1932).

The efforts to perform the survey were diligent, but the reaction by the Tannese people reflected their distrust. Nicol (September 5, 1932) noted that there might be friction over a claim by Rissen at Black Beach as caveats had been issued for the entire area. Persyn took note of caveats against the mission and Burns Philp claims - there were many. The native people were "dubious" about surveys and surveyors. Nicol attributed this suspicion as due to the value of copra on the coast and suspicion "in the bush" about anything dealing with land. Yet it may have been due to the fact that at one time, Nicol (March 27, 1930) told the native people that surveys, caveats and native advocates were services that had to be paid for by taxes. The Tannese people did not want taxes under any conditions.

In an effort to defuse the angry reactions of the Tannese, Resident Commissioner Joy (April 11, 1930) wrote to British District Agent Nicol that the native advocate was provided for in the Protocol. Other reasons were given for imposition of a head tax, such as costs of law, health campaigns, hospitals, and so on. Thus, even though "the basic principle of land policy is the protection of New Hebrideans..." (Henderson, 1971: 336) the adjustment of land claims by the Joint Court of the British - French Condominium in 1927 and thereafter was fraught with difficulty. The Great Depression, with its worldwide ramifications caused even more complex problems. Nicol (13 November 1932) wrote to Commissioner Joy:

The poor whites on Tanna want consideration because of their poverty in their relationships with the natives.

In the case of Europeans who have cattle, for which there is at present no market and who are, therefore, overstocked, the matter of straying cattle, fences in bad repair, no money to buy new wire and no money to employ labourers there is a perpetual source of irritation between them and the natives, who have to pay up in the Native Courts for damage caused by their pigs, horses, or cattle. The European can deny any jurisdiction in the matter and does so when it suits him.

Nicol felt that it was time that a French Agent be sent to form a Court of the First Instance to deal with such matters. Otherwise even a demand that fences be kept in repair was impossible under existing laws. Nicol continued to list a long series of infractions by Europeans against the Tannese. Whether they were hit harder by the depression or not, the British and the Presbyterians lost some of their power during this time.

Ferdinand-lop (1933) described how French interests in colonizing were split into those of individuals and those of big companies, the large scale was of greater impact. In the decade before he wrote, eight different French companies established and invested about 100 million francs.

French Catholics established a foothold on Tanna, to add to the fears of the Presbyterians who were unpopular because of their strict "Tanna Law," a very rigid system of belief used by the missionaries and their disciples to control all behaviour by church members and pagans alike. In 1932 or 1933, the French delegate, anxious to establish a strong presence, ran across the land already owned by the Catholic mission. The first two priests sent soon died. The next visitor observed that although on paper the Catholic mission had 100 hectares, in fact they held only 1.5. On 13 October 1932 R. P. Bochu became a missionary to Tanna and by August 1933 it was reported he had 30 acres at Lenakel, with a house, coconut trees and a location near the government delegates. To purchase and fix his land up with chapel and all, the cost was estimated at 48,000 francs (Durand, 26 December 1935).

The next crisis concerned the move of the Seventh-day Adventists to begin a mission on Tanna. The Presbyterian Rev. MacMillan was deeply grieved about this move, and District Agent Nicol conveyed this grief to his superior

the Resident Commissioner Joy (September 7, 1933) in a letter: After noting that most of the villages at Inamakel are Seventh-day Adventists, Nicol said he himself had no official complaint.

Of course, White Sands is getting overcrowded and land is getting scarce for gardening . . . North and South of Tanna is drying out and the center on either side is getting a bigger population of kids. Mac (Rev. MacMillan) is suffering from the fact that Presbyterians used to be it and the man-o-war its handmaiden and the Seventh Day Adventists type is second rate Salvation Army which please brown brother eating, sleeping in villages and talking slop. The fact that practically all the land claims have gone through will settle things a bit but the natives are quite sure the mission has done them in the eye for their land or in other words stolen it and naturally the Seventh Day Adventists are rubbing it in.

Rev. MacMillan sought to use his influence to block the Seventh-day Adventists (30 September, 1933). The land at Imale was once the land of the Presbyterian Mission. Rev. MacMillan argued the case, saying that the people wanted to give the land in dispute to his mission. He also argued that the Seventh-day Adventists were involved. MacMillan argued that the headmen's authority should be upheld. It was through a complicated case where a man named Nase died, his brother took his wife and named the posthumous son for his brother, Nase II. Nase II subsequently turned against his uncle betraying him to his enemies (1902). Nase II was condemned for this and shot by a blood relative. Later a girl was given to Iahipe, son of Nase II, to make up for his father's death. Later a boy was given to Iahipe to become his heir as Nase III. This Nase III tried about three or four or more guardian parents but kept running away back to his own village. Finally Iahipe wrote out a paper saying Nase was not to inherit the land. His widow lost the paper, though, and someone did try again with Nase III. He stayed a year, until he married and left again. He joined some Seventh-day Adventists at Inamakel. They all disowned him. The big men said Nase III had given up his rights to his land, even though he had come recently to cut copra on it. MacMillan wanted the big men (Presbyterian) to win and not to be flouted by irresponsible youths (Nase

III was a minor). Subsequent agreement on the Inamakel land was reached whereby the people of Nimitagi and of Namekel felt the land should be equitably apportioned between Iaukalapipole and the Nimitagi people.

The arrival of the Seventh-day Adventists mission coincided with the arrival of some government surveyors. A letter by H.H. Buckland to Mr Nicol, dated 4 January 34, Lauuluapu, Tanna, described the Seventh-day Adventists as attracting new converts with promises to assist with land claims, which caused enmity between the two missions. Buckland, a trader who helped teach in the Presbyterian school, leased property from the mission.

The British Resident Commissioner stated in a letter to the High Commissioner for the New Hebrides dated 31 January 1934, that the Seventh-day Adventists leased land at Port Resolution which was "sacred to the Presbyterian Mission, as it was at this place that the first Presbyterians made contact".

A letter to the people of Inamakel by the British and French District Agents, dated 19 September 1945, gave notice that the Inamakel land was not to be used for making gardens or building houses until the new land laws were received on Tanna. Permission would have to be given to the Inamakel people by the government to use their claimed land. This was evidently signed and settled the problem for a while.

A document (File FLS 35/3/10 Lands and Surveys: Southern District) showed that 47 judgements were rendered between 30 May, 1933 and 19 February, 1935. In addition to Burns Philp, Church of Victoria and Tanna Plantation, several churches and individual traders are mentioned as proprietors.

More Recent Land Issues

Given the limited European intrusion on land, the changes induced directly or indirectly resulted in many complex land issues that could not be easily resolved. It was not long before the John Frum Cargo Cult emerged in the late 1930's. An informant claimed that John Frum said, "Every man should go to his 'straight' land." By straight, the informant meant the land that had belonged to the person with the same name - as names carry ties to roles, possessions,

and ownership. After the Presbyterian induced moves, plus subsequent others, this going back to "straight" land was impossible, however.

The impact of John Frum on land issues remains unclear. In terms of the history of land from the Western point of view, according to Crocombe (1972), land symbolized political and economic power. A few foreign individuals and institutions own much of the high quality land, due to fraud, dishonesty, and occasional fair purchase in the nineteenth century. There is probably more land than will be used, but the fight for land is now on, and it is likely that the people of Vanuatu will fight for their land in the future.

The French in particular, united to remain in control presumably because of the vast mineral wealth in New Caledonia and their political role in the Pacific region. Independence of Vanuatu on 30 July, 1980 meant many changes, but ownership of land by non-Melanesians continues to be a sore point to Tannese. It is clear that the Condominium was unable to solve the problems. The trader, Bob Paul, raised the question of land registration in two succeeding Advisory Council sessions, asking the French delegate, M. Delauney, what had been accomplished? The reply was . . . "We have not been able to find a solution . . ." Bob Paul stated that landowners who registered land but did not improve it should be taxed. The French Resident Commissioner said mapping had not been done "and also that claims for registration of land have not been finally dealt with" (p. 35).

In retrospect, one might agree with Rev. Ken Calvert who felt that Rev. MacMillan was very influential in the 1900-1950 era in that he sought to isolate Tanna from outside influences, and thereby helped the Tannese preserve their land. He did "create" Yawis and Kowkarey, two big men who converted and became disciples, but who also escalated the coastal versus interior and the west versus east political splits of the Tannese people. But as a result of the missionary, relatively little land was sold. Given this history, the current quests for land, including logging rights, will no doubt continue to be an interesting tug of war. The interested reader is referred to two major more recent publications for further information (Van Trease, 1987; Report of the Regional Conference on Land Management, 1981).

NOTES

- 1 The name Vanuatu was adopted in 1980. The island chain, previously known as the New Hebrides, is referred to in the article as the New Hebrides in keeping with historical use.
- 2 Dr Gregory is Senior Lecturer in Psychology, School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.
- 3 The article includes information gathered from various archives and libraries as well as experiences encountered during 15 months of field work on Tanna. These data were gathered with support from Public Health Service Research Grant NIDA DA 01129. Field work was conducted in 1976 and 1977. Reference is made to various documents, some of which were made available courtesy of Mr. David Browning, District Agent on Tanna in 1976-1977, others of which were located in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, and various archives and libraries in Port Vila, New Zealand, and Suva, Fiji.

KEY WORDS Land; Vanuatu; Tanna; conflicts

ABSTRACT Tanna, one of the southern islands in the chain called Vanuatu, has had a history of colonialization by both the British and French governments, until Independence was gained in 1980. The impact on colonial rule on the Tannese people was often centered upon land ownership and rights to land. This vying for power and ownership over land is traced out in this account, based on anthropological field work and review of records held in the British Archives, then in Suva, Fiji.

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- Note: The Western Pacific Archives were formerly located in Suva, Fiji and were later transferred to London, but as of September 2002, have been relocated to the University of Auckland in New Zealand. The author used these archives in Suva in April-May 1977.
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Author's Address : Robert J Gregory, Senior Lecturer School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, NEW ZEALAND Phone: 64 6 350-5799 ext. 2053 E-Mail: R.J.Gregory@massey.ac.nz