

AN ACCOUNT OF THE NEKOVIA, TANNA

THE VOICE OF KAVA



MICHEL LIPPITSCH

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Tanna and Vanuatu, September 2007

Michel Lippitsch

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This is a work of memoir. It reflects the author's recollections of events, locales, and conversations from his own experience over time. Some names and identifying details may have been changed.

First edition.

A Note on the Text

This book gathers a nine-day journal covering a trip to Port Vila and then to Tanna for the Nekoviar — the once-in-years gathering of the Toka, Nao, Naser, and Consesua dances, and the killing of the pigs that closes it — together with five shorter, undated reflective pieces from the same trip, and a set of notes for a film Michel made from the footage, called *The Voice of Kava* (an earlier visit of his own is referenced inside the text itself).

A closing appendix reproduces the shot list from Michel's own editing notes for the film, largely as he wrote it.

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A Note on the Film

TANNA

and Vanuatu, September 2007

Three Centuries Ago

Three centuries ago, the first “white” navigators reached the shores of Oceania. What they brought with them changed the islanders’ world: tools, disease, belief systems, weapons, ideas.

Wave after wave came to reach these shores. Captain Cook landed here first. Then a handful of navigators after him carried home fearsome stories about the savagery of the islanders, and the shores of Tanna were left alone — until sandalwood was discovered. Then came a wave of traders. Then the first missionaries. Then the colonial powers, and after them the military-industrial complex. None of them met with the success they expected. Tanna’s resilience probably comes from its inability to form a single central power — designed that way, by the Tannese themselves: no single chief or leader could ever unite Tanna as one. Each power checked the others, in a dynamism that kept the whole society balanced on the edge of chaos.

At the turn of the century, a Tannese man left on a steamer to see the Western world for himself, then still seen as the model to follow. Years later, coming home, his message was simple: resist Westernization. Even the white people themselves don’t believe what the missionaries preach.

Though they live on an island, the Tannese invented a mythical tradition of a world of

spirit, unlimited by the constraints of space. In this open, dreamtime arena, the inner life makes contact with its own wealth and freedom.

The great machine of technology is seen for what it is here — not embraced as a new god, but watched, and tamed where possible, refused entry, if necessary, into places of mystical significance.

The Tannese succeeded, more than any other Pacific island, in resisting the total Christianization of their home. Later, they resisted total colonization by either the French or the British. Each power left behind its own memes and values, taken up or thrown off depending on whether the Tannese found any use in them. The culture's resilience, its growth, draws its strength from a continual reinvention of past, present, and possible future.

Never losing sight of the roots that keep the tree growing. New branches, new grafts, might be added over time — but the trunk stays Tannese. And in their own view, this isn't only for themselves, as one secluded group of tribes, but as the carriers of something important, on behalf of others too.

The spirits are called, the dreamspaces contacted, because they're needed. Songs are created out of revelations from the land of dreams, because they too are needed.

Conflict is constant here, and needs to stay present, to keep in check any single power's chance of rising to take over. The system holds together on mutual gift-giving and gift-receiving, matched to the ability and generosity of the land. The gardens themselves are works of art.

The banyan trees are shaped over time, like cathedrals, across generations — living works of art.

The nakamal are sacred ground. Every day, before the earth turns and hides the sun, the men bring down fresh kava root, and the younger men, not yet allowed to drink it, chew the roots instead. Fires are lit for each clan. The kava is drunk, the last drop spat out, a physical connection made to the spirits. Kava becomes a voice, a whisper — no loud talk, no noise, so as not to drown out the stories told by the trees, the birds, the wind, the insects. A few bites of clean food are eaten. The stars speak, whether or not they can be seen. Everything held in its present moment, in contact with what's real.

The space isn't violated by blasting music, by DVDs, by preachers. You're left exposed to yourself, and to whatever world you're able to perceive, in that moment.

A mythological space gives Tanna its identity — seen as networks, alliances, roads that one travels, and interacts with along the way.

Gaua

The circle, ever-present symbol of intermingling beginnings and ends, of passages that always come back — a symbol of unity.

The circle bends into a spiral, the shape of our known universe.

Now we've given the straight line the front stage instead. Paper bills have replaced shell money, replaced coins. Paper money can burn.

The beat keeps the tempo, echoes the heart, rises, and stops.

Reborn.

The roots, the soil — the feet stay connected.

Exposed, the blood isn't hidden. Nothing here comes packaged. It's all there to see.

The tourist has turned his camera into a gun, hunting for trophies.

The rustle of leaves becomes law and order.

The rain doesn't stop the work — the trees and plants drink it in. And the mythical snake that once came in a dream keeps on dancing.

Boys become men.

Men become graded, advancing through their own cultural evolution, each step earned

in the exactness of a gesture, an inner visualization, without mistakes. In the beginning, a man could die for a mistake in the dance — the pressure to get it right, and pass through.

Hand-fed for years, the pig can no longer feed itself. Concentrated intention, symbolized and made physical in the spiral of its tusks. And the pig, hermaphrodite, is sacrificed to mark a passage.

I've dreamed about mermaids ever since I first reached the sea. My ears have carried their stories, their tales told. And now the incarnation of these water goddesses, pure, forever present somewhere in my body and mind, has become part of how I see the world. I know that on the shores of Gaua, water turns into music, connecting me forever. The waves we ride on the open sea will be met and honored in transformation. The creatures of the sea, celebrated; the spirit of beauty, alive.

The banyan tree becomes a centuries-old, hand-carved sculpture.

*Kava flows in my mind,
To keep the dream of peace alive.*

*Just one shell before the sun goes
down,
Just one prayer to unite with
yourself.*

*Feel the trees breathing,
Feel the earth speaking,
Feel your heart singing.*

Kava, kava.

*Sitting, and the moon is rising,
The gentle breeze keeps blowing,
The fire is crackling.*

Port Vila, and the Hip-Hop Battle

21 September 2007

Strolling into town I meet the mother of Vanessa Quai, the most popular and famous singer here in Vanuatu, probably in the whole Pacific region. Vanessa is celebrating her tenth year in the music business. Tonight a hip-hop competition takes place; I give it a shot and arrive early on the scene. I meet Vanessa, and having just heard about a benefit concert she performed in Honiara for the victims of the tsunami that hit the Gizo area, I chat with her about the Solomons and our friends in the western province. She's twenty-one — she started recording music at eleven. The whole crew running the sound system comes from the Solomons, so of course I have to talk to everyone.

Sound check, a quick rehearsal where I hear Vanessa's fabulous voice. The crowd starts to come in. After the MC talks and a couple of thank-yous to the sponsors, the real stuff begins. Hip-hop is spreading like wildfire around the world, and the kids here love it — with the powerful energy of the Vanuatu people, it's going to be hot. After a first presentation from each group, the real deal starts: the battles. The temperature rises, everyone gets excited, even the old mamas watching every move and reacting to the dancers. The moves are unique — during the presentations it felt more like imitation LA or New York, but now, freestyling, they let it rip.

The tension rises, a tingle of fear appears. A gang member from the audience joins on stage for a showdown.

Port Vila needs to watch out. If the energy stays on the stage, in the battles, it's fine. But imitating the lifestyle of gangster rap — the city needs to worry about that, and watch these groups. Hip-hop, born out of the Black community in big American cities, carried social and political violence along with it. Nothing like that exists in Vanuatu yet — a purely urban phenomenon so far, but the memes travel. A few robberies are already becoming common in Vila.

Cement is pouring in — from three containers a week, two years ago, to a constant flow of more than seventy containers now. Australia has built a huge embassy, more fortress than building, on a hill overlooking the city, right next to the parliament of Vanuatu. Eighty percent of the coast of Efate is now in foreign hands, mostly Australian, mostly real-estate speculators. There was a time when Air Vanuatu produced a great in-flight magazine, full of diversity. Now, on at least one of the flights I was on, it's been replaced by a magazine called *Gold Coast*, with a big spread titled "Discover Vanuatu" — really just advertising for high-end resorts, mostly Aussie-owned, and real-estate opportunities.

Ironical, since Vanuatu is meant to be promoting a "year of kastom economy." Not much of that money is going to land on its own

doorstep — what's invested, and made, goes straight back to Australia. A few people are touring the more rural areas now, trying to educate people about what's happening, but there are few of them. The strongest sense of unity I've felt, a *we will not surrender our way of life* feeling, comes from Tanna. There's a saying: no one messes with a man Tanna. And from what I've seen, there's enough power there, hopefully, to hold on and not sell out.

After the hip-hop battles I went to check out the Aussie scene, but couldn't stay. A good night's rest before my expedition to the roots of Tanna.

To Ikiti, and the Opening of Consesua

22 September 2007

I try calling Philip in Tanna without success, then jump on the plane anyway. It's full of tourists, most of them here to watch one of the earth's great shows, the eruptions of Yasur, Tanna's volcano — and maybe some of them for the Nekoviar ceremony too. A young Tannese man sits beside me, a little girl on his lap. He's coming back from Samoa, where he played for the national Vanuatu football team, after five years away. His name is Jean Nako, French-speaking.

Since no one I know is at the airport, he offers to take me along. He lives in Ikiti, a village close to the ceremony grounds. Someone recognizes me from a previous trip — they'd watched the film I made here, *The Voice of Kava* — and promises to relay word to Philip that I've arrived.

We climb into a truck for an hour's ride. Along the shore, rows of leaves are drying in the sea breeze; I recognize the smell — I wore leaves just like these around my arms in Simbo, dancing the warrior dance, Ey Omba.

We arrive at the most peaceful place, and right away the little girl is kissed and hugged and carried off into the arms of the other children, already playing with her. Nako is something of a star here — everyone comes to greet him. I had no idea, but his grandmother is the wife of one of the four chiefs responsible

for this whole area's Nekoviar, and he's the one who started it in the first place. I can hardly believe it.

After resting under a mango tree, not yet in fruit, we set off to watch the opening of the dance called Consesua, in a nakamal half an hour away. Raspberries are in season, and I keep picking them as we pass fresh-water creeks and virgin forest. I'd come to film all of this, but the men in the nakamal decide not to let me — that would change the next day. The dance is powerful, precise, and I'll see it three times before the week is out.

After the dance closes, it's time for kava, Tanna style. We head to Chief Tom's nakamal, where the root is freshly harvested, chewed, and squeezed. The clan's sacred fire is burning; food is brought down. The banyan tree seems to watch you from every side. After the first shell, I finally feel like I've arrived — the voice of kava is in me again.

We go on to eat in Chief Tom's kitchen. The nearest electricity is in Lenakel, an hour's drive, six or seven hours on foot. Pig and taro, cooked by Nako's grandmother — a social hour, everyone coming round to shake hands. I'll sleep in Tom's house with Nako tonight.

Napen Napen, and the Digging of the Kava

23 September 2007

Sunday, and I'm asked if I want to go to church — there's a French Catholic mission nearby. I ask first if everyone's going. Yes, yes, yes, comes the answer. The sermon is over quickly; I'll later see one of the priests in full swing, dancing. The singing is wonderful, and within the hour it's all done. I'm told Philip has arranged for me to sleep in Yasur, where the whole event will take place, but I decide to stay one more night with Nako and Tom.

After a rest, we go to another village to watch the women getting ready for their dance. This time I'm allowed to film everything. We arrive to find the whole village preparing — the dance is called Napen Napen. It runs over an hour and a half, at least thirty songs, each with its own lyrics and its own choreography, meticulously precise. The gesture is what counts, I'm told. The main beat comes from striking a woven pandanus bag, filled with fern, wrapped in a special leaf. I'm blown away.

Before the dance finishes I follow two men off to dig up a huge kava plant, twelve years old, to be carried to the main nakamal at Yesup the next day. We walk first through gardens of taro, yam, and kava, sharpening two digging sticks with the ever-present machete. The roots run for meters and have to be followed to their end; the earth is damp,

clouds cover the sky. The plant itself, a meter wide, is dug out carefully, without breaking a single leaf — for ceremonial kava, the whole plant has to stay intact. I help dig the kava we'll drink tonight, and we cut stems from it to replant — all kava plants, I'm told, are considered female, and only replanting works. I learn to cut and plant a stem myself, to keep growing until I might come back.

Still not sure how one man can carry a plant that size through the bush, we make it back to the village — the men aren't allowed into the nakamal where the women danced this time. Who knows what they're performing in there now. I'm overjoyed to have planted a kava that will grow into something whole.

Datura flowers, huge white trumpets, are blooming everywhere. Time to head back and drink kava — by now the rain is pouring, not a good sign with the ceremony two days out. Songs carry in from a distance; pigs are being brought up to Yesup. Two shells of kava, and the moon, fuller now, only gets to show herself in gaps between the dark clouds covering the stars.

Back in the kitchen there are new arrivals; by now everyone knows my name and I feel at home. We eat roasted breadfruit, fried pork, and yam pulled from the kava garden. Another night of deep dreams.

The Pigs, and the Opening of Nao

24 September 2007

One day before the ceremony starts. In the morning we head to Yesup to meet the chiefs. As we arrive, the rain still pouring, I'm greeted by Naser and Jean. Naser is strong, an unbreakable mask of a face — I can feel the strength coming off him. Jean, a teacher, chooses kindness instead.

We go to see the pig pen. On the last count, seventy-three pigs will be killed on the final day. One party arrives with pigs — thirty people, singing. Once the pig is brought down, a dance follows, a whirling one, and I get pulled into it, camera in hand. Unlike the more intricate dances prepared for the Nekoviar, this one I can just be inside of — a great feeling.

The rain starts again, and it would be a disaster for the event — the planning took years, the date already pushed back a month to line up every necessary condition: enough pigs, enough kava, the weather, the stars — a full moon for light in case none can be brought up from Lenakel — the dancers ready.

(And, as it happens, something almost magical for me too: I'd dreamed of seeing the Nekoviar ever since we first arrived here, two years ago — I remember mentioning it as far back as Fiji. I'd already planned to take time off from the *Infinity*, at first just to spend time with Eddie, the sand-drawer. Somehow it all

came together fast — the date was confirmed while we were still in Vila. We'd gone up to the Banks Islands first, where another small art festival was taking place, and then I had to work out how I could even afford the trip. The Banks sit at the very top of Vanuatu. With help from the cultural center, and David at Vanair, the tourism office wrote a letter that got me fifty percent off the ticket. Along the way I met a lot of the people involved, and felt the family, the helping spirit of the ni-Vanuatu, who seemed to read straight through me and see the drive underneath.)

Now we move to the smaller nakamal at Yesup, to watch it opened with the dance called Nao. At least fifty dancers are preparing long, fat bundles of roseau reed. The rain keeps drizzling. All the reeds will have to be burned after this dance, new ones cut for the final dances at the main nakamal.

The first conch sounds — everyone starts moving. Men sit around the fire eating breadfruit, gathering themselves mentally. I'm in the hands of Philip's relatives now; Nako's gone ahead to Lenakel.

The second conch call gets everyone moving toward their sticks, sarongs on, a few leaves tucked into their hair. On the third call, every dancer moves into the center of the nakamal. The rain is pouring now, but there's no turning back — the dance has to happen. For an hour, on ground turned to mud, feet and sticks stomp the earth, splashing

everywhere, and everyone seems to be having the time of their lives. By the end, everyone's muddy head to toe. I film it all from the safety of a covered hut. The nakamal is open now.

Time for kava. By now I'm settled in with Philip's sister's family — her husband speaks no English or French, but we manage with our eyes. Earlier I'd met the whole family, had corn with coconut milk for lunch, grated yam pancakes. By now my palate craves this simple garden food, no spices at all.

We drink kava at the nakamal — the voice of kava comes in again. Still raining; I wonder how many people here are quietly wondering if they made a mistake. So far the only outside visitor is Gerard, a retired French mathematician living in Noumea, who arrived a month ago and just stayed. Food cooked under the fire, and then bed. Tomorrow is the big day.

The Women Dance

25 September 2007

As if by miracle, the sky starts to clear. Unbelievable — someone up there is working hard. The men call the women in; dancing begins in the nakamal, in a circle, the mood rising. All around, in the huts, the women are getting ready, painting bright, intricate designs on their faces, layer after layer of grass skirt, each group with its own distinct style. As Jacob, who runs the cultural center's media, points out — what matters is the meaning of the songs, the gesture, the language. The costume is up to the individual. Even so, there's real care in it. I hear the words "beauty magic" — and beautiful, they are.

The day before, a beautiful woman handed me a fistful of raspberries — a garden-of-Eden sight. The Tannese know what they have; they refuse pesticides and fertilizer, believing the spirit of the earth and of Tanna is enough on its own. Everything comes from it, all connected.

Voices rise now in the arena, which has been in preparation for months, widened a little by a bulldozer along one road, otherwise everything here still moves on foot. Three huge banyan trees have platforms built into them, for a better view of the whole ceremony later — and, I'll learn, for protection too.

The first group of women arrives, met with a huge roar from the men, now satisfied, leaving the nakamal. Group after group comes in, closing with the children, each dropping a piece of lap lap onto a pile before taking their place. Eight groups in all. As the first starts its song, beating hard on the napen, the others are already getting ready. Slowly the whole place fills with bright color — maybe five or six hundred women dancing at once. Young men imitate the women's moves to try and rattle them — a mistake, and you owe something back, sweets maybe. The men are here to watch for a possible bride too, I'm told, checking, maybe choosing a girl they like. Meanwhile a security team forms, the same ones who will carry the pigs later and guard the big night to come. The women dance all day.

More pigs keep arriving. A few visitors show up, none staying more than a few hours — I just don't get it.

In the early afternoon, Philip arrives. It's good to see him — he couldn't find transport and walked nine hours to get here. He tells me his family said he'd never forgive himself if he didn't come see me. We talk, remember old times. The film, *The Voice of Kava*, was a hit, traveling even to Ambae on the one copy I sent — the women whose sons had been circumcised in it cried watching it.

As the light fades, it's time for kava again — this time we hide in the bush, too many

people around, and the women aren't meant to see the men drinking, since they can't drink it themselves. It turns out the men around me are all from Port Resolution, where we anchored with the *Heraclitus* a couple of years back — but the *Infinity* had been there too, and once carried the entire Port Resolution football team to Port Vila. They all remember Clemens. Their surprise, when I tell them we're sailing on the *Infinity* now, and that we've all already met on board. Kava works in mysterious ways.

I also meet three French guys from Noumea who'd delivered medical supplies by helicopter while I was waiting for a connecting flight in Santo — we talked about maybe flying over Yasur together, which never happened, though I mentioned Ronnie, the shaman weather-maker of Port Resolution, and they ended up taking him aboard to look at Yasur from the air. Good to get news of friends this way.

With Philip, we talk about where things stand — I explain our situation with the *Infinity*. He keeps reminding me that I'm already a man Tanna, that whatever happens, I'll always have a home here. The knowledge of how to live well on almost no money is still alive here; you can just come.

They live their values. A man is a man.

After kava, food — yam, taro, taro leaves. The last night of decent sleep; I've been cold, up at altitude, in rain and low temperatures,

but holding on. I've gone barefoot for three days now, better grip on the muddy paths. I've been moving like a butterfly, trying for different angles with the camera — the energy is intense, and I hope some of it shows in the footage. Worried about batteries, since no electricity has turned up yet. I've even got a blister on my knuckles. Gabriel lets me use his tree house — a precarious climb each time, a bamboo ladder with rungs that keep coming loose, then a walk out along a branch to the platform, all with a high-definition camera in hand. But it has to be done.

The Night of Toka, and the Killing of the Pigs

26 September 2007

Early rise, more pigs and kava coming in, the women already at work on the lap lap. A quick breakfast, and we go — crossing two mountains this time, to a nakamal where the Toka dance will open, before traveling on to Yesup, the main nakamal. The path is narrow, and wherever it turns slippery there's already a stick placed to help you along. This time the procession arrives out of the bush, announced by the conch, the men ready in full costume. A crowd has gathered around the nakamal — intense, marvelous, powerful, every superlative fits, and having some experience in theatre myself, I recognize the precision and preparation behind something that looks effortless. The energy feels mystical, all of it aimed now toward the nakamal at Yesup.

As the dance finishes, everyone rushes for the next nakamal, another mountain over. There the sky's gone bright blue, the nakamal looks out over the Pacific, and more people keep arriving from what seems like nowhere — not a house in sight anywhere near. The dancers here are extraordinary, standing inches from my lens, all their power in the dance — the second Toka. The energy climbs and climbs; amazing footage, I hope, if I managed to hold the camera steady — not easy, with fifty warriors (Toka is considered male, against the other three, Nao, Naser, and

Consesua, which are female) storming toward you. I climb onto the roof of the nakamal hut to get a better angle on some of it. Men transform into birds, into boxers, into deer.

As the dance ends, and the next is too far to reach in time, we head back to Ikiti to rest and catch up with Nako. The conch sounds again — time to get ready for the opening of Consesua. More people have arrived, the atmosphere electric. We move on to see Naser open, then rush to catch the opening of Nao at the main nakamal.

The sun is setting, the men's dances complete, and it's time for kava while the women begin preparing to dance through the whole night.

I'm warned that tonight, anything can happen — bad things too, since the killing of the pigs the next day marks a new beginning, where everything from the past is forgotten. Men guard their women carefully; a team of a hundred will provide security. The outside world has no jurisdiction here tonight — no government, no police, holds any power on this ground.

Kava again, in the bush. The voice of kava comes in.

Now a crowd of close to seven hundred, maybe a thousand people, is warming up the arena. This is real — intense, intimidating, powerful, the call impossible to resist. Electricity finally shows up, in the form of two

small generators, dimly lighting the place. I've got three or four people with me at all times. As the first group of women enters, the whole place goes wild — a crowd of young men keeps undulating through the arena like a snake, armed with sticks, some fitted with deer antlers, a wild, excited army that nothing can stop. I keep filming in the dim light, atmospheric shots, when a wave of them corners me against a banyan tree, poking at me with their sticks; I snake my own way out. Camera crews have been known to lose their cameras, and worse, in that arena. It's all real. They could kill me if they wanted to, and the ceremony wouldn't stop, and no court anywhere would have any power to do anything about it. The night really is a free space — and freedom where everything is permitted is a dangerous game.

But they control these energies like nothing I've ever seen. It rises, and rises, and rises. At its peak I'm in tears of admiration — most of the world would tear itself to pieces under this kind of intensity.

I take refuge in the tree house, determined not to sleep. The music only intensifies, peaking; the horde of young men with their shark-tooth sticks won't sleep either. In the middle of the night I climb back down into the arena, this time with a bodyguard. Some of the young men keep dancing with the women; the chiefs flash torchlight whenever they feel the energy running too hot. I'm in awe of it.

It's four in the morning now. I hear the chiefs decide the first men's group should come on at four-thirty. As the last of the women sing, something extraordinary happens — the whole crowd turns into a single human wave, surging back and forth, faster and faster. Then the men enter, met by a roar, pulled in as if by magic. They carry a long pole, twenty feet high, made from hawk feathers, representing a high chief and his connection to the god of the earth. They whirl it, one great cry, and the pole comes down, secured against the giant banyan tree.

The first dance, the Toka, begins. Everyone gives everything they have — the movements incarnating stories, past and present. The earth itself seems to shake. The first light of dawn appears; the stars are still bright, not a cloud overhead. As the dance ends, the human wave starts again, calling in the next group. I'm in awe all over again at the raw power of it, camera steady as I can hold it, even in the low light something coming through. A second Toka, again with the long pole, again everything the dancers have. Then Naser, the warriors — unbelievable energy, the crowd going wild. Then Consesua — the men dance holding carved birds, hawks. To close the men's dances, Nao — the host nakamal, two poles. The women jump to the beat of the songs. The sun has risen now, shining straight through the forest of roseau poles, the ground fuming with the stomping of feet. What a finale.

But the day has only started. By nine, an exchange of lap lap, cooked by the women the day before, takes place — every clan trading with another. And now, the killing of the pigs. *La tuerie des cochons.*

In procession, two clans meet, singing challenges at each other. On one carrying pole rides a pig with a chief sitting astride it; behind, the most enormous kava plants I've seen, some fifteen or twenty years old, grown just for occasions like this. The women keep dancing, running, singing up and down the nakamal, until every pig and every kava plant has been brought in — seventy-three of each. The pigs are clubbed, by a specialist, the clubber; not one is left alive. The sacrifice marks a fresh start, canceling whatever might have happened overnight. I watch the chiefs' faces as they watch, sensing, feeling it all. They can be proud.

Now all the pigs lie dead, dogs licking at the blood, chickens hunting scraps of lap lap. An old man from the custom village hands me a piece of roasted taro — I hadn't realized how hungry I was. I sit in contemplation on top of a huge kava plant while some of the chiefs align the pigs and the kava in rows; the day before, I'd walked that same line with them while it was still being planned. Now, everything perfectly aligned, the last rite is performed — one man, someday to be a big man himself, walks the length of the pigs and comes back the other way carrying a Toka pole.

Then each man chooses a pig. In a month's time there'll be another exchange, and whoever takes a pig now will return one of equal size and value, according to species. A man here without pigs is not a man. Each plants his Toka pole into the pig he's chosen, and it's over. Little by little everyone starts packing up, carrying or dragging their pigs and kava roots home. Tonight, kava will flow, and pig will be eaten.

We drink kava in a nakamal belonging to the people of Imake, with Jacob and Philip. The man chewing my kava, I learn, is one of only two left on the island who can shift the weather — brought in especially for this. There are smaller weather-workers scattered around; even Chief Tom, I'm told, keeps a place for this kind of thing. He's not shy about it, or arrogant — he simply admits it, plainly.

We drink two shells. This time I really feel the spirits. Jacob and I seem almost telepathic in conversation; going off to pee, I feel, almost see, the gates protecting the nakamal. We're in a sacred space. The moon is bright enough to seem to talk to you; so are the stars.

We're at the beginning of time. On a small, perfect fire, the insides of a pig are roasting alongside yam, cassava, eggs wrapped in leaves. I'm high — everything speaks. The trees have become friends, swaying in the wind; strange little whirlwinds trace patterns through the leaves. Everyone's quiet, meditative, paying attention to something

larger than themselves, to the sacred. I'm full — though I'm coming down with an infection from days of rain and mud, I'm full of life, privileged to have been let into this the way I was, carried along and supported the whole time. Hands were always ready to help — to carry my bag when the trail turned too slippery to walk, in the arena where I danced and ran, in the kitchen where food always appeared, in the nakamal, among the chewers, who understood I couldn't take part in that one thing. My jaws could take raw sugar cane, could take a pig's heart, but not the kava itself.

I had more conversations than I can count, about everything and nothing. Tanna feels, more than ever, like the secret garden of my own beginnings.

The dances are pure, essential — hands, feet, voice, no instrument but the body. Back to the beat of the earth itself. I found those same melodies and rhythms afterward in the birds, in the insects, in the wind whispering in my ears.

I've seen a great many dances in my life. But this raw, and at the same time deeply sophisticated energy, carried through individuals into a single unity — I haven't experienced that anywhere else. It is our roots, the ones we've forgotten, the ones we're busy destroying. I found, in those few days, something like the origin of human culture itself — passed down and adapted over

thousands of years, gestures and songs still carrying their ancestry.

In the beginning of cultures, there was only man, and himself, and each other. They remain entirely of the biosphere. Their connection to this planet runs deep; the voice of the earth comes straight through them, the spirit of the earth passing right through.

And man Tanna has never surrendered. They were key to Vanuatu's independence, and they remain a check on the corruption of the government now — a government that is, I think, a little afraid of them. A few years back they looted the corrupt, no one else; they warned the honest ones beforehand to close up shop, that they wouldn't be touched, and kept their word exactly. The government has been careful ever since.

They also tolerate, but don't follow blindly, any religion. They are thinkers.

But their biggest contribution, in my own accounting, is in how they hold and transform subtle energy. Where some men meditate alone, in Tanna it belongs to everyone, together — and together, they'll survive. That spirit isn't negotiable. It isn't for sale.

Leaving Tanna

28 September 2007

After a gift exchange in the morning, and the promise that everything I've filmed will eventually make its way back to them — six to eight months, they say — I leave carrying so much. For memory's sake I bring back a napen that Philip's sisters spent two days beating, two feather decorations, a grass skirt, and a Consesua bird. That bird catches the attention of the airport and somehow works like a magic wand, opening doors.

We climb into a truck, dropping a flashlight off with Chief Tom on the way, saying goodbye, heading down to Lenakel. We're lucky to find transport — now that the Nekoviar is over, almost no traffic runs that way. In Lenakel, wondering what to do next, Philip suggests I try to leave today if I can, since transport will be scarce; he'll go on to Imake to see his son. I've brought some DVDs for him to deliver.

I meet Jacob's father, a chief in Imake — his eyes are bright, and we keep talking in Bislama, though the words hardly matter. I feel like he sees straight through to the inside of me. A rebel, for sure — a keeper of knowledge.

My apprenticeship in Tanna feels like it's only just begun, and I know I'll be back someday. There are so few places like this, that become part of you the moment you leave

them. The spirit of Tanna is growing inside me — the making of a planetary man, not simply through travel but through spirit. I'll always be grateful for this teaching.

At the airport, the plane looks full. The irony of history: some Americans chat away, just back from a resort, while a group of Muslim travelers wait for the same flight. Somehow I don't make that plane — remarkable, the workings of the media's own brainwashing machine, that the thought of a bomb crosses my mind as I carry my two pelican cases through; the customs officers must have thought something similar, since for the first time they ask to see what's inside. For whatever reason, I end up on a small plane instead, carrying one old man, one other passenger, and myself. And that's it.

I land back in Port Vila in the late afternoon, barefoot — my flip-flops lost somewhere in the middle of the whole Toka event. Back to the guesthouse, Hibiscus; the night security man there is from Tanna too. I head to Nafest to grab a bite — a band is playing. In the crowd, Eddie spots me. We hang out, but I'm wrecked — I even turn down a bowl of kava. I try to make it back to the guesthouse but collapse halfway, nap in the grass, and finally make it back for a proper night's sleep.

Port Vila, Once More

29 September 2007

I spend the morning going through the shops. Almost all of them, it seems, are Chinese-run now, selling cheap goods, busy on their calculators all day. Hardware stores are growing like mushrooms — a good indication of where things are headed here. I treat myself to a café au lait and two croissants, reading the newspaper — an interesting piece on the depletion of tuna stocks, a rally for the Pacific nations to unite and hold the big powers at bay, at least a little. The festival in Gaua made the paper too, plenty of photos, alongside the Rugby World Cup and Fiji's win — quite a few of the players turn out to be from Ngau, a name that keeps coming up. The last dance in Tanna was Nao, too.

I talk to a lot of bus drivers, find a secondhand shop for a pair of jeans — the woman running it is a retired nurse from the Solomon Islands, raised on the artificial islands of Malaita, in Vila for forty years now. Wild stories about the old condominium government, the supposed alliance between the French and the English, each keeping their own systems in place, to everyone's confusion, two bureaucracies where one would have done. In Sola, I'm told, primary school is still taught in French, secondary in English.

Australians, in general, aren't well received here — and watching them treat the ni-Vanuatu the way I've seen them treat the

Aboriginal community, I'm not surprised. Bossy, even slapping an employee once, in front of me. One story: an Australian watches a ni-Vanuatu man cutting bamboo to put up a screen, then decides to show him the "proper" way to do it. He fails, badly, tries for five minutes, and after wearing himself out, the Vanuatu man quietly takes the saw back and finishes the job himself. The Australian, not giving up, starts trying to break the bamboo with his foot instead, then goes on lecturing about how to tie it, on and on. The Vanuatu men just watch, smiling — he's the boss, after all. (Taking their land, and sending all the money back to Australia. Nothing goes back in.)

I meet Eddie for kava, but first he has to perform with the kids he teaches — four custom dances. Big-name bands are playing on the same stage. We start getting the kids ready as they arrive at the museum, alongside displays of Lapita pottery, masks, and so on. I become the face and body painter, taking each child in turn — about thirty of them.

REFLECTIONS

Tanna Toka

New things, new changes, get folded into new compositions, performed by the dancers, the actors, the singers. A hundred songs and dances will be performed — from the ancestors to the new, merging a new era, another beginning, into the present moment.

The beat comes from the root of man — feet, voice, hands.

Walking toward a future that the people of Tanna are taking into their own hands.

The power of unity.

Every body takes part. One style, but each one individually different.

Evolving, because it makes room for the new. A refusal of the wrong values, a refusal of the destruction of the life-support system.

Open to information, arms wide open to anyone who reaches their shore — and standing by, ready to pass on the jewels gathered over millennia. Human potential, not left to wither, but given enough room to expand, to redesign itself, magic included. Magic understood for exactly what it is: an ability to do. Nothing more, nothing less. It doesn't grant a special status not available to anyone else. The magician performs his magic,

and lives according to whatever's necessary to be able to do it. And since you can't cheat at it, any fraud gets exposed eventually. The techniques change, but they remain techniques — a certain kind of food, a certain kind of kava, abstaining from certain information (television, radio) to keep the channel clear of noise.

Before the pig came the turtle.

Kava unveils the world of dreams. Social and mystical at once, drinking it is done in the nakamal — a sacred place, where intoxication becomes prayer, becomes a voice.

Beauty magic.

The spilled blood of the pig will wash clean whatever happened during the night.

The Stone Is Alive

The stone is alive. The soil is alive. The seed opens, called by the spirits of life. The seed grows up and down, digging for what it needs, giving itself to the world. The wind caresses the leaves, shapes the tree.

Together — the soil and its spirit, the air and the wind, the sun giving its energy, and the rain, and the cover of the clouds — the trees and the plants grow. The magician knows the steps, the songs and chants that help them along. The food is given to men; men share it among themselves.

No one will go hungry on Tanna. No one will be without a roof.

Because the land and its spirits grow, and men have food enough, kava connects you to the dreams. A voice — where the trees, the bees, the crickets, the crackling fire, and the ancestors can all sing, and the song is heard, listened to. The words only come if they carry something true.

In dreams, under a sacred banyan tree, carved over centuries into a living sculpture, a dance was passed down. Toka was born.

Each Nekoviar, new songs, given from the dreamtime, compose themselves.

Credit Toka

Toka, the Power of Unity

A Studio of the Sea production. For the people of Tanna, by the people of Tanna.

Anyone is welcome to copy, show, and share this film's content, so long as it stays non-commercial. If you sell it, or use it to make money, please send fifty percent of the profit to Studio of the Sea.

Scenario: the people of Tanna, including their ancestors. Choreography: the people of Tanna, including their ancestors. Art direction, costumes, hairdressing, makeup, catering, logistics: the people of Tanna. Sets: the island and the people of Tanna. Stage, security, carving, banyan-tree design: the people of Tanna. Trail guides through mud and slippery ground: the people of Tanna. Weather control: the people of Tanna. Lighting: the sun. Inspiration: the people of Tanna, and the voice of kava. Energy supplied by: planet Earth, and the planets, suns, and stars around it. Music, songs, and lyrics: the people of Tanna, and their ancestors. Camera equipment: Studio of the Sea. Additional music: Michel and Flipper. Kava chewer: the people of Tanna.

Every character and event is true. Nothing here is staged or invented. Any resemblance to fiction or fantasy is pure coincidence.

Transportation to Vanuatu provided by the sailing ship *Infinity* and PCRf. Thank you to

Vanair for a discount on flights within Vanuatu. Thank you to the cultural center for its support and inspiration.

Thirty liters of fuel were used to light the Napen Napen night; no other electricity was used. Most transport was on foot, over mountain and trail. Most of the food was grown on the island. A few cars carried people, and some kava and pigs, from farther away. One bulldozer widened the main nakamal and its trail. No plastic bags or non-organic waste were produced during the ceremony, apart from a few torch-light batteries.

Every pig that was killed was eaten, with the highest respect, down to the last organ. Clubbing is the most humane and fastest way to kill an animal by hand. None of the kava, taro, or food grown here used any pesticide or fertilizer.

Years of preparation were necessary; the timing was kept secret until the final weeks. The ceremony was free to visitors and tourists — no fee of any kind was charged, and no foreign aid money was given or used to prepare or perform it.

Two overseas visitors, Gerard and Michel, attended the whole ceremony. Two BBC film crews attended some of it. Fewer than forty visitors came by at all, even for a few hours.

The event made no news, anywhere in the world.

A NOTE ON THE FILM

Michel's own scene list for *The Voice of Kava*, kept here largely as he wrote it — a record of what the camera actually followed, day by day.

1. Preparation of food — voice explaining the cornerstone of Tannese food.
2. Digging the kava root — a story about kava, or a poem of roots and soil being alive.
3. Rehearsal of the women's napen — the fertility stone, and the role of women bringing cooked food in first society.
4. Village introduction — the lack of "money," but the emphasis on skill.
5. The men call the women to dance.
6. Beauty magic — a poem about beauty, intoxicating beauty.
7. Scenes of people — talk of the equality of power.
8. The women arrive.
9. Napen Napen, the daytime dance.
10. Opening of the nakamal with Nao — the symbol of Nao, a personal interpretation alongside the Tannese one.
- 11-13. Opening of the nakamal with Toka, Toka again, and Consesua.
14. Calling the women to dance at night.
15. Napen Napen, the night dance.
16. Calling the next dance.
- 17-20. Toka, Naser, Consesua, Nao.
21. The coming of Kweriya.
22. Niel — the exchange of lap lap.
23. The pigs are brought from the villages.

24. Preparation of the pigs.
25. Bringing the pigs and kava to the nakamal.
26. The killing of the pigs.
27. Alignment of the pigs.
28. The walk over the pigs.
29. The men take the pigs and kava away.

Marked separately, to pull from the longer “Voice of Kava” footage: the talk in the nakamal; the pouring of kava and the mystical voice of the trees; contemplation on kava; the banyan tree; Yasur, the volcano god, and the landscape as the setting of Tanna; Lenakel as a symbol of Western influence; the boys coming out, as a rite of passage; the niel, piles of goods to be distributed; a speech from Jean, on going back to kastom; and a song to extract for the pig dance. One more scene, marked to pull from footage shot in Papua New Guinea: fire-making in Esala.