

Justice and Grace

A Case Study of Three Reconciliation Ceremonies in Vanuatu



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Tank yu tumas long save storiam wetem me. Mi lanem plante samting!

I hope this paper will encourage others to take the time to learn about Vanuatu kastom and culture and understand its importance to the Ni-Vanuatu worldview.

Introduction

In my role as Global Mission Coordinator for the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, I work closely with the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu (PCV), our primary mission partner. This has resulted in exposure to and involvement in a culture very different to my own, providing me with many new and enriching experiences. When study leave became available I decided to dedicate some time to learning more about Vanuatu culture in order to help me understand the Ni-Vanuatu people and their customs more deeply, and as a result, to help me become more effective in my work.

I chose this topic for my study because I had observed some reconciliation ceremonies, and selected ceremonies in which the church had been significantly involved. Due to time constraints I limited my study to three ceremonies. These were held on Erromango Island in 2009, Aneityum Island in 2011 and Ambrym Island in 2013. In July 2018 I spent time in each location interviewing relevant parties, as well as key people in Port Vila. It was a great privilege for me to spend time with chiefs, pastors, elders and community members who shared their stories, their wisdom, and their deep love and respect for their culture with me. The information in this study draws on more than thirty interviews conducted over four weeks in July 2018.

This paper begins with an explanation of the importance of reconciliation ceremonies within Vanuatu culture. Then it gives an outline of the generally accepted story behind each event studied. Then I explore the reasons for each reconciliation ceremony, and evaluate the outcomes. The paper concludes that learning and respecting the values of traditional culture play an important role when working among the Ni-Vanuatu people.

Phil King

“All this is from God, who reconciled us through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” - 2 Corinthians 5:18

A Short Glossary

This explains some of the terms used:

Bislama – the most commonly spoken language in Vanuatu and one of three official languages (the other two are English and French). There also many native dialects specific to various islands.

Ni-Vanuatu, Ni-Van - a native of Vanuatu. It means “of Vanuatu.”

Sori ceremony - Sori ceremony and reconciliation ceremony mean the same. Sori means sorry in Bislama.

Kastom – a Bislama term to describe Vanuatu’s unique customs and traditions

Nakamal – a term referring to a Council of Chiefs. It can refer to both the collective group of chiefs, and also to the physical location where they meet.

Simanlou - a term unique to Erromango to describe their Council of Chiefs meeting, and also the unique Eromangan style meeting house the chiefs meet in.

Nimoval – A local meeting house on Erromango where chiefs and elders would meet to solve problems. It can be regarded as a lower-level Simanlou.

Blackbirding – a form of labour recruitment in the 19th century that enticed Pacific Islanders from their villages to work on plantations, mainly in Queensland and New Caledonia. Sometimes they were taken against their will.

Reconciliation Ceremonies in Vanuatu Culture

Reconciliation, or “sori” ceremonies, are embedded in Vanuatu culture. A reconciliation ceremony occurs when one party has grieved another, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and on the agreement of both parties, they meet to reconcile and put their disagreement behind them. It may occur between families, villages, tribes, even between different islands. A reconciliation ceremony cannot take place without the consent of both parties.

Custom, or “kastom” in Bislama - which is one of the three official languages of Vanuatu - underpins everything in Vanuatu. In this paper, kastom refers to the customs, beliefs and traditions unique to Vanuatu. Kastom lies at the heart of what it is to be a Ni-Vanuatu.

Kastom reconciliation ceremonies usually involve speeches and the exchange of food and mats; in most instances, a pig is the traditional gift offered, which is then killed, cooked and eaten together. The speeches and exchange of gifts are usually followed by a handshake or embraces, and the ceremony is always concluded with a shared meal. To understand Vanuatu and its people, one must understand the importance of kastom, and the place of reconciliation ceremonies.

My first experience of a Vanuatu reconciliation ceremony was at the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu’s (PCV) General Assembly at Ranon, North Ambrym in 2013. The assembly took place one hundred years after a volcanic eruption had destroyed several villages and wiped out a mission hospital and school at Dip Point, further down the coast on the western edge of the island. The whole area was devastated and entire communities were uprooted and forced to live elsewhere, as Dip Point had become uninhabitable. This reconciliation ceremony involved descendants of families (specifically descendants of chiefs) from Dip Point reconciling with descendants of other families who had lived there prior to the eruption, and also with the descendants of missionaries who had worked there. After beginning the reconciliation ceremony as an enquiring and interested observer, I soon became a participant. As the sole New Zealander present on that occasion, by default I represented the descendants of the New Zealand Presbyterian missionaries who were involved, and was presented with several gifts on their behalf.

As I asked members of the Assembly about the purpose of the reconciliation ceremony, I was basing my questions on my understanding that reconciliation involved confession for past misdemeanours, and the offering and acceptance of forgiveness. Where one party had clearly wronged another, it was easy for me to understand why reconciliation took place. With respect to the Dip Point reconciliation, I was confused - why was there a need for reconciliation when the destruction at Dip Point had been caused by a natural disaster? In my attempts to understand, the more I asked people about this, the more intrigued I became about the story that lay behind the reconciliation ceremony.

In the years that followed I became aware of other reconciliation ceremonies and came to understand that they are an important aspect of Vanuatu culture. So I sought to learn more. Initially I thought that they were an example of the impact Christianity had made in Vanuatu - that they were all based on the Christian value of forgiveness. But then I discovered that reconciliation ceremonies had existed in Vanuatu long before the arrival of Christianity. One

commentator I read suggested that the chiefly-led method of mediation and reconciliation in Vanuatu had led to the nation being more peaceful than its Melanesian neighbours. (Jimmy Nelson, Internet, September 2011). Reconciliation ceremonies are still very common in Vanuatu today, covering all spheres of life - political, legal, community and religious. See the addendum for some recent examples of these.

Chief Isaac Worwor is chairman of the Port Vila Council of Chiefs and has significant experience of reconciliation ceremonies. Isaac's role is to help maintain peace in Port Vila and kastom reconciliation plays an important part in his work. Isaac said kastom is learnt from the elders, through watching, being guided, being given opportunities before assuming full responsibility. Isaac learned from his father who passed on his mantle. He says reconciliation is effective because the Vanuatu people believe in it. Families and communities that have been estranged are united again through kastom reconciliation because it is believed in. Isaac said that there are different approaches in different islands - some require a pig, some just a mat - but all of Vanuatu is familiar with kastom reconciliation. It doesn't replace the court system but is supplementary to it.



Isaac Worwor is Chairman of the Port Vila Council of Chiefs and believes reconciliation ceremonies are the best way to learn about Vanuatu culture.

As I listened to Isaac's description of the traditional elements of kastom reconciliation it felt visceral. Sitting with him in his dimly lit room in Port Vila, as he described the ritual of the meal that seals reconciliation I could almost see it, hear it and smell it. He said, "The smoke is important in the deep tradition – the pig was always cooked in the Nakamal (Council of Chiefs), and the chiefs would hear and smell the flesh cooking, and when they saw the smoke, that was a visual symbol that the reconciliation was taking place and must be adhered to. They ate that food together confirming their unity. Once reconciliation was achieved, no one could renege on it." It was done, that dispute was finished – all were one again. If anyone was ever to go back and try to re-litigate what has been reconciled that would be a grievous disrespect of kastom that would create many, many more problems. All this is unwritten, but understood.

Isaac gave an example of the importance of understanding the Vanuatu cultural viewpoint from the tradition of marriage. What is called a bride price is, in his view, not "buying" a wife, but giving recognition to the family of the cost, the sacrifice, of bringing up a child to adulthood. And in marriage, as in all of life, if you receive something you have to give something back. He said, "Vanuatu culture is not like foreign cultures where it is win/lose." In Ni-Van culture, underpinned by kastom reconciliation, each party gets something. For example, in a land dispute, the losing party will still receive a portion of land as a token to acknowledge them, so that is in some way a win-win. All are family. He affirmed, "In our kastom, you cannot forget anyone."



These comments were echoed by Elder Patu Luis, from the southern area of Espiritu Santo. He said that kastom reconciliation seeks to overcome the win/lose nature of a court ruling and in land disputes, for example, there will usually be a small recompense for the losing parties. Chief Jack Keitadi, Secretary of the Aneityum Council of Chiefs said, “That is part of the Vanuatu way – that nobody loses, the blame doesn’t all fall on you.”

Left: Elder Patu Luis Molilosirani from Espiritu Santo. Patu Luis is the current manager of the Presbyterian Church’s Navota Farm.

In an interview I had on Aneityum, elder Akisi of the Presbyterian Church in the village of Anaulcahat gave an example from village life. She held a leaf in her hand and called it by its kastom name, which means peace. She said that historically when two people had a disagreement, one would take “the nature” (the leaf) as a symbol of making peace. If it was accepted, the two would reconcile. If not, the one making the gesture would wait until it was accepted. This is another example of how reconciliation is at the heart of Vanuatu culture.

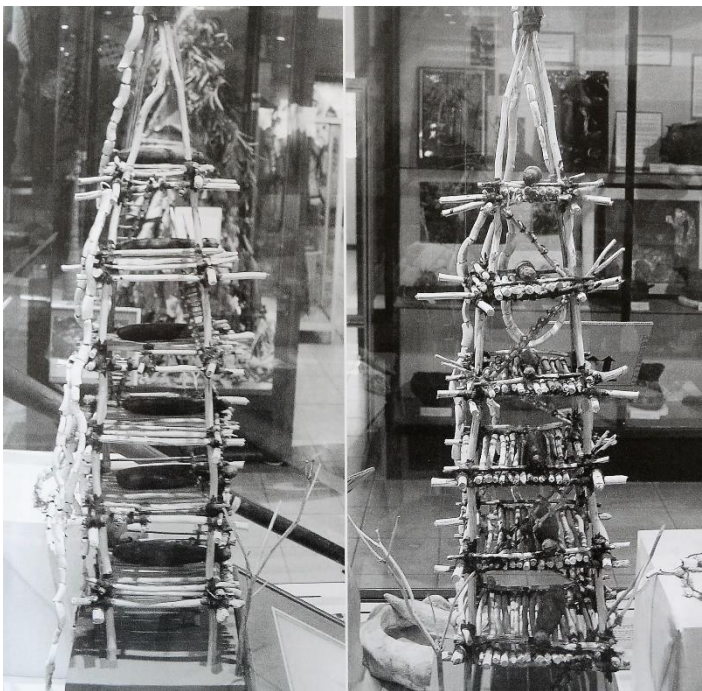
Isaac finds the commitment to reconciliation very useful in solving disputes in Port Vila. He said that if he just goes and talks, the parties concerned tend not to listen to him. But if he goes with a mat or with kava, that makes all the difference. The symbolism of kastom and reconciliation carries a strong message. “If I put a mat there, when I talk, everyone listens. If you just talk without any culture, there is no authority.” Reconciliation is the accepted means to solve all disputes and that is why they have retained it and continued it. Isaac firmly believes reconciliation is the best way to learn something from Vanuatu culture and it must remain part of it.

“Nevsem” - An Example of Kastom from Erromango

An example of kastom from the island of Erromango gives important background to the Erromango reconciliation ceremony discussed in this paper. Reconciliation ceremonies in Erromango developed in early society as a way of making and keeping peace between rival tribes and villages. It was a way of acknowledging and agreeing to respect the authority of each chief. These were given visual representation by the building of a physical tower-like creation called “nevsem.” This is described in the book *Kastom and Culture of Erromango*, (Anna Naupa, editor, Erromango Cultural association 2015). “Meaning ‘to unify’ or ‘to remain stable’ the nevsem is a way to show respect to traditional governance and to celebrate harmonious relations between communities.” (p.24). The nevsem represented balance, giving physical expression to an agreement that kept the peace between their communities. The Simanlou, a meeting where all tribes can meet to discuss matters of importance to them, was developed to help foster island-wide unity when the arrival of Europeans began to have impact on traditional life. From *Kastom and Culture* (p.28), “A nimoval (traditional meeting house) existed in each settlement and was a place to discuss

community issues at a very local level. However with the coming of the Europeans in the 1800s and their often violent methods of taking sandalwood from Erromango, island-wide allegiance was essential to face the outsiders. The first Simanlou, enabling many tribes to meet together, took place at Potnokimsi, East Erromango (date not given). “At the first Simanlou, the island tribes discussed a new system to unite the island and resolve social issues affecting many tribes. Under the umbrella of the Simanlou and through the ritual of the nevsem, traditional life on Erromango was able to develop and artistic endeavours nurtured.” These ceremonies have therefore been embedded in Erromangan culture for generations and are a core value. The last recorded nevsem ceremony was held in 1920. However, in recent times the Erromango Council of Chiefs or Simanlou, has revived the tradition.

The tradition of kastom reconciliation is critical in understanding the reasons for the three reconciliations studied in this paper involving the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu, on the islands of Erromango, Ambrym, and Aneityum.



Two views of a Nevsem Tower from Erromango. This model is in the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in Port Vila.

A typical Simanlou meeting house on Erromango, under construction.



Case Study 1 - Reconciliation Ceremony on Erromango, November 2009

On November 20 1839, London Missionary Society missionaries John Williams and James Harris stepped ashore at Dillon's Bay in Erromango and after greeting villagers on the beach, soon found themselves under attack. While some of their party made it safely back to their ship, Williams and Harris were killed. They were the first of six missionaries to die on the island. 170 years later, on November 20 2009, hundreds of Erromangans met with descendants of John Williams at Dillons Bay to perform a reconciliation ceremony. This event is recorded in the book, "No Longer Captives of the Past."¹

Background to the Reconciliation

The idea for the reconciliation was first suggested by Carol Mayer of the Museum of Anthropology in British Columbia, in consultation with the descendants of John Williams, who lived in Canada. This led to the involvement of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and the Williams family writing to the National Council of Chiefs. Ralph Regenvanu, of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, thought the ceremony was needed due to the strong feeling held by many Erromangans that their island was under a curse because of how the missionaries had been treated. A Port Vila-based committee was formed and they worked with locals on Erromango to prepare for the reconciliation ceremony, which included members of the Williams family who travelled from Canada, Britain and Africa.

Writing in the preface of "No Longer Captives," Rev. Allen Nafuki of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu, who is from Erromango wrote, "The guilt of the murders of many missionaries has weighed heavily on the minds of Erromangans, and is often credited for the delayed development on the island." Plans for the reconciliation ceremony involved both the church and the Government. Allen said, "We felt strongly that this reconciliation was of so much significance to Vanuatu's history that the President of Vanuatu presented medals of honour to members of the Williams family."



Pastor Allen Nafuki of Erromango. Pastor Allen is the General Secretary of the PCV.

After months of preparation, on November 20th 2009, 18 members of the Williams family gathered on the shores of Dillons Bay, ceremonially re-named Williams Bay, to participate in this long-awaited and meaningful event. A full account of this can be found in "No Longer Captives."

In July 2018 I travelled to Port Vila and Erromango to interview some of those who had been involved in the Williams family reconciliation to learn more about it, and asked whether they could identify outcomes several years on.

¹ No Longer Captives of the Past; Carol E. Mayer, Anna Naupa, Vanessa Warri, Co-published by Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Canada, and the Erromango Cultural Association, Vanuatu, 2013.

Reasons for the Reconciliation Ceremony

In describing the reason for the killing of John Williams and James Harris, Allen Nafuki said that the missionaries were killed because one of the key values of Erromango was being disrespected by the missionaries; this was unintentional because Williams did not understand it. This is described in detail in the book *Kastom and Culture of Erromango*; “John Williams came to the river at Dillons Bay. The people had built a nevsem at Umpong for Natgo (the chief). The people drew a line in the sand so the white men would not come close to the nevsem. So when the white people crossed the line, the Erromangans thought the white people didn’t have respect for their high chiefs. Natgo announced this war with his bubu (conch shell) and the people of Umpong came down and killed these white men.” (p.94) And there had also been indiscriminate killings of islanders by traders so tensions were high.



Jason is a chief at Williams Bay on Erromango. He is hopeful of new developments but is concerned at a loss of traditional culture.

Pastor Simon Louvo, the Port Vila based chairman of the organising committee, said that the need for the reconciliation was foreshadowed by an evangelism campaign on Erromango in 1992, led by PCV evangelist Jimmy Ansen. After the evangelism campaign there was a lot of thinking and praying and a sense of spiritual renewal. There was a growing agreement among Erromangans that they were under a curse because the ancestors of the Erromango people had done something very bad in killing the missionaries. “We were brought very low,” said Simon. Other Ni-Vans would make comments like “You people ate missionaries” and the Erromangans felt this was how other people perceived them.

Chief Jason of Williams Bay agreed that their ancestors did not know what they were doing – he said, “There were a lot of blackbirdings at the time that caused a lot of hatred.” (Blackbirding was a term used to describe the practice of labour recruitment enticing local people - sometimes against their will - to work on plantations Australia and New Caledonia). Jason said “I believe that our forefathers did not understand what they were doing [in killing the missionaries]. It was natural for the forefathers to respect and protect their own culture. If the traders and blackbirders hadn’t come, it wouldn’t have turned out that way.”²



Pastor Simon Louvo is a PCV Pastor and was chairman of the Port Vila based organising committee for the Williams family reconciliation ceremony in 2009.

² It is true that traders were active in 1839, but blackbirding did not begin until several years after this.

Traditional culture on Erromango demanded that if an innocent life was taken in tribal conflict something had to be done, that recompense had to be made. If this didn't take place there was a fear that something untoward would happen. Simon referred to the story of Cain and Abel, where Abel's blood was crying from the ground and Cain was cursed. It was believed by many that the spilling of innocent blood on Erromango had affected the island. This innocent blood referred not just to the missionaries who had been killed but to others also, such as traders and fellow Erromangans killed in tribal wars. In traditional kastom deaths resulting from tribal conflicts were reconciled with an exchange of life, specifically the giving of a female to a warring tribe so that she would marry and through childbirth restore life to the family who had suffered loss. The realisation came afterwards that the missionaries were neither traders nor enemies, but friends; and so the Erromangan people came to feel that in taking innocent lives they had negatively affected their own lives. They began to agree with what people from other islands were saying - that because they had killed the missionaries the island was cursed and the population was not growing. So what should they do? There was a gradually growing awareness that something needed to be done to address the feeling that the island was cursed.

When William Natgo, an elder on Erromango heard about the impending reconciliation ceremony, he was worried about it. William knew Erromangan tradition demanded that if an innocent life was taken, those responsible needed to pay back with a female. As William is descended from Natgo, the chief who ordered the deaths of John Williams and James Harris, he carried that burden of responsibility. No one told him what to do, but the idea came to him and he shared it with his wife, Rose. William and Rose agreed to offer up their daughter Uarai to the Williams family. He believed the kastom of making up for the loss of an innocent life needed to be upheld. "If my ancestors have done this" ... then we need to do this" (in reparation). In the ceremony, Uarai was ceremonially renamed Mary and returned to William's family.



William Natgo and his wife Rose with daughter Mary and two younger children. William, Rose and Mary were integrally involved in the 2009 reconciliation ceremony.

William echoed the comments of Simon Louvo, that the Erromangans were known as people who had killed the missionaries. This had the effect of placing a heavy burden on him and fellow Erromangans. He was tired of hearing people preaching about it. But for the island it was good that they knew about it because they needed reconciliation. The reconciliation ceremony was a way to get the burden off their shoulders.

Allen Nafuki explained that the reconciliation was more than an apology to a specific family. It included all missionaries who had lost their lives. When Allen was on the site for the reconciliation ceremony he saw that there were groups representing all the regions on the island, all accepting responsibility for the killing of the missionaries. So the reconciliation was effective for the whole Island. As Simon also observed, all accepted responsibility so there was no division about that between the respective groups. The Williams Bay people came first, then people from the south, then north-east. They all came praying and singing. The tradition of reconciliation and the Simanlou had been embedded in the Erromangan culture for generations so this is what they were drawing on. In fact, Allen Nafuki said that when the chief responsible for the killing of John Williams and James Harris realised what he had done, he made reconciliation with the local people in the traditional kastom a year later, so the Erromangan people had already reconciled over this among themselves. The 2009 event was for the island as a whole to reconcile with the Williams families.



Robbie is pastor of the Praise and Worship Church in Williams Bay. He occasionally visits New Zealand on outreach to seasonal workers from Vanuatu.

Pastor Robbie of the Praise and Worship Church said that when the people in Williams Bay received a message about the reconciliation ceremony from the group in Port Vila, he was happy about it. He felt it would open a door for positive change in Erromango. He believed that the negative feelings on Erromango had been blocking people from letting God in, from seeing what God was doing. He agreed it was a good thing because reconciliation is important for the people as a key Christian process. Simon confirmed, "When the reconciliation took place Erromangans felt happy that something was finally being done to make peace with what had happened."

Outcomes

When I heard and read about the Erromango reconciliation ceremony I was interested to find out what the outcomes were several years on. Given that there had been significant talk about a curse and the need to be free from it, of development being held back, I wanted to know whether there had been any manifest difference on the island, among the Erromangan community since the reconciliation had taken place. While all my interviewees were aware of the belief in a curse, there were mixed responses. Most said either that they didn't believe in the curse, or weren't sure about it. Most expressed this in terms of a

feeling of collective guilt or heaviness. For example, William said he didn't believe there was a curse, but there was a heaviness he wanted release from.

In my interviews I learnt that there have been many positive outcomes, but there was another outcome that I was not expecting. As well as agreeing on the positive outcomes, interviewees also described the existence of significant challenges and the need for ongoing reconciliation among the Erromangan people. I will explore this in the next two sections; positive outcomes and ongoing challenges.

Positive outcomes

The positive outcomes can be summarised in the following way - a lifting of the heaviness that had weighed the Erromangan people down; population growth; economic and tourism developments; Government investment in building and improved infrastructure; improvements in education; and the work of the ministers fraternal.

The most common response, made first by Simon Louvo and then echoed frequently by others, was that "People are now living with release that what took place on our soil is now gone." Simon also believes that the island has experienced population growth since the reconciliation took place. It was as low as 700 in 1988, and since the reconciliation it has grown to 3,000. Allen Nafuki also said there has been some population growth, mainly through childbirth but also through some people returning to the island to work, perhaps to plant sandalwood trees. The growth of sandalwood forestry is an indication of another outcome that is slowly taking place, in the form of economic development. Simon said this has gone forward whereas before it had not done so. Chief Jason explained that there is a New Zealander working on Erromango in sandalwood forestry. The chiefs have given him the use of the land freely for 15 years, and he will start paying a lease when the sandalwood has reached maturity. The chiefs have agreed to this because they believe it will bring economic benefits to the island.

Elder Tom and his wife at Ipota, where they have a small guest house.



Simon's father Tom who lives in Ipota also said he has seen signs of change, that "things have come up." There is some development and he also said more people are attending church. There are now two secondary schools, one in Ipota and one in Williams Bay. One of the schools has been built since the reconciliation, so investment in education is growing. There is more building, with some government centres being built as well as residential houses. The Government is more proactive now. People are coming back to live; Happy Lands Kauri Reserve, a tourist development, is moving forward and there are plans to build a road from Dillons Bay to Ipota. These are joint ventures with foreign companies and he believes these developments are the result of the reconciliation. He is looking forward to bigger change, with more jobs, more income, and people being able to stay on Erromango and work rather than having to go elsewhere to support their families. He has seen gradual growth in confidence and thinks that in another 10 years there will be significant improvements.

Chief Jason had the most to say about economic development on Erromango. He said that things have changed since the reconciliation. New developments include a new Member of Parliament from Williams Bay being elected. Big changes are coming - a new Provincial Government building, new roads will help to connect Erromango, and the airport is being upgraded. There is a carbon credit scheme with Australian investors buying the carbon credits and paying this to the landowners. There is a Strategic Development Plan that the Member of Parliament, chiefs and everyone is working to. The recent chiefs meeting was about working to this economic plan.

William Natgo explained what he saw as the link between the reconciliation and the new developments on Erromango. He believes the reconciliation has given Erromangans more encouragement to do things believing there will be growth. Prior to that, people felt that nothing would happen – in particular people from other islands would say that they had killed the missionaries and so nothing would happen, but they have stopped that. When these things were said, Erromangans felt like these people were cursing them. They have broken the language of that and therefore broken the heavy feeling that came with it.

William also cited spiritual growth as an important outcome. Fellowship with other churches grew at the time of the reconciliation and has continued since then. He is part of an outreach team with a pastor from New Zealand, through a connection with seasonal workers. He was already involved in evangelism before the reconciliation but afterwards he felt more freedom and energy to take part. He was able to preach about the reconciliation experience at an outreach on the island of Santo and found it was a powerful testimony when he shared it with others. The people on Santo said they could not do what he and Rose had done, partly because the events happened such a long time ago. But William replied to them that if God can give Jesus, then he was able to offer his daughter.

Pastor Jeffrey of the Presbyterian Church in Williams Bay was a little more muted in his opinion of outcomes. He said the reconciliation opened up their eyes and minds so they could prepare for the future. And he has observed some changes, for example, there have been more Presbyterian pastors trained, and the Member of Parliament from Williams Bay has been elected. He also referred to other developments previously mentioned. But social problems such as theft, smoking dope, avoiding church, these still remain and need to be



Pastor Jeffrey of Williams Bay with Anya and their young son. Jeffrey is one of the few PCV pastors to have come from Erromango.

addressed. There has been some discussion among the chiefs in the Simanlou about making improvements in education but Jeffrey believes people “need to see God’s vision.” He said that the people of Erromango still need to be reconciled among themselves.

Ongoing Challenges

Concern about social problems was a very clear theme that emerged in my interviews – while all agreed that there has been a lifting of a burden and a new sense of freedom, challenges remain. It was very clear that while everybody could point to some good developments occurring on Erromango since the reconciliation, all of them also said that more needed to be done. Tribal disagreements and land disputes are holding back development on the island, with some court cases pending. There are social problems and a concern about a loss of commitment to cultural values among the younger generation. And while a ministers fraternal worked closely to prepare the reconciliation and has continued since, not all pastors participate in this, and divisions among the churches remain. I asked them what they felt was needed to reconcile between themselves. In response the symptoms were mentioned but there was no clear plan about how to achieve the reconciliation they all agreed they need.

Jason believes the reconciliation was a sign that allowed the Erromangans to be free, but that the people of Erromango also have to change – to forgive and reconcile with each other. Further progress depends on the people of Erromango to change themselves. He said there is a history of tribal fights, land disputes, internal relationships, as well as family issues, that children are suffering - these need reconciliation. There are a lot of disputes at this time. Some tribes are still divided and Jason indicated there are a lot of social problems, but that there is now an open door for Erromangans to reconcile between chiefs, tribes, and families. Jason states that “The reconciliation was a big thing and we have witnessed the changes taking place. There will be challenges but we need to forgive each other.”

Jason was also concerned about the impact that is occurring through the loss of their traditional culture, in particular that their kastom is disappearing - that the Erromangan culture is in danger of "becoming a half-caste system." He said, "In the past, kastom was how we respected people. The kastom was like Christianity - respect, humility, and obedience, loyalty and honour. These were pre-Christian values, and they are being lost. The integrity of the kastom should be paramount. We have beautiful kastom and it's very strong. We are a little bit worried about the next generation, if we do not reinstate the integrity of kastom on Erromango. Recently we had a big meeting with the chiefs on the island, where we talked about these things. We realised the respect has been worn out at the moment. It is driving Erromangans towards a crisis. We need the chiefs and the pastors to work together. These are the two most important institutions. The reconciliation is over and now it's our turn to reconcile with each other, including the churches. We have a lot of churches now and they need to work together."

Elder Poki Wolu of the Presbyterian Church in Williams Bay reiterated what everyone was saying - that the new developments – roads, schools, the airport upgrade, a new health clinic all happened as a result of the positive feelings that had a flow-on effect after the reconciliation. But now the tribes and people need to reconcile, the chiefs and villagers need to reconcile. The problems are land disputes; people not talking together - too many land disputes are a big problem and will end up in court. "The John Williams reconciliation is all finished, but the problems are between us now." This can only be solved through arrangements by the chiefs. It seems there is a problem with a hierarchy of chiefs, that some chiefs were considered to be higher than others and would not listen to those who are deemed lower. This causes an impasse on land disputes. Some chiefs want to reconcile but others are not ready. Poki himself is involved in a disagreement around chiefly status.



Elder Poki is the Presbyterian Church Session Clerk at Williams Bay, and is at home in the mountains and forests of Erromango. Some people also know him as Chief Jacob.

Pastor Robbie reiterated what most interviewees had said; the land issue is the big unresolved problem which hinders development. He added that something needs to be done and the chiefs need to sort it out. When a new development takes place, it creates envy or competition among landowners who want to be first to receive the economic benefit and so claim ownership of disputed lands.



Joseph is an elder at the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Williams Bay and participates in the ministers fraternal.

Joseph is an elder at the Seventh Day Adventist church, and the only member of the SDA churches who participates in the ministers fraternal. He mentioned some of the positive developments but had a lot to say about what still needs to be achieved. He said that change has been slow because of ongoing land disputes. Some people refuse to back down and allow development on what they believe to be their land. He thinks the best thing that could happen would be for the leaders to change their attitudes – this will

solve the land disputes. “When the leaders change, the people will change.” This is what the church pastors and some elders meet together to pray about - so in a sense the church unity practiced by this group of pastors and elders is the best thing so far to have come from the reconciliation – wider unity and agreement is yet to be achieved.

Joseph’s comments echoed those of Pastor Robbie who agreed that relationships among those in the fraternal are still good. So if the churches can lead the way and make the breakthrough, he believes they will see what God can do. The work that Simon Louvo began has been instrumental in helping cement good relationships between some of the church denominations – because the relationship takes a long time to establish.

Joseph believes the 2009 reconciliation was a good event and effected reconciliation with the Williams family and for the events of the past, but it covered over the very real problems that are affecting the current day relationships within the Williams Bay and Erromango communities. He thinks it might have been better for people to have worked on their own reconciliations first before proceeding with the Williams reconciliation. He referred to Acts 1:8 – that the work started first in Jerusalem and Judea before going further – meaning that the problems needed to be solved locally first, before addressing the wider concerns of the Williams family reconciliation.

Peter, an elder at the Presbyterian Church in Williams Bay said something similar. He believes that it is the chiefs who first need to be reconciled among themselves, then the people, and then the churches. He thinks the Williams reconciliation can be a reminder to all that reconciliation needs to be ongoing. He is concerned that outside impacts are affecting the traditional Erromangan cultural values of humility, respect and obedience. Young people are losing their culture, their obedience. These three key values were pre-Christian and so are a deeper part of historic Erromangan culture. He hopes this can be re-discovered.

Another Presbyterian Church elder at Williams Bay, Leiwia, said the best outcome of the 2009 reconciliation will be for the people of Erromango to reconcile between themselves. She thinks that in order to achieve reconciliation, the churches must come together first and reconcile their differences. There are eleven different church denominations and they don't come together in worship. There needs to be more work on reconciling them; each one talks about the other in an unhelpful way. There is some bitterness over ex-Presbyterians who have left and joined other churches, who now criticise their former church; and the Presbyterians criticise them for having left. Although they claim to be more Christian there are no obvious changes in their lives just because they go to a different church. Leiwia believes there needs to be reconciliation at this level to help heal the deeper problems of tribal and land disputes



Leiwia is a Presbyterian elder. She is part Erromangan, part-Tongoan, but Erromango has been her home for many years.



Pastor Dick Mete, a former NTM ministries pastor had a career in the Government for several years.

Pastor Dick Mete said the church fraternal was well-established and sometimes churches work together a bit more; but there are still issues that keep them divided to a certain extent. He reiterated that the church pastors and congregations need to reconcile more. I asked him what steps could be taken now to begin to make this happen. He said that the Hope Centre coming from New Zealand meeting with the fraternal is good (this is with Pastor Matthew who works with Robbie on the outreach to seasonal workers, and around Vanuatu). They meet at "the mother church" – the Presbyterian Church, and have

teaching - but only the pastors come. Reconciliation will encourage the congregations to become more unified. "Where the shepherd goes, the sheep follow." There doesn't seem to be any reason in his mind why they can't move ahead with it now. They do join together on special days and occasions. But beyond that they have family disputes, land disputes, and he said, "We need to fix this one (church unity) first. Perhaps a small number will begin the process - there are eleven churches here from the one original mother church."

Pastor Jeffrey observed that many people felt that after the Williams family reconciliation, things on the island would return to normal or improve. But he believes there is still much to be done in families, homes, churches and tribes. And it is over to the people from Erromango who need to do this, to reconcile among each other.

Summary

As mentioned earlier, reconciliation is embedded in Erromangan culture. For this reason, the deaths of the missionaries weighed heavily on the collective spirit of the Erromangan people, particularly those who were dedicated Christians and who had been impacted by the teaching of the evangelism crusade. Based on an interpretation of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, it was claimed that the blood of the missionaries was crying out from the soil. They also felt that the other islands of Vanuatu viewed them in a negative light because of this. For Erromangan people raised in the kastom of the nevwsem, things were out of balance and needed to be put right. The blending of a deep-rooted kastom belief with an equally deeply held commitment to Christian faith met together in this event.

All I spoke to agreed that the 2009 reconciliation ceremony with the Williams achieved what was intended and hoped for - making peace with the past, reconciling with the descendants of John Williams and receiving absolution for the deaths of all the missionaries. It lifted the burden of guilt and the feeling that Erromango was under a curse, real or imagined.

It is hard to confirm some of the comments about population growth occurring since the reconciliation ceremony, and even harder to attribute developments in the island's infrastructure, economy, education and tourism to the effects of the reconciliation. However, it is important to acknowledge that many Erromangans referred to enjoying a new sense of well-being following the reconciliation. The island *is* now enjoying some educational and economic development that had not occurred previously.

But they also agreed that more needs to be done to unite Erromangans themselves now - to address their social problems, to end the land disputes and overcome the divisions between the churches. As an interested observer and grateful recipient of Erromangan hospitality, I hope the same unifying spirit that brought them together in 2009 for the reconciliation with the Williams family, and a commitment to the traditional Erromangan values of respect, humility and obedience can help them achieve a deeper unity and more lasting reconciliation among themselves.



Looking out to sea from Williams Bay.



A mother and son enjoying a quiet moment on the river at Williams Bay.

Case Study 2 - Dip Point, Ambrym – An Introduction

When I arrived on Ambrym to research the Dip Point reconciliation ceremony, my first interview was with Jesse Demar in a village he had named Lonwolwol, on the shore of Lake Fangteng. The lake was formed after the volcanic eruption at Dip Point in 1913. No one has lived here since then but now Jesse Demar and his family have returned to this site. The name Demar means peace in the local Ambrym language, which seemed apt because on the day I arrived, Lake Fangteng was a very peaceful and beautiful place. I arrived with Philip Joses, who was to be my host for my week on Ambrym, and a young French couple who had met Jesse's son in New Zealand, where he was working as a seasonal worker. He had told them about his father's property and they decided to come and visit Jesse when they were in Vanuatu. He is hoping to establish Lonwolwol as a tourist venue.

Jesse told me that he is connected to the original Dip Point chiefly line through his ancestor Mal. This chiefly line originated from the nearby island of Malekula and in Jesse's words was "high, high, high" in rank. Mal had great authority. This comment about the high rank of the chiefs, the authority they held and the absolute belief in and respect for kastom at that time would be affirmed in every interview I held that week. Jesse said the story about what happened with the Dip Point eruption had been shared with him when he was young, and that when he was a child his parents would bring him to the spot and show him the family lands. Jesse's uncle Harold, the only remaining survivor of his father's siblings, organised the reconciliation ceremony.

Jesse's version of his story is quite fascinating. His decision to return happened around the same time as the reconciliation ceremony and according to him began in a mystical way. In 2012, while he was working on the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) Scheme in New Zealand, Jesse had a dream in which his father, grandfather and brother appeared to him and told him to return and occupy the ancestral lands again, to make a community there. In the dream he saw himself coming back to this place. So in 2013 he decided to return. There are currently only four family members living with him but he hopes this will increase.



Jesse Demar is the first person to return to Dip Point since the volcanic eruption in 1913.

For Jesse, the Biblical story of the Israelites exile in Egypt is important in helping to explain his beliefs about his decision to establish Lonwolwol. Jacob's family fled the famine in Canaan to go to Egypt. It was a disaster that drove them from their land, just as a disaster was the reason why people left Dip Point. And as it was not easy for the Israelites in Egypt, neither has it been easy for the descendants of those people who fled Dip Point. They left behind their ancestral lands. So for Jesse this is like the return to the Promised Land, and is an act of determined faith. He believes God will bless those who return.

As I spoke with Jesse and enjoyed the peaceful environment on the shore of Lake Fangteng, my adventure on Ambrym was just beginning. It seemed so right that the seeds of a new community were being established in this beautiful location. What had taken place on this very spot one hundred years ago, that had wreaked such devastation?

The Dip Point Eruption

On December 7, 1913, a volcano erupted on the island of Ambrym in the New Hebrides, causing widespread devastation and loss of life, destroying villages and a mission hospital and school at Dip Point. Everyone who survived the eruption had no option but to evacuate, and make a new life elsewhere. One hundred years later, a group of people said sorry. Why, after all this time, was reconciliation sought for a natural disaster? What follows is a summary of what happened, the story behind it, and why reconciliation was needed.

The first missionary to arrive on Ambrym was James Murray who arrived at Ranon, North Ambrym in 1883. Others followed, and over the years the arrival of missionaries and traders brought changes to the way of life for local people, and perhaps those who were affected most were the chiefs. Belief in kastom in those days was very strong, and this in turn ensured that the authority of the chiefs was highly respected. Chiefs had immense power. There were many ranks of chief, and the highest ranking chiefs were greatly feared. The missionaries and traders brought Western culture which impacted on the traditional culture of Vanuatu and the authority of the chiefs. There were gradual and occasional disputes and relationships worsened over time.

In the 1890's a mission hospital was built at Dip Point and despite many setbacks and changes of personnel, the hospital became well-known and many people travelled significant distances to use its services. But a series of events in and around the Dip Point mission led to some chiefs feeling dissatisfied and even antagonistic towards the hospital and the work of the missionaries. I conducted many interviews on Ambrym and while there was some variation of minor detail, in substance there was remarkable consistency. Oral history passed down through five generations tells the story in the following way.

The Dip Point Eruption in Oral History

There had been ongoing disagreements between the missionaries and the chiefs, and there were two final catalysts leading to the eruption. First, an unnamed missionary was annoyed that pigs were not restrained near his compound and were destroying his garden. Apparently he shot one of the pigs. It is unclear whether this pig belonged to a local villager or to a chief - although given the following description of sacred food, it is more likely to have been owned by a villager.

Later, a group of missionaries were returning to their village and walked through a stand of coconut trees. One of the missionaries picked a coconut and ate it. This coconut belonged to a chief of high rank by the name of Batik Mal. In the kastom tradition at that time, the chiefs had a sacred, or tapu food source. Each chief's food source was reserved uniquely for that chief and belonged only to him. If anyone else was to eat that food, the chief's food became common and he lost his authority. This was a grave insult to the chief, resulting in a loss of status and costing him both culturally and economically, as he would need to pay in order to regain his rank among the Nakamal. It is unclear exactly who picked this tapu coconut -

some versions state that it was not a white missionary but Ni-Van students who were being trained as evangelists. Regardless of which individual was responsible, it is clear that what lay at the heart of this problem was a lack of respect for kastom, for the chief's authority and for his sacred food. The missionaries knew about the tapu food source but were challenging it, believing that all foods were the same. Christianity brought new beliefs that challenged traditional cultural beliefs and here was an example of how that played out in village life.

When Batik Mal found out about this, his anger burned, and he called a meeting of the Nakamal. As mentioned, kastom in those days was very strong and, in the words of Chief Tokon of Ranon, "If you made the chief angry there were two options - either make a reconciliation with a pig, or die." Therefore, the problem on the missionaries' side was that not only did they not respect the kastom of the tapu coconut, neither did they understand nor respect the kastom of reconciliation to put it right.



Chief Tokon of Ranon

Ambrym is a volcanic island, and Batik Mal knew that one other chief held the secret of how to ignite the volcano. This chief was called Ling Mal. In the nakamal, Batik Mal requested Ling Mal to visit retribution on the missionaries who had so disrespected him, by causing the volcano to erupt and to destroy the missionaries' work. In Chief Louis of West Ambrym's description, he requested that five volcanic "bombs" be lit and directed to five specific locations, ensuring the complete destruction of the mission. Plans were put in place for this to happen.

When the plan became known, some villagers placed kastom leaves adjacent to certain villages to try and spare them from the effects of the volcanic eruption. But other villagers, so incensed at the lack of respect that had been shown their chiefs, and so committed to ensuring the mission was destroyed removed them, ensuring that every village unfortunate enough be in the path of the lava flow would also be destroyed.

The eruption completely destroyed not only the mission hospital and school at Dip Point, but every village nearby, causing loss of life and complete devastation. The landscape was entirely changed. Those who had previously lived there fled to other areas of Ambrym, to Malekula, and also to Efate. Needless to say, the mission ended instantaneously and never returned.

The Reason for the Reconciliation Ceremony

The story of the Dip Point eruption has been passed on from generation to generation, and was always present in the minds of the families who had lost their ancestral lands at Dip Point. Some of the chiefs felt that something was amiss on Ambrym and that the Dip Point eruption had something to do with it. The subsequent acceptance of Christianity had changed attitudes, and many people sensed the loss of what might have been if the hospital

had remained. It would have brought social and economic benefit to the island. Many families had lost their ancestral lands. Some families, descendants of chiefs from Dip Point, were being blamed for these negative feelings. The chiefs felt that it would be beneficial to have a reconciliation ceremony at an appropriate time, to try and resolve some of these issues. As the time for the 2013 PCV General Assembly at Ranon drew near, the chiefs decided this would be a good time and approached the PCV to put plans in place.

What Needed To Be Put Right?

When people have been grieved by the actions of others, whether intentional or deliberate, the reasons for reconciliation are clear. With respect to grief caused by a natural disaster, the situation is quite different. But as I learnt about the story and reflected on it, I realised that the most important thing was to get inside the hearts and minds of the people of Ambrym, rather than debating the cause of natural disasters. What is *their* story? As Isaac Worwor explained, “Some people think it was just a volcano, that somebody has not created the eruption, but many years later the stories evolved and it came to be perceived and understood as a problem that needed to be resolved – even though they didn’t have the same belief about cause and effect. There needed to be a reconciliation over attitudes to those who were originally from Dip Point and who dispersed to other areas.”

He explained, “They (the descendants of the chiefs) are not a big family. They felt bad for what had happened - there was a genuine sense of loss about it. Dip Point might have become a big town, there might still have been a big hospital there. There was a sorrow about what might have been.”



Chief Bong is one of the chiefs at Ranon.

In Ranon, Chief Bong echoed these sentiments, saying that the descendants felt guilty for what had happened and hoped that out of the reconciliation things would come back to normal and equilibrium would be restored. Chief Lengkon Joel at Megham, North Ambrym said there was a feeling that families needed to be reunited. “Although the events were caused by our ancestors, we are the offspring of our ancestors and need to sort out our differences. So we needed to do something to reconcile.”

Jesse Demar offered another view that added weight to the need to have a formal reconciliation. He said there were some differences between families that had existed prior to the eruption, so some families may have carried stories or grudges for generations that had never been reconciled. The reconciliation ceremony allowed all that to be put behind them. There had been a tribal war before the eruption and these historic differences were also part of the healing of the Dip Point reconciliation ceremony.

All these factors lay behind the reason for the reconciliation ceremony, and it was timely that the PCV Assembly at Ranon, where some of the descendants of evacuees from Dip

Point had relocated to, along with nearby Megham and Ranventlam, was held exactly one hundred years after the eruption.

What Were the Outcomes?

It seems that the outcomes have been felt most of all in the healing of relationships between the various families involved. Quoting Isaac Worwor again, he said that as a result of the reconciliation some families have returned to Ambrym because they felt accepted there again – there is a sense that those who felt they did not previously belong there, now do. The reconciliation resolved differences, real or perceived, and the population is growing now in North Ambrym.

Chief Louis, a paramount chief from Lolibulu village in West Ambrym confirmed this, saying that many families who went to Malekula are now returning to their ancestral lands on West Ambrym following the reconciliation ceremony. It is a changed environment now. He has seen and felt that happen. Farming and gardening is improving and people's economic state is improving. He is very happy to see Jesse Demar returning to Lonwolwol and is helping with the building of a road to improve access.

Chief Bong believes the outcomes have been positive and that Jesse Demar's return to Lonwolwol was the fruit of the reconciliation ceremony. It feels like the beginning of a new era, and things are sure to improve there in the future. Most people know about this but perhaps only those who were present at the Ranon assembly know anything about the story and understand the reasons for Jesse's return to Lonwolwol.



**Chief Lengkon Joel and Elder Andrew at Megham,
North Ambrym.**

Chief Lengkon Joel also said that some people are deciding to return to their ancestral lands, and with respect to his own community, perhaps to have two homes, one at Megham and one at Lonwolwol. Their plan is to go to Lonwolwol as a group and form a community. Then when this community becomes stronger they will build houses and a church and a Nakamal and then members from different tribes will return there.

Jesse said that after the reconciliation it was time to get on and do something; that he and Harold have seized the moment as a sign of the new hope expressed in the reconciliation, believing that others will follow. Jesse hopes for development on the site, although there are no signs of it yet. But he is trying his best to get things moving, including working with others to develop a road that will connect with West Ambrym so that things will improve. He uses solar power and has plans to install a water pump; his family uses the lake water for cooking. There are no signs yet that other people are returning but based on comments from several others that I interviewed, it is only a matter of time before others join him there and begin to establish a fledgling community once again.

Dip Point Summary

The details of the events leading to the Dip Point eruption were handed down through five generations although it seems that most people I spoke with heard it first at the 2013 Assembly. The story had been held within the families descended from the chiefs until then. One hundred years later economic development in Vanuatu had not reached Ambrym and so there was a sense of loss about what might have been, if the hospital had remained and further development had flowed from that. Coupled with an understanding of cause and effect that attributed the loss of the hospital to the will of the chiefs, a need to put things right grew in the hearts of the family members descended from the Dip Point chiefs. The tradition of kastom reconciliation gave them a framework, and the PCV Assembly at Ranon, Ambrym in 2013 – one hundred years after the eruption - provided the ideal time and place for the reconciliation ceremony to occur. Everything fell into place.

Some people may still question why a reconciliation was needed for what can be described as a natural disaster. But the enduring impact of the loss of lands, the dispersal of communities to other areas of Ambrym, Malekula and Efate islands, and the lack of development on Ambrym help to give an understanding of the significance of the eruption. The sense of lost potential and breakdown of relationships was an important aspect. And while it is hard for the outside observer to see it, there can be no doubting the sincerity of those who believe there have been improvements on Ambrym since the reconciliation ceremony. The return of some former Ambrym families was attested to by more than one chief, and there was genuine support (with some exceptions) for the re-establishment of a village, albeit in a fledgling state, at the former Dip Point site. The outcome of the reconciliation ceremony has been encouraging for those involved and so, in some ways this renders irrelevant questions about the cause of the eruption. More important was the manner in which kastom understanding and Christian faith combined to achieve this beneficial outcome.



Participants in the Dip Point reconciliation ceremony in 2013 with the mats given and received. Note the skull of the pig with the curly tusk on the far left. This is of high value in kastom money.



Sign welcoming visitors to Lonwolwol, the community established by Jesse Demar on the shore of Lake Fangteng, at Dip Point.

Lake Fangteng, which was formed as a result of the volcanic eruption in 1913.



French tourists with Philip Joses at Lonwolwol. They heard about it from Jesse's son in New Zealand and decided to visit when they travelled to Vanuatu.

The History of the Dip Point Mission - From the LIVE Series by Graham Miller, Book 4.

1883 - The synod of the PCNZ decided against sending medical missionaries to Vanuatu.

1892 - Despite the 1883 decision, Charles Lamb was appointed as a missionary doctor to Ambrym. The synod meeting at Aneityum agreed with Lamb's choice of a temporary settlement near Dip Point. The synod approved of his later getting a more suitable site. This more suitable site never happened.

1893 - A hurricane wiped out the first buildings

1894 - A fire destroyed the second buildings. "The fire of 1894 destroyed the whole premises, and with them the medical, hospital, surgical, trade, clothing and household equipments." Lamb returned to New Zealand to seek further assistance. He passionately pleaded for the church to renew its support for this medical mission. Support for bigger and better buildings was raised.

There were warnings of an active volcano in the area: "A new crater of immense size had been formed not far from the mission station at Dip Point, pouring out a sea of lava." Mention was made of consultations being had to find a new site - but nothing was done, and the hospital was rebuilt on the same site.

1895 - First ward of new hospital opened. The hospital was busy with many patients from all over the region.

1896 - Lamb became ill and had to leave. Then he had to retire, and the nurse resigned - all in 1896. A hurricane destroyed the mission's launch.

1897 - Mansfield lost an eye in an accident at the hospital.
Nurse McLean resigned and the hospital closed at the end of the year.

1899 - John Bowie was appointed superintendent. Under his leadership the hospital grew in strength but staff suffered ongoing health issues and there was pressure to build another hospital in Port Vila and there was some competition for support between those involved.

1903 - There was a vexed relationship between Lamb and Bowie "which led to the latter's breakdown in 1903. Bowie became ill and left for some time.

1907 - Progress moved forward for the development of Paton Memorial Hospital in Port Vila as a memorial to Rev. John Paton. There were rumours that the Ambrym hospital would be closed to make way for Vila Central Hospital. This led to a downturn in support for the hospital at Dip Point. News of a possible closure impacted negatively on the support that had been raised for it. Notwithstanding, the hospital was still busy and well patronised, as attested by a letter from Peter Milne. (p.66)

The hospital would soon be closed permanently, but not in the manner anyone would have predicted.

Case Study 3

Aneityum Reconciliation Ceremony with Congregational Church of Samoa, August 2011

This reconciliation ceremony took place on August 22, 2011 to reconcile the people of Aneityum with the Congregational Church of Samoa over the deaths of four Samoan missionaries in 1841. Aneityum is a small island with an equally small population, but hundreds of people were present for this highly anticipated event. An organising committee including church leaders and chiefs had received advice and support from the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu as they prepared for the ceremony, and representatives from the PCV in Port Vila attended.

The Congregational Church of Samoa was represented by five members who came with traditional Samoan gifts. Elder Akisi described it as a big celebration, when everybody came together, “all denominations, our customs and cultures, everybody was together, united. The church and kastom came together.” Pastor Simon Vani recalled the emotions on the day, “Everybody felt the changes, something happened. It was like when you have been tied up with chains, when the chains were unlocked, you feel them coming off, so the people during the ceremony felt something was emotionally changed. Everybody, the whole congregation shed tears together.”

The reason for the reconciliation ceremony

Time and opportunity on Aneityum was limited, so I only managed to interview five people. Reconciliation ceremony organiser Pastor Isaac of the Presbyterian Church said that prior to the reconciliation, the church held prayer groups, and they realised that people on Aneityum felt they were under a curse due to something that had happened historically. Children were not achieving at school and the island suffered from a lack of development. Isaac believes that God revealed the idea of the reconciliation to him in a prayer meeting, to free the Aneityumese from bondage and a curse that was on the island. This feeling of bondage and curse was not new, he said, “We knew it, that’s our story” – so Isaac began to share about the need to have a reconciliation. They prayed about it and came to a decision that they had to make a reconciliation with the descendants of the Samoan missionaries who had been killed on Aneityum.



Pastor Isaac of Aneityum is the chairman of their reconciliation committee.

They had heard about the Williams family reconciliation ceremony on Erromango in 2009 but he believes their reconciliation was their own idea, a vision from God to them. They had been praying about things for a few years, but didn’t know how to contact the Samoans. Then in 2010 Isaac met a member of the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa at the PCV Assembly. Isaac asked to speak with him and raised the idea of having a reconciliation,

which he took back to Samoa. Isaac then asked Pastor Allen Nafuki what to do and he gave Isaac advice and support.

After discussing it in the churches, they took it to the Council of Chiefs, who gave it their approval, and appointed a representative from the Council of Chiefs to be on the reconciliation committee. So it became a united approach, with kastom and Christian elements together. Isaac mentioned that there are stages of reconciliation in terms of the kastom understanding. So as a follow-up to the reconciliation they asked the chiefs to reconcile anything where there was disunity among the people.



Chief Jack Keithadi is Secretary of the Aneityum Council of Chiefs.

Chief Jack Keithadi, Secretary of the Aneityum Council of Chiefs said, "We all grew up knowing that we had eaten the Samoan teachers but there was no way to make amends; so once the idea was put out by the churches the Council of Chiefs knew that we had to do something. The stories had been passed on orally since the time they happened." He said that the loss of life on Aneityum through disease was deemed to be part of the punishment meted out to Aneityum for "eating a Samoan teacher," and there were lots of other things that had happened to them that they couldn't understand. And so they began to think that they were still suffering the consequences from negative events that had occurred in the past, and that were not settled traditionally. In kastom thinking, what the ancestors have done

still affects ensuing generations. So when the idea of the reconciliation came up, the thinking was, "OK, let's settle this."

The tradition of kastom reconciliation played an important part in this thinking. There were other incidents where Aneityumese had attacked and killed each other in the days of the missionaries but these were reconciled internally in the traditional way. So the Samoan one was outstanding. It had a unifying effect with all the churches taking part. They believed that the reconciliation would have a good effect.

PCV Pastor Simon Vani shared, "In 2010 we had a committee led by Pastor Isaac and we approached the chiefs about a reconciliation. In the church we felt we had done something wrong according to the Word of God with our friends from Samoa, how we treated them. As a result, it has not been easy on the island, life is hard, and maybe if this was one of the causes we needed to do something. Maybe it was part of cursing, we felt that we were guilty because of what our ancestors did to the Samoans and many others. So the committee decided, then we had talks with the PCV, and made the arrangements."



PCV Pastors Simon Vani (left) and David Niyae (above) are on the ministry team on Aneityum.

Pastor David Nijae commented, “There were some London Missionary Society Samoan teachers who lost their lives here and others were treated badly; some people felt there was a curse on the island that needed to be released.” He made similar reference to the story of Cain and Abel as mentioned on Erromango, that the spilt blood of the missionaries was crying from the ground. They heard that the Samoans were coming to Port Vila and the chiefs decided it was a good idea to do something for Aneityum because there were many problems. The churches had been doing reconciliations in other parts of Vanuatu, and they thought that perhaps it was something they needed to do here as well. The reconciliation also included representatives of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu. Because the deaths of the missionaries contributed to the mission leaving, this affected the development of the PCV and they also felt they had to make reconciliation with them.



As a result of the 2011 reconciliation ceremony, Elder Akisi went to Australia in 2017 to give thanks to the church there for sending the missionaries to Aneityum.

Elder Akisi described it; “We all knew that we were bad, it was our ancestors who did the killing. Even though we all worshipped and went to church we felt there was something wrong. We didn’t expect them to come (from Samoa) but it was from their hearts and we were happy about that. Even though we were Christians there was still something in us that meant we were not free. Everybody here thought the reconciliation with the Samoans was an important thing to do.”

Outcomes

The outcomes from this reconciliation have clearly been significant in terms of the impact on the pastoral ministry of the church, among families, and between various tribal groups on Aneityum. There has been an ongoing spirit of reconciliation which has flowed from the 2011 Samoan ceremony, that the pastors have nurtured. Reconciliation is now at the heart of their life on Aneityum and each interviewee had something to say about this.

Isaac said that there have been many more reconciliations since and it is not yet finished. The reconciliation committee still exists to encourage pastors and elders and chiefs to keep working on reconciliation between people, families and tribes, and also with other islands. There were conflicts in the early days between tribes that were Christian and tribes that were not – and this is an example of the historic reconciliations that have been taking place. This included a reconciliation over a killing that took place a long time ago. Then in 2016 there was a big reconciliation associated with a National Evangelism Convention – the programme included reconciliation to do with the last missionary who had lived on Aneityum.

There is an apocryphal story that when the last missionary left Aneityum he shook off the dust from his feet – and this was viewed as regrettable by the now Christian population who felt it was a sign the missionaries had been obstructed and driven out by unwelcoming locals. They felt this needed reconciliation. They couldn't make contact with the descendants of the missionary John Paton, so the convenor of the PCV missions committee represented the missionary and received the apology on his behalf. Then he prayed for them. They wanted to talk with the descendants of the families concerned but it was difficult for them to do that. The problem was not just between the missionary and the Aneityumese, but also between the Aneityumese themselves and the reconciliation ceremony addressed that.

Isaac also intimated that the reconciliation committee has plans to reconcile with the nearby island of Futuna. The Futuna reconciliation will address the mistreatment of missionaries by the Futunese towards missionaries from Aneityum who took the gospel there. They were offered no food and no shelter. Also, he explained that the Aneityumese had given the Futunese a name that means "No Good." They have historically referred to the Futunese in their local language this way. So they need to change the name they call the Futunese after this reconciliation - to a name that will bless them.

In a broader way there have also been changes that those involved can see. There have been some economic developments which, although slow to start with, have now gone ahead well. The permanent wharf is a boon and attracts more cruise ships; with more tourists comes greater economic benefit. Isaac doesn't know what impact there was for the Samoans, but on their side, they had to do it, and it has had a significant and lasting impact.

Pastor Simon is convinced the reconciliation ceremony has brought many benefits. "The reconciliation we held with the Samoans has continued on with many more reconciliations with tribes and families." He also took part in a reconciliation with a community on Tanna Island. The ancestors from Aneityum were involved in a tribal war when a trading journey

turned bad and they were killed. Then there was a retribution killing on Aneityum. The tribal wars went back to the 1800's but had never been reconciled until the spirit of reconciliation flowing from the 2011 event sparked this one.

Simon continued, "We are still working on more reconciliations. As a result we have changes, we have healing on the land, healing upon our fruit trees (Isaac also mentioned this), they are not like before, and the sea has given up many resources. The outcomes have flowed on until today in terms of blessing on the land and in relationships."

The unity of the churches has also continued. They have an ecumenical body with churches coming together. He acknowledged it is not easy but they all come together with a sense that it is time to forget about the doctrines of the churches and look at how the people of Aneityum can come together, rather than being bound by their traditions. "What we are trying to do when a minister comes into Aneityum from another place, we say the people of Aneityum are one, and we want to know about the word of God, not doctrines."

Reconciliation has become significant in his pastoral ministry. When counselling husbands and wives, if there is something wrong between them, he has suggested there is a time to reconcile. After they have had a reconciliation, he said many families have come back a few months later to thank him and say how much better they are feeling. He concluded, "Reconciliation has become something in my life."

Simon is convinced the spirit of reconciliation can continue to unite the people of Aneityum. He said, "It is not easy, it will take years and years because traditionally we have been bound by the traditions of our churches, but we believe that as people of Aneityum we will stand together. Before the missionaries came, the livelihood of the people was one tradition, one culture, only one ... So we are educating people from now on, they are learning that they can stay in their church, but the most important thing is to unite the people of Aneityum. We believe that if we come together it can make a change in Vanuatu, and we believe that we can start it."

Pastor David Niyae recalled that after the Samoan reconciliation, there was a revival that broke out on Aneityum, which lasted for about 3 months before things returned to normal. But there was a lot of ongoing change. On an everyday level life is better here now than it was before. Life for young people is much better than it was. Prior to the reconciliation, there were always arguments about doctrines and beliefs, churches were always debating and arguing, but now they work as one. They still have their differences but come together on important occasions now; they remember July 29 as the day that John Geddie landed and they share together. This is something that unites them.

Chief Jack remembers that at the time of the reconciliation the Presbyterian Church was practically empty, but something happened in the life of the church and there seems to have been a revival since those times. (That is in the Presbyterian Church, he doesn't know about the other ones). It is only a small population but it seems that most of those who had backslidden returned to church.

The chiefs also started to try and recover the traditional covenant system of working together and this has brought greater unity. Jack said they have their ups and downs but overall there is more acceptance of working with both the traditional and the modern ways of working – that they can go hand in hand.

The churches approached the Council of Chiefs again about another incident involving Tanna, and in 2016 a group went to Tanna for a reconciliation there. This incident involved Aneityumese teachers being killed on Tanna. There was also another incident where Tannese came to Aneityum to offer reconciliation for a retributive killing that had taken place on Tanna.

These were all spurred on by the 2011 reconciliation. This made them realise there were still accounts that they had to settle. He thinks there may have been approaches from other islands as well, where Aneityumese teachers had been killed. (Aneityum had sent out 113 missionaries around Vanuatu).

Akisi agreed that there has been change saying, “Even though I was Christian before, I feel that I have moved to another state. We were not free, but now we are free. And even though we are in different denominations, we all felt the same, we are Christians together and we are free.”

A very significant outcome for Akisi occurred in November 2017. Despite the positive outcomes of the reconciliation, Akisi felt that one more thing was missing. She felt led to make a response to the fact that the missionaries had come to Vanuatu and brought the gospel. So in November 2017 Akisi travelled to Australia with her eldest daughter and Pastor Fred from Aneityum to say thank you to the church for sending John Geddie and the other missionaries to Aneityum. They were met and hosted by members of the Uniting Church in Australia. In a service where she brought thanks from the people of Aneityum, they sang John Geddie’s favourite hymn. She also met one of her former teachers from Lenakel, in Geelong. He offered a special prayer in the graveyard of John Geddie, prayed for Aneityum and for the women of Aneityum.

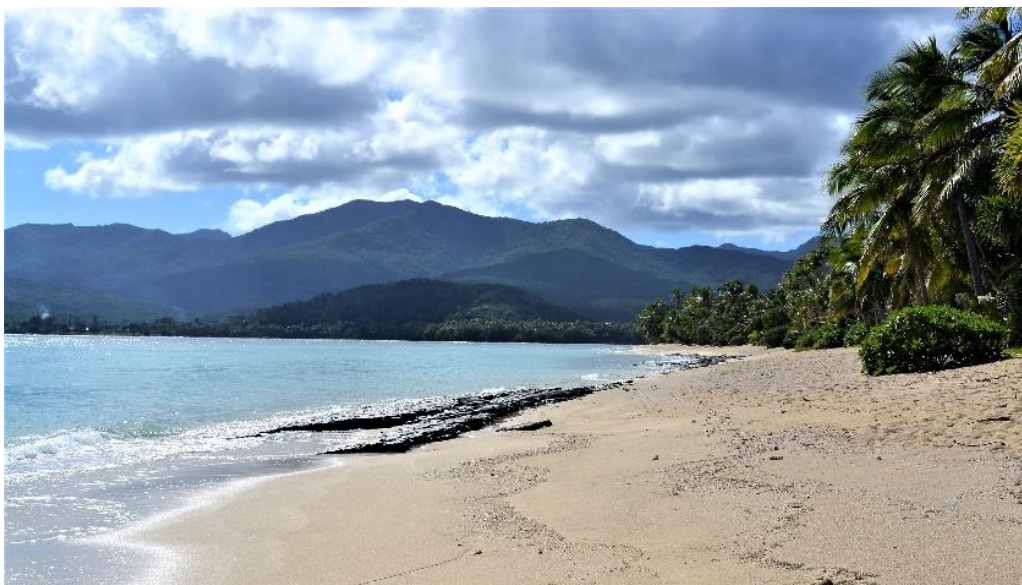
Summary

The Aneityum reconciliation ceremony is the one that has the most straightforward storyline. What happened is clear, the deaths of the missionaries, being Samoan, were not complicated by colonial issues of trading and blackbirding, and the reconciliation ceremony involved only a few overseas guests attending from Samoa. But it is also the one that has perhaps had the most significant outcome in terms of ongoing reconciliations and the healing of relationships between families and tribes on the island and also between Aneityum and other islands.

The theological rationale for the reconciliation ceremony leaned heavily on a belief in generational curses having a negative effect on Aneityum and its people. Pastor Simon Vani’s comments were representative of many when he said, “Although the younger generation may say we do not need (to apologise for our ancestors), there’s still something, we know we are part of it ... the Word of God in the Bible said the shedding of blood is still

alive – we haven't reached the fourth generation (quoting Numbers 14:18³) so we are still part of the killing. " So theologically the argument was based on a particular reading of the Hebrew Scriptures from which they believed the current generation was under a curse due to the actions of their ancestors. Some comments were made that belief in generational curses is also held in the traditional culture which gives a slightly different perspective to it – it could be argued that this theological belief sits more comfortably within the Vanuatu culture than it might within others. Akisi said that after the reconciliation ceremony, families and tribes went to the church and made public reconciliations. "They didn't want to pass on their generational curse to their younger generations." And the chiefs are still working on that, asking people that if they remember something that happened among their ancestors, that these be brought up and reconciled.

These theological and kastom beliefs, combined with the strongly held belief in the cultural importance of reconciliation drove the desire for the reconciliation ceremony to take place. Although Isaac feels otherwise, it is probably true that the 2009 Erromango reconciliation ceremony had some impact in creating awareness; David Niyae alluded to this. And as with the other two reconciliation ceremonies on Erromango and Ambrym, the outcomes on Aneityum have been genuinely experienced. The impact of ongoing reconciliations between families, tribes, villages, denominations and other islands has been very significant. Several years on from the reconciliation ceremony there is still a strong spirit of unity among all people on the island. Much of this can be attributed to the ongoing pastoral ministry being exercised by the pastors, and also the existence of the reconciliation committee which includes chiefs and pastors providing ongoing leadership in seeking out the need for reconciliation. It is implied that this remains active because they have experienced the tangible benefits of it. Reconciliation between families, villages and tribes has resolved land disputes and this has allowed economic development to move forward on the island, and reconciliation between churches has fostered spiritual unity. This is a good model for others to follow.



View of Aneityum from nearby Mystery Island.

³ "The Lord... punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

Conclusion

Theological Challenges

As I listened and reflected on each of these reconciliation stories, several theological challenges presented themselves to me:

1. The theology and language of generational curses. In the cases of Erromango and Aneityum it was very clear that a theology of generational cursing lay behind the feelings of guilt over the killing of the missionaries (this was less a factor on Ambrym). This was a particularly strong theme on Aneityum. It is worthwhile noting that on Erromango, several people, when asked, said they either didn't believe the island was really cursed, or weren't sure. But they were all aware of the talk about it and tended to refer to it as a heavy feeling rather than a definite curse.
2. God's punishment effectively being the reason for perceived problems and delayed development on the islands. This is troubling given similar historic judgments being made in the past. It is an uncomfortable thought that this kind of punishment theology may have contributed to low self-esteem on the island.
3. Attributing the cause of the volcanic eruption on Ambrym to black magic. While this is problematic from a western viewpoint, I found it important to approach it with an open mind. Hearing the story from the point of view of those involved and learning about the beneficial outcomes gave a new understanding to this interpretation.

Positive Outcomes from the Reconciliation Ceremonies

The influence of these theological themes reflects the more conservative nature of Christianity in Vanuatu, as well as the influence of traditional beliefs. However the underlying theology is viewed, the reconciliation ceremonies in all three instances had positive outcomes including the spiritual and emotional well-being of the participants and their communities, the return of some families to ancestral lands and the re-establishment of a village at the former Dip Point site. Many referred to the lifting of a burden, a sense of freedom and even new economic development. On Aneityum, the impact of ongoing reconciliations between families, churches, tribes, and with other islands has been impressive.

In the case of Erromango, it is clear there is still significant work to be done to reconcile tribes and resolve land disputes. But based on the comments made by so many, they are all aware of it - now they need the will and the commitment to work together to try to achieve the reconciliation they need among themselves. It is worth suggesting that Aneityum's Reconciliation Committee could be a good model to follow.

The Combination of Kastom and Christian Elements in the Reconciliation Ceremonies

The reason why all three communities held reconciliation ceremonies is rooted in Vanuatu's culture, and long history of kastom reconciliation. Carol Mayer of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology was familiar with this tradition and thus suggested the reconciliation ceremony as a format for the Erromangan community to reconcile with the descendants of John Williams. This event was looked to by other islands as providing something of a model, which involved adapting the traditional ceremony with a strong

Christian emphasis. This has allowed the Ni-Vanuatu to give full expression to their long-held and deeply respected kastom traditions, while also ensuring that their strong commitment to Christianity was a central component in the reconciliations. William and Rose Natgo of Williams Bay, who offered their daughter to the Williams family in accordance with kastom understanding, but influenced by their faith, demonstrated this. William said, "If God could do this with Jesus, we can offer our daughter."

This of course has many different layers and is open to critique. Some will feel uncomfortable with the emotional harm that might be caused to a young girl in such a scenario, and it is difficult to argue against that. But it is never easy to offer critique of a cultural value when observing another community from outside that culture. Given the harm that Western culture has visited on many islands in Vanuatu since the arrival of traders, blackbirders and missionaries, it is difficult to see how Western culture has any right to critique Vanuatu culture at all.

The point I take from the convergence of kastom and Christian elements in reconciliation ceremonies is that the tradition of kastom reconciliation sits well with the central message of the Christian gospel - reconciliation with God and between people. As Allen Nafuki said, the Erromangan tradition of the Simanlou laid a foundation "so that when the good news came, the Erromangan people were able to see themselves as brothers and sisters."

My host on Ambrym, Philip Joses, summed up this complementary relationship between kastom and Christian elements in reconciliation ceremonies when, translating an interview at Ranon, he said, "According to the culture, the pig is the only object that is effective for reconciliation, but in the church it is prayer. Sometimes they do it within the culture, and then also within the church, and that is justice and grace."

Kastom Reconciliation Ceremonies Within Vanuatu Today

Kastom reconciliation ceremonies retain an important place in Vanuatu culture. As attested by the examples in the addendum they are common in all aspects of Vanuatu society, including village life, tribal and island conflicts, and also in judicial and political spheres. An academic study published in the *Journal of Pacific Law* (2008) noted that kastom has been incorporated into the laws of the country and that reconciliation ceremonies often take place to offer reparation to victims of crime. This paper explores whether legal recognition of kastom reconciliation could deliver justice to victims of sexual offences in Vanuatu. (Arthi Bandhana Swamy, LLB Student, University of the South Pacific).

Understanding the tradition and place of kastom reconciliation is a key component in understanding Vanuatu culture and values, and also in understanding that Christianity did not introduce reconciliation ceremonies to Vanuatu but has built upon and contributed to them. The foundation for Christian reconciliation ceremonies had already been laid within the culture before the missionaries arrived.

I have not had the time to test Jimmy Nelson's assertion that reconciliation ceremonies have made Vanuatu more peaceful than its Melanesian neighbours - that would be a much longer study than I can give time to here - but Chief Isaac Worwor is of the opinion that reconciliation in Fiji and Samoa "is totally different." He indicated that the Fijian

Government was interested in learning about how Vanuatu used traditional culture to address their social problems, and had invited him to meet and share with Government officials about this.

There can be no doubt that the desire for reconciliation to restore social balance and harmony lies at the heart of Vanuatu life and culture, with reconciliation ceremonies in all spheres of life in Vanuatu attesting to how important they are. This includes adhering to the principle that reconciliation should avoid a win-lose mentality. As mentioned by several chiefs, with respect to land disputes the outcome of a reconciliation ceremony requires that all parties receive something. The reconciliation ceremonies studied in this paper included strong commitment to Christian beliefs but the driving force behind all three was also very clearly based on a deep respect and commitment to kastom and tradition. So even where reconciliation ceremonies have a strong Christian component, they are grounded first and foremost in the traditional Vanuatu values system. The case studies of these reconciliation ceremonies reveal how important it is for those working closely with Ni-Vanuatu people to take to time to hear their stories, learn the culture, and understand the function of kastom in Vanuatu, in order to work respectfully and fruitfully within the Vanuatu context.



Participants in the Dip Point reconciliation ceremony embrace after exchanging gifts.

Addendum

Examples of reconciliation ceremonies within contemporary Vanuatu life:

1. **Comment from an interview with Chief Jack Keitadi, Secretary of the Aneityum Council of Chiefs:**
 “The chiefly system is still very strong. Custom reconciliations still take place. There was a recent reconciliation between groups of Aneityumese after someone had died of liver problems and there was speculation that he had been poisoned. There was an accusation and the chiefs had to hold a meeting and a reconciliation. There is another one coming this month between different tribes, where both will bring pigs and kava.”
2. Dr. Leodoro wanted back in Surgery - *Vanuatu Daily Post*, January 12 2018
3. Vanuatu Union of Moderate parties Holds Reconciliation Ceremony for Reunification - *Pacific Islands Report online publication* March 15 2017
4. Malvatumauri to organise reconciliation at right time - *Vanuatu Daily Post* December 11 2015
5. Vanuatu PM performs reconciliation - *Radio New Zealand Pacific News* 5 April 2013
6. Reconciliation 3 years after sorcery murders in Vanuatu - *Island life*, November 10 2017
7. Man sent to prison for rape (second to last paragraph makes comment about the guilty party performing a kastom reconciliation) - *Vanuatu Daily Post*, July 18 2018

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