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# Tanna: Romancing *Kastom*, Eluding Exoticism?

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Margaret Jolly

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Dedicated to the memory of Jacob Kapere and Mungau Dain

*My thanks first to Martin Butler and Bentley Dean for their fascinating film and for agreeing to my long interview with them after I had sent an early draft of this essay. That and our email correspondence was a crucial source of corrections, additions and new insights. I am especially indebted to Martin since the interview was only a couple of months after the loss of his beloved partner, renowned journalist and barrister Liz Jackson. My heartfelt thanks also to Hari Simon, Siobhan McDonnell, Mitiana Arbon, Richard Reid, Rachel England and Tim Rowse for conversations about Tanna and to Mitiana, Siobhan, Tim, Monty Lindstrom and Chris Ballard for comments on an early draft. Thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their positive thoughts and suggestions not all of which I could effect in the space available. Many thanks to Carolyn Brewer yet again for her prompt and meticulous editing of the text and bibliography to style. All remaining errors and infelicities are mine. I dedicate this essay to the memory of the late Jacob Kapere, a wonderful filmmaker and curator of Vanuatu's cinematic history and the late Mungau Dain, Tanna's stellar leading man whose untimely death in Port Vila on 5 January 2019 shocked us all.*

## Introduction: The Making of *Tanna* – a Co-creation

- 1 *Tanna* (2015), a feature film co-directed by the Australian duo Bentley Dean and Martin Butler was widely received as a “Romeo and Juliet” romance. Set in the South Pacific, on Tanna, one of the southern islands of Vanuatu, it tells the story of how a love affair between a young couple was thwarted when the woman was promised to another man to make peace between warring villages. To avoid that fate the couple runs away but, pursued both by enemy warriors and their own kin and failing to find refuge elsewhere,

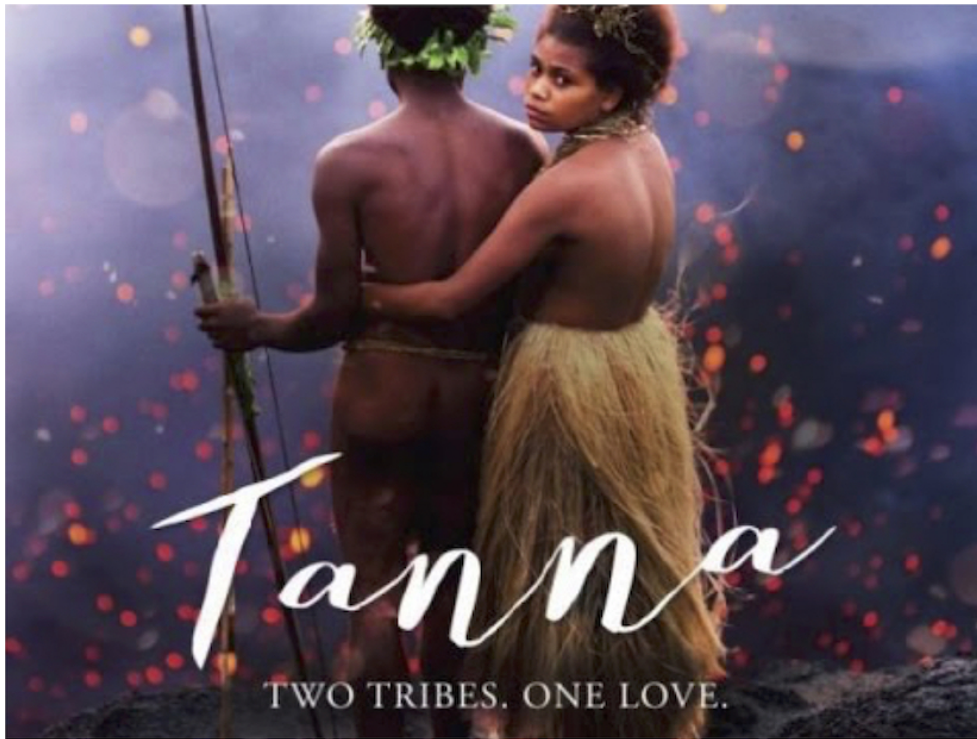
they commit suicide on the fiery mouth of Tanna's volcano, Mount Yasur. The plot derives from the true story of an ill-fated couple on the island in 1987 and the story line was developed in collaboration with people of Yakel village over several months of workshops and improvisation before filming started (Kuipers, 2015; Frater, 2016). These were guided by Jimmy Joseph Nako who acted as translator and cultural director of the film and the late Jacob Kapere who was pivotal in selecting the village, advising the directors and securing collaboration. Ultimately, Yakel people chose to tell this story, memorialised in a poignant song which is heard in the film's opening and closing frames.<sup>1</sup> Through the words of this song, which reverberate through the final scenes, we are told that this tragic double suicide catalysed reflection and a change in *kastom* (indigenous practices),<sup>2</sup> allowing marriages catalysed by a couple's love as well as marriages primarily arranged by kin.<sup>3</sup>

- 2 The co-director and cinematographer Bentley Dean spent seven months with his wife Janita Suter and two young sons living and filming in the *kastom* village of Yakel, while his co-director Martin Butler flew in during filming for the sound recording. The fictional couple Wawa (Marie Wawa) and Dain (Mungau Dain), Wawa's sister Selin (Marceline Rofit), the Yakel chief and Dain's grandfather (Chief Charlie Kahla), the Yakel shaman and Wawa's grandfather (Albie Nangia), Wawa's grandmother (Dadwa Mungau), Wawa's father (Lingai Kowia) and Wawa's mother (Linette Yowayin) and all the other actors are non-professionals, playing roles akin to those they play in daily life. The cinematography powerfully evokes the lush, lived landscape of a bountiful tropical island and a traditionalist *kastom* community. It combines a documentary sensibility (akin to two earlier documentary films Dean and Butler co-directed)<sup>4</sup> with closeups and action sequences of high drama, in the style of many contemporary feature films. Dean observed:

“From the story to the surround and dramatic score, we wanted to make this look and feel like any other feature film you'd seen in a cinema.” (Bodey, 2015)

- 3 Screen writer John Collee (of *Master and Commander*, dir. by P. Weir, 2003) collaborated, weaving the narrative into a conventional cinematic structure, intensifying action sequences and adding dialogue. The dialogue, including a diegetic voice-over and recorded, scripted conversation is almost exclusively in local languages, Nauvhal and a little Nafe (a language from southeast Tanna), both subtitled in English.
- 4 *Tanna* thus hovers between the genres of ethnographic and fictional feature film, in a way similar to *Ten Canoes* directed by Rolf van de Heer (2006) and might be dubbed a “docu-drama”. Dean avowed this inspiration: “I'm influenced by anyone who blurs that distinction between documentary and fiction” (Pfeiffer, 2015).<sup>5</sup> Rolf van de Heer acted as an “unofficial consultant” at several stages in the film-making and the celebrated editor of *Ten Canoes*, Tania Michelle Nehme, edited *Tanna*. Early in his sojourn, Dean screened *Ten Canoes* in Yakel so that locals could witness the naturalism and acting style he was seeking to emulate.

PICTURE 1. – Wawa and Dain at mouth of Tanna’s volcano – the image used in the film poster and DVD cover



- 5 As Dean had promised, Yakel people were the first to see the film in April 2015. Alas, Butler and Dean arrived just a few weeks after Cyclone Pam had devastated Vanuatu and Tanna in particular, destroying houses and subsistence gardens, occasioning food and water shortages and massive dislocation with the Tanna hospital and Tafea Kaljoral Senta badly damaged.<sup>6</sup> To show the film they fashioned a screen by stringing up bed sheets on a banyan tree which was still standing after the cyclone (Marks, 2015).<sup>7</sup> Despite this recent trauma, the filmmakers were warmly welcomed back by Yakel people and Dean suggests that their response was “ecstatic”, as people gathered from “all the tribes in the area” to watch it (Maddox, 2015). He likened the screening to a football game more than “your average cinema” with the large, engaged audience laughing and cheering. During the love scenes, older women “tut-tutted” while adolescent boys snickered and adolescent girls shushed. At that first screening people sang along with the songs in the film, an experience Dean describes as “magical” for any filmmaker. The Yakel chief (Chief Charlie Kahla) proclaimed:

“We enjoyed it because its our film. Its all about us, our culture, our ceremonies, our dancing.” (Maddox, 2015)

- 6 It later proved a hit both in Port Vila and in Nouméa, catalysing national and regional celebration. At Tana Ciné in Port Vila the 156 seat cinema had completely packed houses for the first few weeks from late September 2015, and then full houses every weekend for the first six months only slowing down when the DVD became available for sale (see Figure 1). According to the cinema manager Caroline Bunet the audiences were almost exclusively ni-Vanuatu and most were delighted by the love story, a story which seemed familiar, told in an indigenous language. There was no sense of exoticism for these audiences (Email to author by Stuart Bedford and Caroline Brunet July 2, 2018).<sup>8</sup>

PICTURE 2. – Crew filming Dain at crater's edge



(By courtesy of B. Dean et M. Butler)

## Critical Reception: International Prizes and Warm Praise

- 7 Though only a modest success at the global box office (grossing USD 69,961 according to Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanna\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanna_(film))) *Tanna* achieved widespread critical and audience acclaim. It was first screened internationally at the 72<sup>nd</sup> International Film Festival in Venice in September 2015 (AAP, 2015), where it won the Pietro Barzisa Audience Prize. Butler and Dean won the award for best Foreign Film from the African American Film Critics Association in 2015. At the 6<sup>th</sup> AACTA (Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts) Awards it was nominated for Best Film and Best Direction and Bentley Dean was nominated for the best cinematographer. Antony Partos won awards from both AACTA and the ASE (Australian Screen Editors) for the film's original music score, and Tania Michelle Nehme the ASE award for best editing of a feature film. Subsequently it was selected as the Australian entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 89<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards and was one of five nominated for that award in January 2017.<sup>9</sup>
- 8 Film critics were in general celebratory with positive reviews in *The Guardian*, *Variety*, *The Washington Post* and *LA Times*, with a Metacritic score of 75 per cent and a Rotten Tomatoes score of 91 per cent on the Tomatometer and 76 per cent on the audience score. Luke Buckmaster writing in the *The Guardian* celebrated the film's "many beautiful sequences matching quietly drawn performances with aching screen-swelling backgrounds" (Buckmaster, 2015) and the "magnetic" performances of the untrained cast.

“Yakel people’s passion to tell this story is undoubtedly at the heart of the film’s success.” (Buckmaster, 2015)

- 9 Richard Kuipers writing in *Variety*, celebrated

“an emotionally engaging story of forbidden love [... T]he eternal story of young lovers breaking all the rules and risking everything to be together is beautifully told in Tanna ... the pic weaves fascinating details of tribal life into a universally accessible and emotionally affecting romantic drama.” (Kuipers, 2015)

He especially praised the central couple:

“Wawa is luminous in the central role and has terrific screen chemistry with well-cast leading man Dain.” (Kuipers, 2015)

Stephanie Merry (2016) writing in *The Washington Post* suggested that the directors had

“an attention to earthly detail that gives the movie a beauty to rival a nature documentary. But they also have a keen anthropological eye ... their traditions and rituals ... are seamlessly integrated into the plot, educating the viewer without making the tribe’s experience seem overly exotic ... the movie is a tremendous accomplishment ... their performances are as stunning as the setting, and that is truly saying something.”

- 10 Kenneth Turan writing in the *LA Times* applauded the “effectiveness of the drama”, “the convincing story of forbidden love between two young people and how it plays out in this kind of closed culture.” He praises how Wawa and Dain play the young lovers

“with finely expressive eyes and faces. Perhaps because the story came directly out of their tradition, they transport us completely to this very different but somehow familiar world.” (Turan, 2016)

*The Globe and Mail* in a later review online adjudged it a

“smart refreshing story of star-crossed lovers ... filmed on the untouched-by-time island country of Vanuatu.” (Wheeler, 2017)

## This “Very Different but Somehow Familiar World”

- 11 As we can see from the above, most foreign reviews of the film are pervaded by two contesting, even contradictory tropes. First, there is a constant allusion to the “untouched” character of Yakel, “one of the world’s last tribal societies” (Buckmaster, 2015), suggestive of both geographical and temporal distance from an “outside”, as in most Western constructions of the exotic. There is a litany of references to how Yakel is “closed”, and how *kastom* is a rigid set of rules which extrudes modernity (e.g., Wong, 2017) and in particular romantic love which is “forbidden” (Kuipers, 2015). There are graphic references to “warring tribes” (Merry, 2016) and how “lovers are torn apart to keep tribal peace” (Kenny, 2016). In the more sophisticated reviews “remoteness” is seen more perceptively as an active choice by Yakel people, as “avoiding” or even resisting “modern modes of living” (e.g. Kenny, 2016).
- 12 Yet, simultaneously, and often even within the same review, there is an acknowledgement that the main message of the movie is that *kastom* has changed, by embracing the possibility of love marriage, constructed as emblematic of modernity. Phil Hoad (2017) celebrates the film as “an open-throated and universal call for change from within”. This sense of a radical rupture is emphasised by hyperbolic stories of Yakel people’s very recent exposure to cinema, alleging that they have never seen a movie before they acted in this one: for example, “performed with conviction by actors who’d never seen a film or a movie camera before” (Kuipers, 2015) and “who had reputedly never seen a film, let alone acted in one” (Bohane, 2015). Garry Maddox

(2015), writing in *The Sydney Morning Herald* was even more declamatory: “Tanna’ the ancient Vanuatu tribe who had never watched a film now star in one.” Yet, as noted above, Dean screened *Ten Canoes* while in Yakel so that local actors might emulate its style and many people, men in particular, had not only seen films in Port Vila but had themselves acted in reality television series (see below).

13 Reviewers such as Glenn Kenny (2016) and Kenneth Turan (2016) situate the film in a genealogy of exoticism, comparing it to early silent films of the South Pacific extending back to Robert J. Flaherty’s *Moana* (1925) and his collaboration with F.W. Murnau, *Tabu* (1931; see Jolly, 1994b). Glenn Kenny (2016) concludes: “*Tanna* drifts into a mode of exoticism that renders it an ultimately frustrating experience”. Other reviewers simply celebrate the film’s exoticism (e.g., Buckmaster, 2015; Turan, 2016) or suggest, on the contrary, that it is not “overly exotic” (e.g. Merry, 2015).

14 One lucid, distinctive voice in this echo chamber of reviews is the anthropologist Lamont Lindstrom who describes himself as “working with local communities on a series of ethnographic, linguistic and historical projects” in Tanna since 1978 (Lindstrom, 2015). He describes in detail how the fiction of the film occludes the reality of Yakel peoples’ contemporary lives. Warfare between tribes had ended long before 1987, the year in which the film’s drama is situated. Yakel village is only a few kilometres up the hill from the town of Lénakel and has a constant stream of tourists visiting, especially since a freelance journalist in the 1970s persuaded men to wear penis wrappers and women grass skirts when tourists are around.<sup>10</sup> Tourists can move on from Yakel to walk the “cannibal trail” or walk up to the volcano if permission is granted. Lindstrom observes how many of the ubiquitous signs of globalised modernity like cloth, metal and mobile phones have been “meticulously scrubbed away” by the filmmakers while almost all Bislama (an Austronesian pidgin, lingua franca of Vanuatu) which “people freely code-mix” in everyday conversation, has he claims been almost excised from the actors’ lines.

“Only a tobacco pipe, a bush knife, and some dubious island Christians ... signal our contemporaneity.” (Lindstrom, 2015)<sup>11</sup>

15 Moreover, Lindstrom quashes the common claims that Yakel people are cinematically naïve. Not only have many men and some women seen films in Port Vila while working or living there but “penis-wrapper-wearing Yakel men are the island’s outstanding global travellers”, to the UK, France, USA and Australia to star in a variety of reality TV series (including some of the cast of this film in *Meet the Natives* (Parsons, 2007-2009). Lindstrom insists that Yakel people like most Tannese are sophisticated and “extremely savvy” about how Western romanticism celebrates ancient cultures, and willingly exploit such fantasies by performing a cosmetic version of *kastom* for paying tourists, photographers and filmmakers (compare the Pentecost land-dive, Jolly, 1994a and 2016a). He situates the co-directors Bentley Dean and Martin Butler in genealogies of exoticism and romanticism,

“echoing Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s fantasies of noble Tahitians against which he could project the squalor of 18<sup>th</sup> century France.” (Lindstrom, 2015)<sup>12</sup>

16 Lindstrom’s critiques are compelling but would have been more so if the film was an ethnographic documentary rather than a fictional film based on a true story set in 1987 (long before mobile phones if not many other imported things like cloth, machetes, metal and plastic).

## Vanuatu's 'star-crossed lovers'

- 17 But equally significant are those tropes in reviews which stress not the distance and difference of the exotic but rather the shared and even universal character of forbidden, romantic love. This is most palpable for Western audiences in the constant allusions in reviews to the story as a Romeo and Juliet-style romance. Stephanie Merry dubs the film “a real-life Romeo and Juliet set amid warring tribes” (Merry, 2015). Oliver Pfeiffer (2015) on SBS (Special Broadcasting Service) television news in Australia had earlier anticipated: “Australian film *Tanna* to tell [a] Romeo and Juliet like tale in Melanesia.”<sup>13</sup>
- 18 He quoted Bentley Dean:  
 “It’s quite universal and quite shocking the way the story resembles *Romeo and Juliet*.” (*ibid.*)<sup>14</sup>
- 19 *The International Business Times* proclaimed: “Tanna brings Vanuatu’s Shakespearean tale to Australia” (Faderugao, 2015). Maricris Faderugao, Brad Wheeler and several others allude to Wawa and Dain as “star-crossed lovers”, a generic moniker for lovers doomed by astrological alignments or destiny, but most often referring to the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet (e.g., Wheeler, 2017; Pfeiffer, 2015). Such allusions to the privileged genealogy of Western romantic love presume its shared, “universal” and “eternal” character (see Hirsch, Wardlow *et al.*, 2009: 10ff) and are in tension with seeing the film as overly exoticist.
- 20 Moreover, internal to the movie’s drama rather than in the externalities of its foreign critical reception, there is a singular scene where a powerful affinity is drawn between the arranged marriages central to Tannese *kastom* and the marriage of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip. This is portrayed as an exemplary, high-status arranged marriage orchestrated by their families in ways akin to Tannese practices (see below).

## Spatio-temporal Distance and Cultural Difference

- 21 In the rest of this article responding both to the film itself and its critical reception, I address these core questions. Does the film romance *kastom* through a nostalgic celebration of ancient cultures? Does *Tanna* “drift into” the cinematic exoticism suffusing many documentary and feature films, about the Pacific and about Vanuatu in particular? There is an abundant literature on the concept of the exotic in the Pacific — in the visual arts, in literature, in anthropology, in cinema and on the relation of eroticism and exoticism (e.g., Connell, 2003; Jolly, 1997a-b; Kahn, 2011; Smith, 1960; Teaiwa, 1994).<sup>15</sup> Recent discussions of exoticism in the Pacific abound in *Touring Pacific Cultures* (Alexeyeff and Taylor, 2016) and *Re-Possessing Paradise* (Alexeyeff and McDonnell, 2018). Exoticism fundamentally depends on a distancing and an amplification of the difference between the familiar and the strange. It is closely linked to a romanticist nostalgia for times past, for ancient cultures.<sup>16</sup> Here I focus on both spatial and temporal representations of distance in this film — between cultures, generations and genders.
- 22 But let me first reveal my own history of watching this film. Several long-term friends who saw its première in Sydney told me how much they loved it, how beautiful the place and people of Vanuatu appeared and how much it reminded them of my doctoral



research in South Pentecost in the northern islands of Vanuatu in the 1970s. There are certainly affinities between these *kastom*, non-Christian peoples on these two geographically distant islands of the archipelago (see Jolly, 1994b). I first saw *Tanna* in November 2015, in a flash new cinema complex in Port Vila, the aptly named Tana Ciné, together with my colleague Siobhan McDonnell and her adopted father from Lelepa, Richard Matanik. It was a midday matinee; we emerged with tear-stroked cheeks into the glaring sunlight of a town still suffering the wounds of Cyclone Pam and a subsequent protracted drought. I saw *Tanna* a second time on a Qantas flight between Brisbane and Tokyo, en route to the Pacific History Association meetings in Guam in June 2016. Again it moved me intensely and I sobbed quietly in the dark, gazing out the window at the immensity of the ocean below. I watched it a third time in the chill of a Norwegian autumn, in October 2017, at a screening presented by students of anthropology at the University of Bergen, and spoke about it afterwards on a panel with colleagues Annelin Eriksen, Edvard Hviding and Knut Rio, responding to searching questions about its exoticism and romanticism. I watched it a fourth time from the comfort of my own lounge-room sofa when it screened on ABC television in early January 2018. That evening, it was immediately followed by a documentary on the union of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip and the central role played by Lord Louis Mountbatten in orchestrating that marriage — intentional or serendipitous programming? I have since rewatched *Tanna* several times with a more critical and less tear-filled lens.

- 23 Without being too self-indulgent, I ponder how far my own affective responses have been over-determined by an ethnographic nostalgia — because this film evoked in me intense memories and aesthetic responses grounded in my own experiences of living in the *kastom* communities of South Pentecost decades ago. My embodied memory recalls my youthful self walking on muddy trails through forests of deepest green and bathing in fast-flowing streams and the surging ocean of South East Pentecost. I was captivated anew by the beauty and grace of people dressed in penis wrappers and skirts and living in houses of bamboo and sago-palm thatch, all fashioned from their land. I was impressed again by the sight of bountiful gardens of taro wrought by hard work and the exhilaration of children playing games and cavorting in rivers and waterfalls. My ears echoed with the melodies of soft laments accompanying poignant stories, of wistful pan pipes and of desperate pigs squealing as they were sacrificed. My body moved compulsively with remembered rhythms of chant and dance, as the feet of young and old stamped on the Yakel dancing ground, percussive sounds of stamping and clapping with varying tempos building to a crescendo of that collective circular dance, *niel*, reminiscent of South Pentecost — men in the middle, women and children circling on the periphery (see Figure 2) I was moved again by the proud declarations of those still following “*kastom* roads” despite the inroads of modernity they catalogued — Captain Cook, Christianity, colonialism. Am I still romancing *kastom*? Perhaps, my personal experiences as a captivated, even seduced viewer might betray broader insights into the connection between exoticism and romanticist nostalgia — between how distance and difference in place and in time is connected.<sup>17</sup>

PICTURE 3. – Yowayin, Wawa’s mother watches the circle dance on the dancing ground shrouded by the banyan tree



(By courtesy of B. Dean et M. Butler)

## Looking at *Tanna*: “I feel Her...I hear Her”

- 24 *Tanna* is good to look at. Bentley Dean’s cinematography captures not just the extraordinary beauty of the natural world of the island — lush green forests, gushing cascades, pristine white beaches, fiery bursts of volcanic lava but also the beauty and grace of its human inhabitants and their intimate connections with nature. Their brown bodies are gleaming and sensuous, clothed habitually in local fibres, grasses fashioned into swishing skirts for women and swinging penis wrappers for men; feathers, ferns and crushed, perfumed leaves adorning their bodies. People move easily through dense foliage, revelling in freshwater pools, rivers and waterfalls, striding across the exposed expanse of the charcoal ash plains of the volcano, meeting and dancing in the bowl of a ceremonial ground, flanked by a gigantic banyan tree with huge aerial roots. We see luscious food created from local crops — puddings of grated yams oozing with coconut cream, and soft meat, served in banana leaves and piglets suckling on fat pigs, bred for exchange and eating. Superb aerial shots of the village feature houses, fashioned from bamboo and thatch, releasing the smoke of cooking fires as if they are exhaling breath.
- 25 Luke Buckmaster, film critic for *The Guardian* (2015) praised Dean’s cinematography:  
 “Tanna has a warm, shimmering vitality. Like the trees and the birds, the frame feels alive.”
- 26 Even more, the film’s frame evokes a distinctively ni-Vanuatu sense of an animated landscape, where divine forces and spiritual agents are alive in trees and rocks, rivers and ocean.<sup>18</sup> Most vividly the volcano itself is alive. She is Yahul the spirit mother, source of inspiration and wisdom. When Selin, Wawa’s younger sister, is taken on a trip to the volcano by her grandfather, the Yakel village shaman, to teach her respect after she has entered a dangerous tabooed place, she absorbs Yahul’s power through her body and mind, exposed at the crater’s edge: “I feel Her. Her warmth ... I hear Her.

She's talking to me," she affirms. But the volcano is also a place of danger — where the terrors of nature and of *kastom* coalesce. For it is here on the crater's edge on that overnight trip with Selin that her grandfather is violently bludgeoned by the warriors of the Imedin enemy tribe and nearly dies. And it is here that the young couple, Wawa and Dain, thwarted in their desire to love and live together, lie down after eating poisonous mushrooms and die cradling each other. Yahul's gaping mouth traces the arc of the dramatic plot of *Tanna*.

PICTURE 4. – Selin sees and hears the power of Yahul



(By courtesy of B. Dean et M. Butler)

## Plotting Arranged Marriage and Forbidden Romance

- 27 In the opening frames of the movie, we are told through the poignant lyrics of a Nauvhal song that arranged marriage is foundational to *kastom* (See Figure 4). Marriage, as conceived by the ancestors, was destined to eclipse the individual desires of men and women in order to create exchange between peoples, to ensure fertility and to make peaceful alliances between warring villages to ensure survival. This *kastom* credo is immediately juxtaposed with the reality of the surging desires Wawa and Dain have for each other.
- 28 Dain is the tall, quiet, dignified and broodingly handsome young grandson of the chief. <sup>19</sup> He returns to Yakel village still gripped with grief because of the death of both of his parents, massacred by Imedin warriors: his father's throat slit; his mother, speared through the chest, died in his arms. As an orphan, he courts a desire for revenge which is painfully obvious to his wise grandfather Chief Charlie Kahla as Dain violently digs up his parents' overgrown taro garden. "I loved your father as you did. Now we only have each other." He also courts Wawa, a childhood friend, tantalising her with the alluring music of his pan pipes, inviting her to illicit trysts in the forest and down by the river. Wawa is a young, nubile beauty, who is just at the cusp of her initiation as a woman. She responds eagerly to Dain's overtures with flirtatious delight. In early scenes we see their modest, furtive exchange of glances filtered through the green light of the forest,

their bodies gently touching, their hands discreetly entwined. Their growing love is palpable – from intimate touches, to tight bodily embraces silhouetted against the red sparks of the volcano<sup>20</sup> and finally “playing” together, in ways that would be seen by many ni-Vanuatu, Christian and non-Christian, as daring, immodest and immoral. She empathises with his grief but dreams of a future without fear for “our kids”. “It might happen one day that we will have children.” “How will that happen?” Dain playfully teases in response.

- 29 Wawa’s younger sister Selin can see what is happening. A smart and spirited girl, she delights in mischief, running off with the penis wrapper of a young boy while swimming at the river. She is forthright and bold, even entering a taboo place, the forbidden site of a massacre by Imedin warriors. Her father reprimands her as we see the fierce eyes of Imedin warriors lurking in the forest. They overhear that she will be taken on an overnight journey to the volcano by her grandfather, the Yakel shaman, so that she might learn respect and absorb the power of *kastom*. On this fateful trip he is bludgeoned by enemy Imedin warriors and left close to death. But Selin manages to escape and, in exhilarating action sequences, races for several hours, panic-stricken, back to Yakel through dense forest and slippery mud paths at night to alert her kin.
- 30 Due to Selin’s daring, nocturnal race back home, her grandfather is rescued and eventually revived with the healing powers of the indigenous medicine-man, collective care and spiritual invocations to Yahul by Chief Charlie, who is given a song by the ancestors urging peace. But the brutal attack on the Yakel shaman by Imedin warriors provokes an escalation of conflict between the villages. Yakel warriors go in hot pursuit and inflict casualties on their Imedin enemies. Weary of the increasing violence, Chief Charlie, consults the Peace Chief who summons a meeting with Imedin men led by Chief Mikum. Here he envisages a return to peace by exchanging brides, promising Wawa, without her knowledge or agreement, as a bride to a young Imedin warrior, Mikum’s son. Selin recognises him – he has unmistakably intense eyes, two entwined circling pigs’ tusks around his neck and his name is Capn Cook (the actor’s real name, and a nice irony). All the women are ordered to leave the meeting on the *nasara* (ceremonial ground) before Wawa is offered in marriage to the very man who bludgeoned her grandfather. Chief Charlie is still seemingly unaware of Wawa’s love affair with his grandson but his suspicions are aroused when Dain leaves the peace meeting in anger, slashing the ground with his machete. Later, down by the river, older women admonish Wawa and insist that she must comply, that sacrificing individual desire to communal benefit is core to *kastom*. Wawa’s grandmother is suspicious when Wawa fails to join women at the seashore collecting shells for her bridal necklace, and tries to extract the truth from Selin. But, in a scene of discreet understatement, Dain and Wawa clasp hands and we suspect they have resolved to make love. Their love affair and sexual relationship is exposed. Wawa declares “I slept with Dain and they won’t take me now”. Since she is no longer a virgin, her prospective marriage is compromised and further war threatens. Chief Charlie acts to forestall conflict by exiling his grandson Dain: “Who gave you the right ... You must leave. Go to Yahul.” He does, but hearing his mournful panpipes, Wawa slips out under the cover of night (observed by the watchful, wakeful eye of Selin) and joins Dain at Yahul’s mouth.

PICTURE 5. – Selin surreptitiously watching the lovers



(By courtesy of B. Dean et M. Butler)

- 31 Several sequences depict their journey in exile first as a sensuous escapade. They splash together in the waters of a fine, white sand beach, circling around each other with relish and imagining the abundant fertility of their bodies, their gardens and their pigs in the future. Dain spears and roasts fish, but, before they can eat, they are visited by a chief from a nearby coastal Christian village. They seek but are denied refuge with him, for he fears the repercussions from Yakel chiefs if he accepts them. He suggests they consider refuge with charismatic Christians (see Lindstrom, 2015).<sup>21</sup> This scene is an awkward moment in the film. Seemingly blind women, shaking their hands in trance-like gestures welcome the couple from their sinful lives in “the wild”, sniffing around their bare bodies and offering to clothe them. Other Christian villagers dance gleefully to the sound of a string band. The Christian leader offers them refuge; his God will accept their love even if their elders do not. They refuse. “These people freak me out,” says Dain in a jarring translation of Nauvhal idiom. Wawa agrees. “Me too. Let’s try the forest.”
- 32 Dain hunts bats and climbs a tree to gather delectable wild honey. As the sense of their inevitable fate closes in, Imedin warriors are seen in the distance and they hide in a secluded complex of caves on the far side of the volcano. Here they are discovered by Wawa’s grandfather, father and Selin, who cannily suspected their hiding place. Her father tries again to persuade Wawa to accept the arranged marriage, warning of the collective peril of war if peace is not effected through her moving in marriage to the Imedin. She again refuses: “I’m not leaving you,” and follows him, climbing out of the caves. With Imedin warriors nearby and violent death threatening they choose a peaceful, indigenous way out, eating poisonous mushrooms. They die together in a mutual embrace on the edge of Yahul. The soaring soundtrack of plaintive voice merges with the funereal whoops of Wawa’s father as their bodies are discovered by their kin. Laments echo through the elevated landscape as they are carried back to Yakel. Wawa’s mother and sister stand grief stricken by their graves; Selin weeps profusely. Solemn men congregate again on the ceremonial ground – the enemy tribes of Yakel and Imedin together with those other tribes whose role is to witness and effect a peace. Pigs

and kava are exchanged and speeches made by both Chief Charlie and Chief Mikum affirming that from this point on *kastom* will be changed, seedlings of love between young people will in future not be cut down and separate logs will be conjoined in the single fire of *kastom* to allow love marriages and effect peace between warring tribes.

## The Gendered Roots of *Kastom*: Men Beneath the Banyan, Women Down by the River

- 33 The film represents the gendered hierarchies of Tannese *kastom* in ways that are quite ethnographically faithful, even though war between Tannese tribes ended decades ago. It is men who are seen to make the major public decisions about life and death — younger men who by their lusty desires or daring actions can catalyse conflict and war, older chiefs who are capable of making peace and alliances (see Jolly, 2016a on the generational configuration of “men of war, men of peace”). Vivid scenes portray the enemies as tightly congregated groups of men confronting each other on the Yakel *nasara* (ceremonial ground) beneath a towering banyan tree — led by chiefs exchanging speeches laced with compliments and insults, threatening peace or war. Women sit on the sidelines of these public debates and disputes until they are banished when sensitive decisions are made, as with Wawa’s betrothal. Then women defer, leaving the *nasara* in a quiet file, respectfully, with their arms crossed covering their breasts. Like Wawa, women here appear as muted and marginal in meetings, even if crucial as tokens in male contests for power and honour — betrothed to effect harmony and secure alliances, given in marriage without their agreement, even against their will.
- 34 But, though they are clearly portrayed as subservient to masculine power and privilege and the masculinist presumptions of *kastom*, the women of Yakel are not imaged as simply subservient pawns. Wawa is clearly defiant and several scenes are suggestive not just of women’s playful mutual intimacy and support but their persuasive potency. We see women at the river preparing green fibres for making clothes — softening them in the flowing water and scraping on the rocks, as they gossip and joke together. We see Wawa with her grandmother, her mother and other women delighting in her coming-of-age ceremony to celebrate menarche. They cover Wawa’s body with coconut cream in sensuous celebration of her initiation as a mature woman, now ready for marriage. They relish mutual joking, with diverse kin mock whipping each other with swatches of leaves, with uninhibited hilarity. Wawa’s handsome, white-haired grandmother is a potent figure in all this — offering bawdy wisecracks about her hardworking “bum and belly” and, despite their generational separation, affirming her sameness with Wawa. “This is not about you, its about all of us ... We’ve all experienced what you’re feeling ... If you follow your heart Imedin will take revenge.” And alluding to her own arranged marriage: “I’ve never had any regrets.” Echoing the admonitions of male chiefs about the need to sacrifice individual desires for collective good and survival she tries to inveigle Wawa to agree to the marriage, with an exquisite mixture of warm intimacy and elderly authority: “You must say you agree with your grandmother.” Wawa refuses.

PICTURE 6. – Wawa painted for her initiation



(By courtesy of B. Dean et M. Butler)

## Christianity and *Kastom*: Orchestrating Conflict of Individual and Collective Desires

35 The film thus orchestrates a powerful conflict between the individual and the collective, between sexual desire and passionate love and the rules of *kastom* and collective alliance and survival. Although both Wawa and Dain suffer as individuals by this arranged marriage, it is ultimately Wawa who will have to move as a wife to an enemy tribe, and even wed the man, the marauding, violent Capn Cook who has bludgeoned her grandfather and left him for dead. Such a gendered orchestration of how *kastom* and in particular arranged marriage is in conflict with Western values of individual freedom, romantic love and companionate marriage, has been central to the dramatic encounter between Christianity and *kastom* in Vanuatu and throughout much of the Pacific for centuries. Early missionary writings dating from the nineteenth century, including both Protestants of the London Missionary Society and Marist Catholics, lament the strictures of arranged marriage (especially of older men to younger women), polygyny, the bride price and critique how this renders women “objects” of male desires and powers (see Jolly, 1991 and 2015). As many analysts have suggested this stark binary between Western individualism and Oceanic collectivism occludes similarities and shared histories (Wardlow, 2006; Jolly, 2016b). Such dichotomies ignore how far individual desires of both women and men were acknowledged in some ancestral practices (through elopement or even women being “stolen” by men), despite arranged marriages being the statistical and moral norm. Moreover, the marriages of early foreign Christian missionaries themselves, although

often legitimised by notions of romantic love, individual freedom and companionate intimacy were in varying degrees “arranged” to secure the evangelical efficacy of early Protestant Christian missions (Latai, 2016). The difficulties and the fraught domestic lives of early Christian converts in Vanuatu negotiating these opposed ideals might be imagined from research into the domestic lives of recent Christian converts, such as the Huli of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea (Wardlow, 2014). But, in Vanuatu, where many communities have been Christian for over a century there has been a historical compromise and an accommodation between these two models of marriage (see Jolly, 2015).

- 36 Although the drama of the film pivots on this orchestrated conflict between arranged and love marriage, *Tanna* is distinctive in that, although it presents an image of a closed and resilient world of “*kastom* roads”, it does not portray Yakel people as merely following a system of rigid rules. The film offers compelling portraits of the complex intellectual and affective lives of individuals, portrayed with sensitivity and delicacy. This is not just confined to the central couple — trying to resolve the tragic dilemma between the potency of their love and the threat that poses to the peace and collective survival of loved kin — and ultimately sacrificing themselves to the latter imperative through a conjoint suicide. It is palpable also in the anguish that Chief Charlie experiences when he feels compelled to exile his beloved, orphaned grandson who, by loving Wawa, negates her arranged marriage and potential peace.<sup>22</sup> It is clear in how Selin deals with the agony of balancing her love for her sister and her voyeuristic, vicarious thrill in her love affair with the pressure to expose that affair to her elders and the likely itinerary of the lovers in exile. It is patent in Wawa’s grandmother’s nostalgia as she remembers how she too had to follow her parents’ decision about whom she should marry; a decision she insists she has grown to live with and even love.
- 37 In contrast to this complex portrayal of the dynamic interplay between individual and collective will in Yakel, the representation of Tanna’s Christians (who, as in most of Vanuatu today constitute the majority of Tannese people) is flat and caricatured. The filmmakers Dean and Butler, as with several anthropologists who have worked with traditionalist *kastom* enclaves, seem to have absorbed the strong anti-Christian ideological stance of their privileged interlocutors (see Keesing and Jolly, 1992). It is significant that the filmmakers chose to represent the now indigenous religion of Christianity through the practices of a small charismatic group. Although evangelical Christianity and charismatic practices are burgeoning in Vanuatu as in much of the western Pacific (see e.g., Eriksen, 2016) what is represented here is hardly typical. Evangelical Christians are seen, both through the eyes of the *kastom* couple and the lens of the camera, as freaks. This might arouse humour and perhaps some critical reflection about Christianity on the part of secular Western audiences. Though I doubt that the “comedic effects” were unintended this sequence might provoke Westerners to consider “the strangeness of their own culture” (Herrschner and Cheer, 2018: 212). It does reinforce the film’s exoticist impulse to romanticise *kastom* for foreign spectators. But I wonder if the predominantly Christian ni-Vanuatu audience found this humorous or disrespectful, since Christianity is not “strange” but a familiar part of “their own culture”?



## The Arranged Marriage of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip

- 38 As well as the rather dubious portrait of Christian modernity through such caricatures of a charismatic cult, there is another critical cameo where modernity intrudes through the figures of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip. There has been much celebration of Prince Philip on Tanna. Since the 1960s the Prince Philip movement centred in the *kastom* village of Yaohnanen linked him to an ancient story that the son of a mountain spirit would become white-skinned, travel overseas and marry a powerful woman. When Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip visited Vanuatu in 1974 on the royal yacht *Britannia*, Chief Jack Naiva, who was paddling a war canoe for their ceremonial arrival, saw him on board, tall and elegant in his crisp white naval uniform. This confirmed for him that Prince Philip was the embodiment of that ancient prophecy, a divine being, a messiah. At the suggestion of John Champion, the British Resident Commissioner of the New Hebrides at the time, Prince Philip sent a portrait of himself to his Tannese followers and they reciprocated with a pig-killing club; following their instructions he sent back a portrait of himself holding the club. Several Tannese men visited him at Buckingham Palace in the late twentieth century and again in 2007, as part of the reality TV show *Meet the Natives*. These visits did not diminish beliefs in Prince Philip's divine power which was credited with the first black man Barack Obama becoming the President of the United States and with the assassination of Osama bin Laden (Bayliss, 2013). Tannese worshippers connected Cyclone Pam in 2015 with his retirement from public duties and thought that it heralded, after his daughter Princess Anne's visit in 2014, his imminent and final return to Tanna. These hopes may have been strengthened by Prince Charles' visit to Vanuatu in April 2018, his donning a pandanus skirt, his drinking kava and his assumption of the chiefly title Mal Menaringmanu.<sup>23</sup>
- 39 *Tanna* does not allude directly to the Prince Philip movement, although that may be a presumed sub-plot for knowing ni-Vanuatu and foreign viewers. It rather introduces his wedding with Elizabeth, then heir to the throne in 1947, as a fine foreign example of an arranged marriage. (The history of that marriage in which Philip's uncle, Lord Louis Mountbatten played a central role in introducing the couple and facilitating their courtship can equally be seen as a dynastic arrangement and as a marriage enabled by romantic love). Wawa's grandfather shows Wawa an old 1950s magazine to explain how their marriage was arranged (as in Yakel) and to highlight how they grew to love each other and have children (as in Yakel). He shows her black and white photographs of their elaborate wedding in Westminster Abbey and of the couple cuddling their infant Charles and reveals an old colour photograph of himself as part of a group of ni-Vanuatu men on a visit to Prince Philip in Buckingham Palace. When Wawa challenges him about whether the royal wedding was truly a love marriage, he says he could see with his own eyes how much Philip loved his wife, now Queen Elizabeth.<sup>24</sup> Since they are not just any Western couple but members of a rich and powerful dynasty, (perhaps even a union between a temporal Queen and her divine consort from Vanuatu), their coupling thus underlines the legitimacy, the superiority of arranged marriage.
- 40 An integral part of the film's narrative, this singular scene powerfully introduces a rare indigenous lens on questions of cultural difference and human universals. The Yakel shaman is not only drawing a moral and political lesson for Wawa but also for the

audience, indigenous and foreign; humans are similar in having to balance collective familial needs and individual desire in making good marriages.

## Co-created Cinema, Cultural Diplomacy and Tourism

- 41 Finally, I want to situate Tanna in the context of debates about the imperial and racial character of cinema and how non-Westerners in general and indigenous people in particular are no longer just objects of a cinematic gaze (see Shohat and Stam, 1994) but subjects and creators of film. There have been powerful reflections on decolonising impulses in cinema (e.g. Ginsburg, 1991; Deeger, 2006). The claims that this film was a “co-creation” between Yakel people and the Australian directors can be heard in this context: “*Tanna* avoids any accusation of tokenistic local involvement” (Herrschner and Cheer, 2018: 206). Dean and Butler seem alert to postcolonial critiques of both documentary and feature films and worked hard to create a compelling film from a story that Yakel people wanted to tell, thereby giving voice to indigenous ni-Vanuatu people. Ron Adams thought the film evoked a “deep sense of Tannese agency” (2016: 464). We have already heard the words of Chief Charlie: “[I]ts our film. Its all about us, our culture, our ceremonies, our dancing,” words which have been amplified in the promotion, distribution and reviews of *Tanna*.<sup>25</sup> (See Figure 5)
- 42 There have been fine ni-Vanuatu cinematographers like the late Chief Jacob Kapere from Tanna, who was head of the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta’s (vks) National Film and Sound Unit for decades and later Director of the Tannese branch of the vks. He was crucial in the early stages of co-ordinating the film project and had a close and respectful relation with Yakel people (Cullwick, 2018). The directors also worked closely with Jimmy Joseph Nako the cultural director on the film, whom they affectionately call JJ. Still the cinematography, the sound, the overall direction, the editing and the promotion of this film was done by an Australian team. Although *Tanna* entered international festivals and Oscar nomination lists as a co-production between Australia and Vanuatu, like most “partnerships” in the world of Australian aid and development the technological capacity and the authorship is ultimately shaped by the unequal power of Australians. Most reviewers write from the presumption that we see Yakel primarily through a foreign lens – hence the debates about exoticism. Only Lindstrom poses the question of auto-exoticism by Yakel people in his observations of how the village, as seen in the space-time of the film’s fiction, departs from the Yakel of contemporary modernity – replete with mobile phones and tourists.
- 43 In a recent paper Irena Herrschner and Joseph Cheer (2018) analyse the film in terms of the bilateral relationship between Australia and Vanuatu and its impact on cultural diplomacy and tourism. They share the verdict with many other reviewers that *Tanna* creates an “exotic other” and even, by essentialising Yakel people, “glamorises primitivity” (Herrschner and Cheer, 2018: 215). Ouch! This sounds much worse than romancing *kastom*.<sup>26</sup> They suggest that the warmth of its reception by Western audiences is because they crave simplicity, honesty, loyalty to kin and respect of nature (a rather expansive and optimistic claim about Western responses). Moreover, they see the film through the frame of the bilateral relations between Australia and Vanuatu, suggesting that its cinematic diplomacy is an extension of cultural diplomacy whereby soft power is used to promote a country’s foreign policy and strategic interests through

culture. But does the film primarily serve the cultural diplomacy of Australia or Vanuatu?<sup>27</sup>

- 44 It could be both — the film might be seen as promoting Australia’s soft power in the Pacific in an era of waning influence due to the growth of Chinese hard and soft power (witness recent debates about Chinese investment in the economy and specifically the wharf development in Luganville as a potential Chinese naval base, see Zhang and Smith, 2017 and Wesley-Smith and Porter, 2010).
- 45 Herrschner and Cheer (2018) also suggest that the film has a value for Tannese people and ni-Vanuatu in general by promoting the country through the soft power of cultural diplomacy and the lure of tourism. Given the centrality of tourism as a source of cash for Yakel people specifically and for the Vanuatu economy as a whole this may be seen as a desirable outcome. It was certainly lauded as such by Jenny da Rin Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu — who praised both the co-creation of the film and its potential to fuel tourism at an Australia Vanuatu Business Forum and Trade Expo in March 2017 (Cullwick, 2017).<sup>28</sup> Film-induced tourism, Herrschner and Cheer tell us, is widely seen as a legitimate “destination promotion mechanism” (2018: 214). Whether *Tanna* will induce an increase in tourism to Vanuatu in the way that *Lord of the Rings* (Jackson, 2001-2003) and *The Hobbit* (Jackson, 2012-2014) did for New Zealand, only future visitor numbers will tell. From a visit to Yakel in 2016, Ron Adams (2016) reports a perceived increase and there are plans to open the airport to Tanna to international flights and for cruise ships to visit Port Resolution. Tourism can destroy the very things which tourists come to see (Alexeyeff and Taylor, 2016), and Joseph Cheer (2010) has elsewhere pointed to the negative effects of tourism in pursuing development goals in Vanuatu. In more ethnographic mode, Siobhan McDonnell (2018) has recently pointed to how the *Survivor* television series and subsequent tourism helped to catalyse a land rush, real estate development and indigenous land dispossession on Efate island. Clearly *Tanna* was made with a very different ethos and hopefully will not precipitate similar consequences.

## Conclusion

- 46 *Tanna* certainly romances *kastom*. This is obvious in that the directors chose to film with the *kastom* people of Yakel rather than with Tannese Christians and in the comedic caricatures the film offers of Christianity. But it also historicises *kastom*, showing how in order to ensure their very survival, minority *kastom* enclaves like minorities elsewhere have to concede more to the individualism of more mainstream modernities.<sup>29</sup> It is exotic, “sumptuously so” in the apt words of Ron Adams (2016: 463). But the patent exoticist impulses of the film are balanced by appeals to the shared, universal and eternal character of romantic love, and especially of young love which is forbidden and ends in tragedy. The film’s alluring invitation to share the warmth and the grief of Wawa and Dain’s love is heightened not just by the pervasive external framing of a “Romeo and Juliet romance” but by how, within the film, comparisons are between *kastom* practices of arranged marriage and a royal wedding in Britain. The film thus offers not just a stereotypical view of the exotic other for Western audiences but reveals how ni-Vanuatu, like other indigenous people who have been colonised, have their own distinctive views of cultural difference and shared humanity. Sometimes those ideas of shared humanity extend to stories that powerful white people in Britain

and powerful black people in America can trace their divine ancestry to Vanuatu. We might wonder then how some Tannese people might construct the most recent royal wedding between a British prince and a beautiful woman of African American ancestry and feminist persuasion?

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DEAN Bentley, 2013. *First Footprints*, Documentary Series, Australia, 228 min (4 episodes of 57 min each).

DEAN Bentley and Martin BUTLER, 2010. *Contact*, Australia, 79 min.

DEAN Bentley and Martin BUTLER, 2015. *Tanna*, Australia, Vanuatu, 104 min.

FLAHERTY Robert J., 1925. *Moana*, USA, 77 min.

HEER Rolf (van de) and Peter DJIGIRR, 2006. *Ten Canoes*, Australia, 90 min.

JACKSON Peter, 2001-2003, *Lord of the Rings*, Film Series, New Zealand/USA, 558 min.

JACKSON Peter, 2012-2014. *The Hobbit*, Film Series, New Zealand/USA, 462 min.

PARSONS Charlie, 2007-2009. *Meet the Natives: England and USA*, Reality Television Show, Travel Channel, UK/USA, 2 seasons (3+6 episodes of 45 min each).

MURNAU Friedrich Wilhelm, 1931. *Tabu*, USA, 86 min.

WEIR Peter, 2003. *Master and Commander*, USA, 138 min.

## NOTES

1. The directors first heard this story not in Yakel but on the outskirts of a dispute meeting about a love affair on the other side of Tanna, from an English-speaking school teacher who said that such disputes in the past often led to war and who told them that these suicides in 1987 initiated a series of similar suicides. They discussed other possible plots, for instance based on Tannese origin stories, but this story was the one Yakel people preferred to tell (Jolly, 2018). Its power and affect in local historical memory is manifest in this song which relates the tragic story and its aftermath as a quiet mournful lament.
2. There is much debate about the meaning of this polysemic word, *kastom* in Bislama, the lingua franca of Vanuatu. Earlier formulations, including my own, tended to stress the appeal to the past (e.g. Jolly, 1992 and 1994b). Increasingly, since *kastom* is broadly used in discourses of legitimation, it can incorporate exogenous elements which have become indigenous, most palpably Christianity. So *kastom* is better translated as indigenous practices or ways of the place and can be seen as a future-oriented notion in alternative visions of development – as in the *kastom ekonomi* movement (Jolly, 2012). However, in the context of Tanna and this film, Yakel is marked as a *kastom* village, a traditionalist village which, in contrast to the majority, eschews Christianity and many other marks of global modernity.
3. In conversation with Oliver Pfeiffer of SBS Bentley Dean reflected on the story: “I was immediately attracted to that story, and even after 30 years it was still quite raw in the village and they sang me a story from the perspective of those lovers. Songs in their culture are the biggest motivations for change because they come from the spirits. I learnt that from that point on the tribes agreed to allow love marriages for the sake of future generations. I thought this was a fantastic story of ‘love conquers all’ and had real resonance for a Western audience” (Pfeiffer, 2015).
4. These documentary films were *Contact* (2010) and *First Footprints* (2013). Dean suggested that his inspiration for making a feature film in Tanna originated from an earlier visit fourteen years earlier, to make a documentary film about the violent clash between John Frum movement supporters and the rival prophet Fred Nasse, leader of a breakaway Christian sect. This screened on SBS TV’s *Dateline* program in Australia in 2004 (Jolly, 2018).
5. He also mentioned Dziga Vertov, Russian filmmaker, theorist and practitioner of cinema verité as an influence.
6. Additional clips on the DVD of Tanna show the massive destruction to houses and gardens by Cyclone Pam. The green screen around the Yakel ceremonial ground is ripped open and the landscape devastated.
7. A reviewer noted an early precursor in the local screening of films made by Martin and Osa Johnson in the archipelago then called New Hebrides/Nouvelles-Hébrides (see Lindstrom, 2016).
8. There are 110 indigenous languages in Vanuatu, and several on Tanna..
9. The Oscar for Best Foreign Language film in 2017 went to *The Salesman* directed by Asghar Farhadi (Iran).
10. This is a reference to photographer and filmmaker Kal Muller who in the 1960s and 1970s was a pervasive presence especially in *kastom* communities in Tanna, Malakula and Pentecost (see Jolly, 2016b). Dean observed that his early celebration of *kastom* and *kastom* clothes resonated with the path chosen by Yakel leaders (Jolly, 2018). Such *kastom* aesthetics have proved crucial for attracting tourists.
11. Bentley Dean insists that Nauvhal language was consistently spoken in Yakel and surrounds (perhaps unlike other parts of Tanna Lindstrom is more familiar with he suggested) and that there was no ‘excising’ of Bislama from dialogue in the making of the film (email to author July 13, 2018). He also noted that Bislama is little spoken by women in Yakel. Lindstrom suggested that the lack of code-switching may have been a matter of deliberate choice on the part of Yakel



people (email to author December 14, 2018). Both Butler and Dean also reflected on the fact that it was Yakel people who decided how they would daily dress for the film and that mobile phones as much as machetes have, though introduced products, been made their own. Butler in particular saw the debate about exoticism and romanticism as a curious scholarly preoccupation, proclaiming that Yakel is authentically different and indeed 'exotic' (Jolly, 2018).

12. Faderugao also deconstructs the image of Yakel as untouched: "In reality, Tanna is not as remote as it was before. Most of its inhabitants are already acquainted with modern utilities such as shopping stores and mobile phones. International tourists frequently flock the island and Yakel is a popular tourist site which is located near the town's centre", that is Lénakel (Faderugao, 2015).

13. In interview, Dean noted that they tried to avoid the comparison with *Romeo and Juliet* but that the media found the allusion irresistible. He also observed, as I do below, how the plots diverge significantly. Butler stressed how the story was 'amazing' insofar as arranged marriage was still being practised (Jolly, 2018).

14. Yet the story line, though similar apropos forbidden young love which is consummated but ends in a tragic joint suicide, diverges in significant ways. Juliet spurns her parents' proposal of marrying Paris. The romance between Romeo and Juliet is fraught because they come from rival, enemy noble families – the Montagues and the Capulets whereas Wawa and Dain are rather forbidden because they are lovers from the same place. Moreover, the joint suicide of Romeo and Juliet is not simultaneous, but rather the tragic result of Romeo presuming Juliet is dead since she is comatose from Friar Laurence's drug. Mistaking this for death, Romeo poisons himself, but Juliet awakens and, seeing him dead, commits suicide with a dagger. *Tanna* has none of Shakespeare's fraught suspensions and mortal misrecognitions. The suicide of Wawa and Dain is more mutual; they both ingest poisonous mushrooms and die lying together on the mouth of the volcano.

15. I do not have space to situate *Tanna* in the extensive debates about colonialism and cinema (but see Shohat and Stam, 1994) nor a broader history of cinematic representation of the Pacific (but see Landman and Ballard, 2010).

16. Butler in particular saw the preoccupation with exoticism and romanticism as a scholarly distraction, insisting that Yakel is authentically different and indeed 'exotic' (Jolly, 2018).

17. I thank Tim Rowse here for his comment on the habitus of scholarly asceticism which often precludes such avowals of sensual pleasure by authors.

18. This resonates with much recent anthropological discussion celebrating such alternative "ontologies". Compare this with the alarming adjudication: "Tanna is also evocative of the pre-enlightenment practice of deferring to a higher entity" (Herrschner and Cheer, 2018: 10). It is odd to impose such a Western chronology on Vanuatu and not to witness the continuing global power of religion in the twenty-first century.

19. He was chosen for the role by Yakel people because he was thought the most handsome young man.

20. I asked Dean about the challenges of filming near the volcano and he recalled that as he was trying to get the iconic shot of the lovers silhouetted against the red gashes of the volcano's lava on one occasion that it rained and his camera, unprotected at that point, was damaged by acid rain (Jolly, 2018).

21. Lindstrom (2015) speculates they are followers of prophet Fred Nasse; Dean rather suggests they are a separate splinter group. He said Yakel people simply called them 'Christians' (Jolly, 2018).

22. In his reading of this essay Tim Rowse reflected on how this evinces "the emotional burden of patriarchy" and the tension between the subject positions of being a group leader and an "emotionally-bonded kinsman".

23. The man we see in the film playing Wawa's grandfather Albie Nangia is in that photograph, as part of the delegation to see Prince Philip. He is a firm adherent of the Prince Philip movement. However, Dean noted that only some in Yakel believe these stories about Prince Philip; they are contested (Jolly, 2018).
24. Dean observed that Wawa elaborated and improvised in this scene, interrogating zealously as to whether the royal marriage was really about love (Jolly, 2018).
25. Dean stated at the start of our interview that the inspiration for the film was not the story itself which unfolded much later but the *process* of collaboration and co-creation. In this both Butler and Dean were influenced by their experiences with and the protocols developed for filming with Indigenous Australians (Jolly, 2018).
26. Herrschner and Cheer situate the film in terms of Said's *Orientalism* (1978), but a large literature analyses the differences between exoticism in the Middle East and the Pacific. Their critical analysis of exoticism is strangely at odds with their view that the film evinces "arguably primitive spiritualism and cosmologies embodied by the cast and dialogue" (2018: 8). Moreover, although they see this as an "inadvertent outcome", their claim that the film manifests "patronising and infantilising modes" and "suggests that the other ought to be shielded from change and modernity" is in my view remote from the film's emphasis on changing *kastom* from within.
27. It is a shame that the authors did not consider the insights of Greg Fry and Sanda Tarte (2015) on the new diplomacy in the Pacific, which discerns a fundamental shift in Australia's role in the region and potent new indigenous Oceanic regional fora.
28. Jonas Cullwick reported her speech in these terms (*Vanuatu Daily Post*, 3 March 2017): "The Australian High Commissioner, Ms. Jenny Da Rin, says Vanuatu might be a small country, but it has tremendous potential in tourism and can capture the world's attention. 'Tanna movie is an example of that – a brilliant Australia-Vanuatu collaboration, receiving support from Screen Australia to fund its development, produced by Australian Directors, Bentley Dean and Martin Butler, featuring an incredibly talented ni-Vanuatu cast and set in the spectacular scenery of Mt Yasur and the kastom village of Yakel on Tanna,' she said in her address to the opening of the 5<sup>th</sup> Australia Vanuatu Business Forum and Trade Expo at the Holiday Inn in Port Vila Tuesday."
29. I am grateful to Tim Rowse for pointing out this crucial aspect of the film and my argument.

## ABSTRACTS

There have been protracted debates about exoticism in representations of the Pacific, in anthropology, visual arts and the cinema. The film *Tanna*, created and filmed in the Vanuatu island of that name by Australian filmmakers Bentley Dean and Martin Butler has been both celebrated and criticised for its representation of the people and place of Vanuatu as exotic. Such adjudications have to confront the complexities of a film that is a co-creation between Australia and Vanuatu, that hovers between ethnographic realist and fictional cinematic imaginaries and simultaneously evokes a sense of distance and difference and a sense of the shared human reality of young love and tragic loss. This article offers an analysis of the film and its critical reception.

De nombreux débats portent sur les représentations de l'exotisme dans le Pacifique, que ce soit dans le domaine de l'anthropologie, des arts ou du cinéma. Le film *Tanna*, créé et filmé au Vanuatu, sur l'île du même nom, par les réalisateurs australiens Bentley Dean et Martin Butler, a

été à la fois applaudi et critiqué pour avoir présenté le Vanuatu et ses habitants comme exotiques. De tels jugements doivent tenir compte de la complexité de cette co-création australienne et ni-Vanuatu qui se situe dans un entre-deux flottant entre réalité ethnographique et fiction cinématographique, tout en évoquant un sentiment de distance et de différence, ainsi que les émotions partagées de la réalité humaine face à un jeune amour et une disparition tragique. Cet article propose donc une analyse du film et de son accueil critique.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Tanna, Vanuatu, exotisme, coutume, amour, docudrame

**Keywords:** Tanna, Vanuatu, exoticism, kastom, love, docudrama

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