

## DREAMS OF UNITY, TRADITIONS OF DIVISION

John Frum, *kastom* and inter-manipulation strategies as  
cultural heritage on Tanna (Vanuatu)

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### INTRODUCTION

Tanna is the most highly populated island (approximately 30 000 inhabitants) in Tafea, the southern province of the Republic of Vanuatu; formerly known as the New Hebrides, this archipelago has been an independent island state since 1980.<sup>1</sup> Geographically located halfway between the shores of New Caledonia and Port Vila, the country's capital on the island of Efate, Tanna, stands at the cultural crossroads between these two areas. Despite the constant flow of Tannese migrants towards Port Vila, they are renowned among other ni-Vanuatu fellow citizens for having maintained strong traditions on their home island. However, like many other Pacific island communities, they have been consistently manipulated since the period of first contacts by traders, settlers, missionaries and colonial delegates, as well as anthropologists. By manipulation I mean that these intruders were exerting their influence over indigenous peoples with the aim of exploiting their manpower, alienating their land and converting, knowing and dominating them. However, Tannese have never bowed their heads. To quote the historian Ron Adams,

The history of the first century of European contact with Tanna is the story not only of the incorporation of the Tannese into the world of the European, but also of the Tannese attempts to establish control over the European and to exploit the world he brought with him (1984:22).

Indeed, in modern times, Tannese have never been manipulators any less than the manipulated. In the second half of the nineteenth century, they set the traders in opposition to the missionaries and then, half a century later, the colonial delegates in opposition to the missionaries. In the 1930s they supported the Adventist and Catholic missionaries against the Presbyterians, during the Second World War the US army authorities

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<sup>1</sup> The New Hebrides were colonized by both the British and French. The two countries eventually signed an agreement making the islands an Anglo-French Condominium, which lasted from 1906 until 1980, when the New Hebrides gained independence as Vanuatu. Under the Condominium there were three separate governments: one French, one British and a joint administration. The Condominium divided the New Hebrides into two separate communities: one Anglophone, the other Francophone. This divide has continued even after independence, with schools teaching in one language or the other, and with different political parties.

against the Condominium authorities, and later on the French against the British. Still today, they make use of French or Neo-Caledonian neo-colonial influences to try to counter domination by Australian or Chinese traders, they join new churches when old ones lose their strength, they collaborate with greedy businessmen or foreign companies with the hope of restoring the power of the customary chiefs and some Tannese have even adopted Islam recently to reinforce the powers of *kastom*.<sup>2</sup>

I use the term 'manipulation' with reference to Jon Fraenkel's book "The manipulation of custom" (2004). Fraenkel argues that any comprehensive description of the on-going crises of the nation state in the Solomon Islands should insist on the role played by ideological appeals to 'Melanesian custom' (otherwise spelt 'kastom' by Melanesians as well as by anthropologists) by national politicians and provincial leaders in order to support or to threaten the country's stability.<sup>3</sup> However, in these neo-traditional methods of avoiding or settling social and political conflicts,

there existed no unitary point of cultural reference [...] Custom was inevitably re-moulded, redefined and selectively styled to meet these new and unfamiliar circumstances. And since there was scope for designing custom, there was also space for manipulation (Fraenkel 2004:10–11) [...] [Introduced modernity] has been deeply and irreversibly absorbed, and has become as much part of perceived custom as that which has some formal continuity with age-gold culture (Fraenkel 2004:12).

Such political use of cultural references for hegemonic purposes might have been experimented with by Melanesians in different ways prior to their contacts with Europeans. Generalised attitudes of conspiracy by one group against another, the hidden interference of two-faced go-betweens, recurrent splits occasioned by intra-group divisions – all these strategies belong to a larger political culture and cultural heritage which cannot be reduced to secular appeals to the notion of *kastom*. Sometimes qualifying themselves as 'strong heads', Tannese generally come to terms with the idea that a shared feeling of keeping united despite their divisions and oppositions is quite relevant to their very own mentality. It is a common cultural attitude for them to agree stubbornly over their structural disagreements.

If the fateful consequences of manipulation are acknowledged within the scope of traditional social relations, they nonetheless coexist with a longstanding island desire for an impossible unity. Though they might have already existed in pre-colonial Tannese society, these disintegrative tendencies should now be analysed through the conjunction of traditional social principles and outside global forces that both support and

<sup>2</sup> Personal interviews with Tannese community leaders who have converted to Islam (Tanna, Middle Bush, 2008). See also Zocca (2006:258–259).

<sup>3</sup> Since 1998 ethnic violence, government misconduct and crime have undermined stability and civil society in the Solomon Islands. In June 2003, an Australian-led multinational force, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), arrived to restore peace and disarm the ethnic militias.

undermine whatever island political unities might be achieved. In this modern context, reciprocal influence, dialectic exploitation or mutual encompassment invariably take the shape of inter-cultural manipulations.<sup>4</sup> New influences (church, politics, business) introduce new ways of dividing and engendering further social segmentation, when not already class oppositions. But the cultural challenge imposed by strengthening acculturative pressures also gives rise to new attempts to achieve a certain political unity that cuts across local divisions.

The history of the John Frum movement, renowned in anthropological literature as an outstanding example of a cargo cult, provides useful insights into this issue of struggling for unity while at the same time reshaping existing divisions.<sup>5</sup> In the context of colonial and post-colonial domination, the cultural strategies displayed by this indigenous movement represent neither the product of exotic 'cultures of resistance' nor just the fateful importation of a modern capitalist model of exploitation. They should rather be considered as 'patterns of resistance' within small-scale Pacific cultures that are confronted with rapid and drastic social change (Sahlins 1992). As in Fraenkel's example, the political use of cultural 'patterns of resistance' in Tanna is also constantly framed in the language of *kastom*, the difference here being that the continuity being claimed is not just related to the ancient culture of a golden age, but also connected with a new golden age which is just arriving and taking the form of a syncretistic kind of parousia: the expected return of John Frum as a newly praised cultural hero.

The aim of this paper is to explore how the millenarian legacy on Tanna has been turned into a tradition which can be called 'Johnfrumism'. The John Frum movement has demonstrated its propensity to re-imagine the metaphysical dream of unity in the course of its confrontation with hostile global influences, though its Tannese followers never succeeded in achieving a greater and more sustainable political unity. Oppositional evocations of local *kastom* have even served to complicate that purpose. My descriptions of an impressive millenarian revival in Tanna will provide an opportunity to question the historical continuity of cargo movements like the John Frum cult. These ethnographic updates also encourage us to rethink Peter Worsley's (1957) and Jean Guiart's (1951) original functionalist accounts of cargo cults and Melanesian social movements as instituting new social unities. Finally, in my conclusion I will discuss the cultural contributions of John Frum's millenarianism to current Tannese representations of temporality.

<sup>4</sup> On the occasion of a meeting held to discuss political and land problems in Tanna, a chief of White Sands explained the very reason for many present troubles in the following way: 'Before, Marc, you know, every time we had serious problems, the white man stood behind with the intention of tricking us, while he was considering us as not mere than stupid bush men (*man bus*). But today, many problems don't originate anymore from the white men, but from our own children. It was a huge sacrifice for us to pay their school fees and to send them away to find good jobs. And now when they come back to Tanna, they try to trick us, like white man before, while considering us as stupid bush men'.

<sup>5</sup> On the great return of millenarian and cargo cults as themes to the anthropological scene, see Lindstrom (1993a), Dalton (2000), Jebens (2004), and Tabani (2007).

## FIELDWORK CHRONICLE

In order to complete my Ph.D. thesis, between 1994 and 2000,<sup>6</sup> I spent twelve months conducting fieldwork in Vanuatu, mainly based on the island of Tanna. My doctoral research was primarily focused on the traditionalist implications of the discourses and neo-traditional practices of the followers of the John Frum movement. In 1994, this politico-religious movement was released from a period of severe control and political discrimination by the nationalist and authoritarian government of PM Father Walter Lini (1980–1991), which had lasted for eleven years (Tabani 2000, 2002). I therefore tried to assess the folkloric directions in which the John Frum movement has been engaged hitherto. My initial findings underscored the ideological dimension of the constant appeal to *kastom*, as well as local ways of instrumentalizing it in opposition to the official *kastom* of the state.

For a time before 2000, I used to consider the John Frum movement as strongly threatened by its conversion into a spectacle, its commercialisation and other basic political manipulations. At that time, self-reflexive ideas about concepts like ‘cargo’, ‘cult’, and ‘millenarianism’ became a reflex for me, with terms like ‘Cargo carnival’ and ‘Cargo horror’ ringing in my head (Lindstrom 2000). But after 2 May 2000, when Lake Siwi in east Tanna destroyed the Sulphur Bay village which was the ‘Cargo headquarters’,<sup>7</sup> and during all the events that followed, I had to stop dealing with ‘Cargo stories’ and to concentrate on full-time ethnographic observation instead. It was not even Cargo anymore that I had to deal with, but almost the Vailala Madness, i.e., prophecies convincing thousands of peoples and leading them to social action, the construction of airstrips to wait for Cargo planes, collective trances or hallucinations, belief in the ritual ‘return’ of the dead, the sudden breakdown or suspension of the existing leadership system, and radical attacks on established *kastom*.<sup>8</sup>

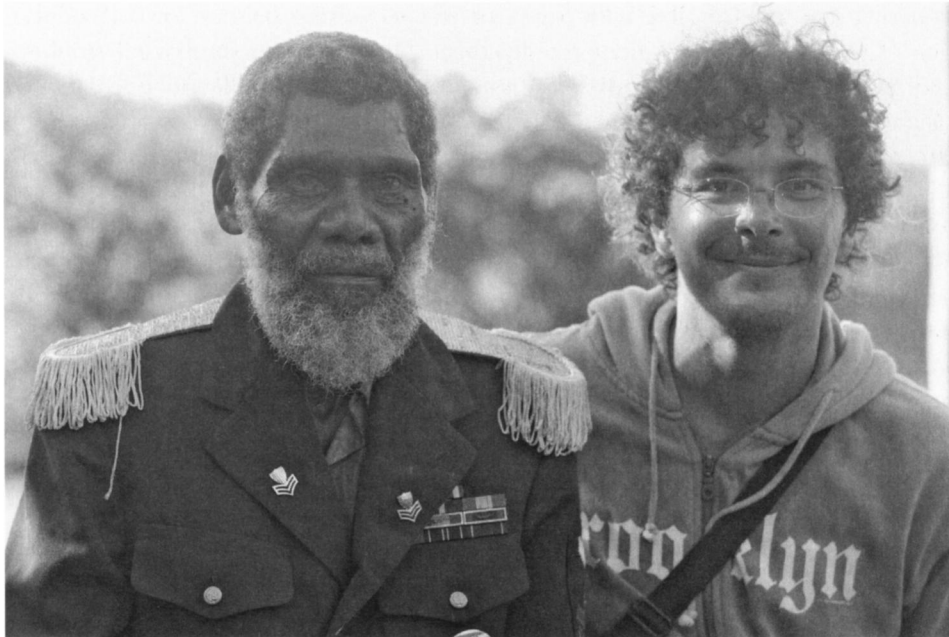
Being well acquainted with the social context, and having befriended the main leaders of the John Frum movement in the Sulphur Bay, Port-Resolution and White Sands area, I was locally appointed a privileged observer of different cultic movements

<sup>6</sup> October to December 1994, October to November 1995, August to September 1996, February to March 1999, January to March 2000

<sup>7</sup> The Siwi was the sole real lake in Tanna, others being only ponds. During the rainy season from November 1999 to February 2000, the level of Siwi Lake rose so high that it burst its banks like a natural dike and drained into the sea. Ipike village (Sulphur Bay) was severely damaged by the complete draining of the lake. Now all that remains of Siwi is a black volcanic plain covered in grass.

<sup>8</sup> The Vailala Madness was a millenarian movement that started in the Papuan Gulf at the end of the 1910s. Well documented by the Australian government anthropologist Francis Edgar Williams (1923), the exuberant mythical and ritual developments of that movement have made it known as one of the most famous cargo cults in the anthropological literature. Since my descriptions sometimes sounded too fantastic for some of my French anthropologist colleagues, I felt the necessity to use my abundant video footage and to produce a documentary film witnessing my field experience in order not to seem like an Oceanist Carlos Castaneda (see Tabani 2005).

(Fred Nase, Joe Keidu, Prophet Karis) that have grown up in the wake of this millenarian fever. Over the last nine years, I have completed fifteen months of further fieldwork in Vanuatu.<sup>9</sup> My recent research focuses primarily on the revival of cultic activities by the John Frum movement on Tanna. This paper relies partly on some of the materials collected during that period.<sup>10</sup>



Chief Isak Wan, leader of the Sulphur Bay branch of the John Frum movement and Marc Tabani (Lamakara, 15 February 2008; photo: Ulla Lohmann)

#### *CONFLICTING IDENTITIES AND MILLENARIAN UNITY IN TANNA*

The anthropologist Jean Guiart (1956) has described social organisation in Tanna as fraught with strong trends towards 'atomism'. In respect of hierarchy, he adds that the number of chiefly titles is so high that a majority of men could claim to be chief. For a tribal society, he argues that social organisation in Tanna offers the paradoxical image

<sup>9</sup> October to November 2002, February to April 2004, October 2006, January to June 2008, November to December 2008

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller survey of my ethnographic data, see Tabani (2008a).

of a 'reign of individualism'.<sup>11</sup> Since colonial times, the politics of inter-manipulation, which was initially intended to cope with internal processes of fragmentation, have gone through a continuous reshaping or disruption of older dualistic social divisions to make them fit in with contemporary cultural and political challenges.

Pre-colonial antagonisms between encompassing ceremonial and war moieties, called *numurukwen* and *koyometa*, lost their efficiency when, upon the arrival of missionaries, they were replaced with pagan (or *kastom*) versus Christian (or *skul*) opposition.<sup>12</sup> Other kinds of opposition preceded them, like the *man bus* (bush men), stubborn and hostile inland dwellers versus the *man solwara*, the hospitable and open-minded inhabitants of the seashore. Latter, in the 1970s, these initial oppositions became a full part of the new national political game: *kastom* and John Frum followers, hostile to a hasty independence, supported the francophone moderate parties, whereas the Presbyterian nationalist Anglophones of the Vanuaaku Pati opted for immediate independence (MacClancy 1980, Tabani 2002). While Guiart (1983) is quite ambiguous about the supposed continuity in the succession of these dualistic oppositions and Bonnemaïson (1987) is quite affirmative about them, Lamont Lindstrom (1990), Ron Brunton (1989) and other anthropologists are more inclined to argue that there is a series of disjunctions within these oppositions, a 'replacement rather than outgrowth of the one before' (Lindstrom 1990:189).

The dualist view of conflicting identities that the Tannese experimented with in the pre-colonial past became a historical product through the systematisation of local alliances with outside or foreign powers. To invoke Knut Rio's (2007) perspective on social ontology and agency on Ambrym, I would say that, on Tanna, since the period of European contact, these local conflicting identities have also been defined with reference to a third party: the foreigners or *nipitoga*.<sup>13</sup> This third party, or outside agency, reconfigures divisions of the past in accordance with contemporary, antagonist claims of identity. This mediation between local divisions and conflicting identities through an outside power became the fate of the Tannese *kastom*. *Kastom* in Tanna is fraught with the memory of older splits, but it also provides an antidote to processes of fragmenta-

<sup>11</sup> Guiart (1956:115; translation M.T.). Brunton (1989) also lays stress on the almost anarchistic nature of Tanna society in the post-contact period (1847–1910).

<sup>12</sup> Words in italics are from two languages among those currently used in Tanna: the Nefe vernacular of the Southern Kwamera area and Bislama, the Pidgin English of Vanuatu.

<sup>13</sup> 'Thirdness is here not meant as a middle term between people, but as a constitutive force both in the constitution of persons and relations [...] There is the recognition of social forces outside of Ambrym, such as foreign Church agencies, agencies of the state, colonial landowners, that directly have effects on Ambrymese relationship [...] there is a constant nomination of outsiders, witnesses and strangers for influencing essential relations of production' (Rio 2007:28). – Used to refer to foreigners and Westerners, etymologically the word 'nipitoga' may mean 'people from the Southeast' (since *natoga* and *uritoga* are names for south-easterly winds) or people from Tonga, because Tonga is certainly roughly located in that direction (Lindstrom, personal communication). The southwest Imwarem (ceremonial dancing place or *nakamal* in Bislama) in the village of Port Resolution is called Samoa.

tion. Tannese are indebted to outside influences (John Frum, the Americans, the French and others) for having saved *kastom*, even if different John Frum and other Tannese traditionalist groups never acknowledge one and the same saviour. In brief, Tannese still stay strongly united concerning the fundamental principles on which their inner divisions are based.

In Tanna, constant processes of segmentation do not exclude the metaphysical expectation that all the Tannese should be united or, in accordance with some cosmogonical myths, of reuniting them again. Tannese are otherwise a very united community in exile. In Port Vila, for example, they usually express deep feelings of common belonging. Within this framework of a constant balance between the realities of divisions and spiritual or ideological aspirations for union, the shared cultural heritage of the Tannese incorporates the experience of inter-cultural manipulations.

The John Frum cult, the famous millenarian politico-religious movement already mentioned, which began at the end of the 1930s in Tanna, provides a good illustration of these inter-manipulation strategies. At different periods in its already long history, cult leaders and inspired followers have produced new sets of symbolical representations in order to make use of foreigner's hegemony as a symbol in order to gain local control over inter-group divisions (Tabani 2008a). Both ritual and political means have been applied in order to revive Tannese *kastom* and to place that revival at the core of a shared cultural heritage.

John Frum, a singular and ambiguous cultural hero, is identified as a foreigner, but it is also supposed that he has existed since the creation of Tanna and should preside until the end of time. The vision of John's second coming confers on his cult one of its most millenarian aspects. It has also given birth to rich syncretistic representations. John Frum is considered to be a man unlike any other man and at the same time to be a spirit overwhelming all the other traditional spirits. White and dressed in a Western manner, although also speaking Tannese languages, Frum succeeded in attracting many participants from outside the south-western district of Green Point, the original birthplace of the John Frum cult. With the beginning of a very brutal seventeen-year-long colonial repression (1940–1957), John's messages became more and more radical in denouncing the colonial authorities and also gave rise to fabulous predictions. If the colonial masters and church disciples had come close to eradicate pre-colonial customs in the first decades of the twentieth century, it was now the beginning of the end of their power that Frum proclaimed. John's second coming should coincide with the radical transformation of the existing world: people would stop dying and neither would they have to continue working, while they would receive back all the goods formerly stolen from them by the white ancestors in a distant mythical past. Even antagonisms between blacks and whites would cease to exist with the advent of this Melanesian style parousia (O'Reilly 1949).

## KASTOM, JOHN FRUM AND DREAMS OF UNITY ON TANNA

Another distinctive aspect of the John Frum cult is what I would call the invention of the 'salvage of *kastom*' ('Jon hemi bin savem kastom' is a fairly unanimous motto among the communities of Tanna). Placed between a rock – the Mission – and a hard place – the colonial administration authorities – *kastom* has been seen by the Tannese, as well as by pre-war anthropologists such as Speiser (1923) and Humphreys (1926), as totally dying out. Nevertheless, the mobilisation of all *man Tanna* has allegedly managed to save it, even at the price of the sacrifice of several pre-colonial elements, of a synchronic readjustment of some of its functional aspects, and of a conceptual reframing of *kastom* as an encompassing objectified whole. This theme is no less millenarian than that of John's second coming. In fact, the two sets of myths converge. Frum is currently represented as the saviour of Tanna's *kastom*. He also appeared to provide guarantees for the future of *kastom*, whose adaptation to new realities is seen as a prerequisite for his return (Tabani 2008a). This ultimate event will include a radical transfiguration of *kastom* itself. In this way, John and *kastom* became the *alpha* and *omega* of the local process of adaptation to modernity (Lindstrom 1982).

There is a very important socio-political dimension to Frum's first apparitions, which gave rise to complex forms of ritual organisation known as the 'Jonfrum muvmen'. More impressive than John's incredible messages were in fact the amazing meetings organised in his honour. Held in the south-western part of the island, at Green Point, before they were prohibited and suppressed by colonial authorities, they made it possible for all the Big Men from all over the island to gather together. Christian and pagan groups, traditional rival groups, supporters of and future opponents of John Frum, all joined to dance with great fervour and shared in the kava-drinking ritual.<sup>14</sup> Through these large assemblies, most dignitaries implicitly or explicitly expressed their opposition to the government, which had banned pagan dances, and to the church, which had forbidden kava. In the context of these major sociological events, people came to share *hic et nunc* a new form of unity, which was grounded in the manner of a performative ritual.

Such unity was virtually unknown on Tanna since the cosmogonical times called *nepro*, at which stone ancestors are said to have given birth to present-day humankind. Since that time, groups were divided and fought against each other for traditional reasons, until colonisation reshaped controversial intra-island borders. In an early article, the anthropologist Jean Poirier called Melanesian cargo cults 'mouvements de libération mythique' (1949:97). But we should add that this mythical liberation was not only oriented against colonial oppression, but also against peoples' own pre-colonial divi-

<sup>14</sup> Kava is a narcotic drink made from the roots of the shrub *Piper methysticum* that was initially used only for ceremonies and communing with the spirits. Forbidden by the Presbyterian missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century, the freedom to drink it became one of the main claims of John Frum and customary groups on Tanna.



sions and traditional myths, which before had usually been used to legitimate this state of perpetual antagonism.

This spontaneous unity among all *man Tanna* had a short life span. It lasted until May 1941, when suddenly groups from all over the island left the churches as one man and on the same day. Since the beginning of the Pacific war, the John Frum movement introduced real transformations in its doctrine and organisation. Progressively, towards the end of the 1930s, the major influence zone and dynamics of the cultic movement changed from the villages on the south-west coast to those on the east coast. The village of Sulphur Bay became a ritual headquarters. In that period, villages from that area were subjected to strong Christian influences. They became strongholds of 'Tanna law', a very oppressive and dictatorial missionary regime that attempted to wipe out most aspects of traditional culture. A new motto emerged, according to which John Frum was Roosevelt's friend, and the US Army would come to the New Hebrides to save Tanna's people and traditions from the nasty Condominium regime.

Christian-educated leaders from the east coast started to reintroduce forgotten principles of *kastom*. In doing so, they radically adapted *kastom* to Christian ideas. According to the followers of the Sulphur Bay branch of his movement, John Frum left his children behind. Dressed up as US-Marines, they were called 'cowboys' (*kaobo*). Red crosses were erected for them on consecrated altars, and they could be communicated with through wirelasses or flower telephones. Ships, planes or, during the Cold War, submarines were actively expected, and airstrips were built. The cult leaders, their captains and their guards still wear old US uniforms on special occasions, organise drills, wave different flags and paint the letters 'USA' in red letters on their chests and backs.<sup>15</sup>

The Sulphur Bay branch of the John Frum movement had even greater success than the original one. At great ceremonial events it was able to mobilise up to two thirds of the island's population. Most of the pagan groups of the north and centre of the island were affected by the influences of these ex-Christian or neo-pagan groups and the diffusion of their syncretistic beliefs and prophecies. Only the groups in the south-west, to which belonged the founders of the John Frum movement, have never integrated its Sulphur Bay branch, refusing to join the new fangled dances and guitar music bands or to sing reinvented Christian hymns.

The Sulphur Bay movement improved its organisation and developed its doctrine. But when it became more permanent and acquired ever greater power and influence over Tanna's communities, it started to split into a great number of sections, for internal doctrinal reasons as well as because of its inability to sustain this newly acquired hegemony through a united leadership. Inside the main branch of the John Frum movement, the followers of the Black Cross, a symbol of *kastom*, started to distinguish them-

<sup>15</sup> These practices started in 1957, when one of the movement's prophets was released from jail, and are still followed, since I was able to observe them in 1999, 2000, 2004 and 2008.

selves from the followers of the Red Cross, a symbol of John's blood and a memorial to the John Frum believers who belonged to the Presbyterian church. In the north, John Frum's followers founded the Kastom John group, which was fully *kastom*-oriented. The Monday Monday group, called by this name for having chosen Monday as a day of worship, wanted to return to John Frum's original message (Bonnemaison 1987). For their part, Prince Philip cultists think that all other groups got things wrong in not recognizing John Frum's true identity as the Duke of Edinburgh (Bailys 2005).

#### SECESSIONISM ON TANNA AND NATION-BUILDING IN VANUATU

In the decade prior to Vanuatu's independence in 1980, a new collective will to create an island-wide unity manifested itself again. A new branch of the John Frum movement called FORCONA ('four corners') tried to federate all groups in a party called UTA (Union des Travailleurs Autochtones) and to proclaim the independence of the 'Tanna nation'.<sup>16</sup> A self-proclaimed King of Tanna, Antoine Fornelli, tried to produce an insurrectionary atmosphere among John Frum groups to facilitate support for French colonial positions. After his failed attempt at secession and his own arrest, he admitted that his actions had been suggested to him by French local delegate M. Pouillet (Bonnemaison 1987). According to Bonnemaison, 'his aims have always clearly been political. His goal was to counter the influence of the nationalist Vanuaaku Pati by building up a "customary party"' (1987:444; translation M.T.). Guiart's affirmations are quite more accusative: 'The main idea [of those who sent Fornelli] was to transform the people of Tanna into Harkis [the pro-French indigenous militia during the war of Algerian independence], by furnishing them with weapons so that they could defend white settlers'.<sup>17</sup> This movement failed because the colonial manipulations which gave it its initial impulse were not in line with the fragmentary directions of the John Frum ritual organisation.

Since the 1970s, John Frum's followers have been engaged in a struggle against Christian nationalist elites. John Frum, as a non-customary indigenous movement (led by the indigenous desire to transcend traditional divisions) became the guardian of an objectified *kastom*, an encompassing *kastom* that has only a little to do with pre-colonial traditions. But those to whom Tannese *kastom* was opposed were the former Anglophone and Presbyterian politicians of the leading nationalist party, regarded locally as having completely given up the ancestral spirituality linked to this concept of *kastom*.

<sup>16</sup> A Corsican Frenchman called Antoine Fornelli imagined this symbolism, which has now been indigenised. UTA was reinterpreted as 'Union Tanna-America' (Guiart 1975). Fornelli, an enigmatic individual and a kind of unskilled Bob Denart (one of the most famous and influential French mercenaries since World War II), was a former colonial fighter in Indochina, who migrated to the New Hebrides at the beginning of the 1970s. The FORCONA name and the symbol of the cross was taken from the label of a corned beef tin.

<sup>17</sup> Guiart (1983:163; translation M.T.). See also Calvert (1978).

in Tannese representations. Under the hegemony of the John Frum movement in pre-independence days, Tanna's *kastom* was basically used as a prominent symbol of an exclusive, non-shared local identity (Tabani 2002).

After a failed attempt to stage a rebellion in Tanna just before Vanuatu's independence in July 1980, the John Frum movement came back to its primary goal, its role as a safe-keeper of *kastom*. But its situation was again a difficult one, as in the early colonial period. The movement was challenged by new nationalist elites and official church leaders as a 'false kastom' manipulated by colonialists and opposed to the sole 'true kastom', the 'kastom blong God'. Its followers were officially presented as 'showing weakness in their adaptation capacities to modernity and Western influence' (Lini 1980). The national government claimed that its support for development programs in Tanna would be vain if the inhabitants of that island could not abandon the idea that everything was free or would not stop their votes being influenced by dreams and legends (Naunun, Sel, and Nakat 1995).

The political situation changed in 1991 with the electoral victory of the Union of Moderate Parties and the pro-Francophone coalition. Since then, the John Frum movement has progressively been recognised for its struggle in defending native *kastom* during the colonial period. At present, its followers are currently officially presented as forerunners of the contemporary political programme promoting state *kastom* at the national level. So, like *kastom*, John Frum became a full part of the 'national cultural heritage'. At the end of 1990s, the John Frum movement even acquired ideological legitimacy by having one minister nominated in the national government. During that period, it seemed to be engaged in a neo-traditionalist phase. Its cultural practices were increasingly folklorised and sold out to tour operators, filmmakers and journalists. The rural exodus grew stronger, and Western influences had a greater impact on rural outer-island communities than ever before.

#### THE YEAR 2000 CANOE

The advent of the year 2000 had a detrimental impact on the Tannese. The strong emergence of new churches, a thoroughly bad economical situation and the past experience of millenarianism had led many villages to speak about the end of the world. In east Tanna, the Sulphur Bay branch of the John Frum movement was especially receptive to this millenarian agenda. The increasing disappearance of most of the first and second generation of John Frum leaders was accompanied by strong conflicts over the succession. A major split occurred within the movement. Under the impact of two Presbyterian Church leaders, a young John Frum follower called Fred Nase was promoted to a prophetic role. He predicted the disaster of the Siwi Lake (see footnote 7). But the catastrophe was much stronger than expected: the lake disappeared in just one night and provoked massive population displacements throughout the island. Hundreds of people

converged in the direction of the destroyed village of Sulphur Bay. Fred announced to them the imminent end of the world. With this prediction, people started to build the so-called New Jerusalem village on Yenekahi ridge, and to organise the so-called year 2000 canoe: a new Noah's arch so that Fred's followers could sail to paradise. Some other new millenarian movements emerged in the wake of Fred's movement.



Emblem of the Fred Nase branch of the John Frum movement (Port-Resolution, 2008; Photo: Marc Tabani)

Fred Nase and his followers, like their John Frum forefathers in 1939, have concerned themselves with a total renovation of *kastom*, church and law: 'Keep what is good in the custom, the church and the law, throw back what they have of bad' (Fred Nase, personal interview 2002). Inspired by the spirit of 'Jesus-John' to fight against all other kinds of spirits, Fred's revelation gave him the mission to join together John Frum spirituality, Christian faith and *kastom* beliefs and to bring people together again within a latter-day movement. Its principal mottoes are: no work (Jesus-John will provide people with food in abundance), no school (there will be neither rich nor poor, and money will lose its power), and no doctors (all sick and old people will 'change their skins like crabs', and every

last follower will become immortal). Active dances that lead to collective trances are the means suggested by Jesus-John to see the truth and to detect who is a sinner.<sup>18</sup> Sinners are obliged to change their behaviour and to follow Jesus-John's moral principles, which require people to rebuild Noah's arch and to stay in the New Jerusalem (field-work observations, 2002–2004).

The process of the reinterpretation of myths and the innovation of rituals initiated by this movement is still much too active to be summarised in a single paper (see Tabani 2008a). The most important characteristic of this very large millenarian revival is Fred's followers' obsession with creating a new unity among the Tannese while reappraising very seriously their established cultural heritage. They officially call their ritual organisation a 'movement of unity', and its leaders are known as 'doctors of unity'. However,

<sup>18</sup> Possessed women are called 'glas' by Fred's followers, because the 'spirit' can supposedly detect through them all the 'sins' they have committed. Since possession does not seem to be a traditional (pre-colonial) practice, Pentecostal influences appear to be evident, as in the case of the *glas meri* in Papua New Guinea. See Leavitt's reference to the role of *glas meri* in his analysis of "The psychology of consensus in a Papua New Guinea Christian revival movement" (2001:162). See also Lohman (2003).



Prophet Fred Nase at a meeting (Ipëkël, 2004; photo: Marc Tabani)

this proclaimed unity seems to have nothing to do with organisational improvements. Fred's goal is mainly eschatological. John Frum's work is seen as a unifying symbol. Millenarian reassertion of the myth of unity exclusively relies on John's parousia to set free all believers instantaneously from all kinds of past divisions and from every new form of inequality and oppression. In a very short time, Fred succeeded in bringing together around a third of Tanna's inhabitants. One of the consequences of his success is to have stimulated rival movements. After a peak of mobilisation of its followers, rival groups started to create new lines of

division on almost a daily basis, each side claiming for itself the exclusive capacity to unify all Tannese.

#### *UNITY AND NATIONALISM*

One cannot explain such a revival by using the same arguments as those employed by anthropologists to comment on the first appearance of John Frum's movement. For former anthropologists, myths like Frum's were intended to generate new forms of collective identity. From their point of view, ritual means to ascertain identity were doomed to be overtaken by new modes of pragmatic action and rational organisation. Cultic contest emanating from 'pre-rational' politico-religious movements would dissolve during the political process of decolonisation and nation-building. Peter Worsley (1957), who, with Jean Guiart (1951), was one of the main propagators of this argument, adds to his thesis that the factor of 'proto-nationalism' in Melanesian post-contact societies sums up a process of integration or centralization encompassing different traditionally non-united social groups. According to Worsley, this federative process is central to the dynamics of most Melanesian pre-World War II politico-religious indigenous movements. Historically, their rationality is supposed to lie in their becoming (Kilani 1983), in their transformation into bureaucratic forms of organisation and unification. This ineluctable process of secularisation, which leads from lower class religions to anti-colonialism, should also open the way to the invention of a wider identity based on shared feelings of a community of culture.

This proto-nationalist theory, formerly used to explain different sorts of indigenous movements usually classified as 'cargo cults', is contradicted by the facts. It is a matter of fact that the observed direction of most of these movements since the World War II period went from immediate political reaction (disobedience to colonial and mission domination) to sophisticated religious changes. The more virulent the initial spon-

taneous opposition (seen as irrational by a former generation of anthropologists), the more prolific and complex the syncretistic processes that succeeded to it and extended it. Currently, in Tanna, political innovations are mostly seen as socially disintegrative, while religious innovations are generally considered integrative (Tabani 2002:121). According to the proto-nationalist theory, Melanesian millenarian movements are specific to colonial contexts; thus, their future should be examined in continuity with post-independence nationalist claims.

John Frum and other cargo cults have shown that such movements have generally been opposed to nationalism, to the centralisation of power and to national integration. Of course, one can find some similarities between cargo cults and manifestations of state nationalism. Lindstrom, for example, noted that:

Like cults, the new states organise and attempt to regulate bodily experience by means of parades, military drilling, hygienic public health and anti-Aids campaigns, and national sports competition. Like cults, the new states institute novel regularities of space and time in the form of national capitals/headquarters, flag bedecked parliament houses and other ritual centres, and state holidays. And like cults, the states demand both national harmony and unity (1993b:507).

However, one cannot infer a sociological equivalence from similarities between the integrative scope of indigenous movements on the one hand and the nation-building assimilation model on the other, nor can a shared ideology be identified; the continuity between both models of social construction is not obvious. The amalgamation of cargo cult, *kastom* and national cultures does not present any evidence of historical continuity. Frequently, when national political leaders promote the idea of national integration and community harmony, their speeches are filled with mythological and messianic metaphors; during their electoral meetings they promise Cargo symbols and then proceed to ritualised rice distributions. Producing miracles and preparing cult followers for salvation are usual activities for Cargo prophets, but these goals do not fit in well with modern politicians' official statements, nor are they a requirement for state leaders' legitimacy. Unfulfilled Cargo prophesies do not weaken the faith of cultic movements' followers: the millenarian hopes they raise are just postponed, unlike 'false electoral promises', which are publicly denounced as political propaganda or corruption and can provoke social protest and civil riots.

A recent tendency for national politicians is to claim for themselves some oppositional aspects of the legacy of cargo cults. It is remarkable that, if the proto-nationalist analysis of cargo cults has lost much of its explanatory efficiency, it is still used politically by ni-Vanuatu political leaders. Barack Sope, for example, former co-founder of the nationalist Vanuaku Pati and later of the Vanuatu Republic, was one of the most virulent opponents of cargo and indigenous movements (especially the John Frum movement in Tanna and the Nagriamel movement in the northern part of the archipelago). He largely contributed to the imprisonment of Jimmy Stevens, leader of the Nagriamel movement

and instigator of a secessionist rebellion, for eleven years (Tabani, 2008b), though in 1991 Sope's National United Party concluded a political alliance with the Nagriamel. When he was appointed Prime Minister in 1999, Barack Sope attended the annual ceremonies of the John Frum movement in Tanna that followed. The talk he gave in the village of Sulphur Bay asserted a convergence between the rebel movement and his own political ideology:

The constitution of Vanuatu declares clearly that there is enough space left under the sun of Vanuatu for all of our customs, or for the John Frum movement or for the Nagriamel movement, or for any movement or organisation. And any movement has the right to go on. Everybody has the right to follow them, as well as to vote, to go to school, to use roads or to go to the hospital. The constitution is the guarantee for these rights and everybody must respect it.

I came for the first time to Sulphur Bay when I was at the university, writing my book, to speak with Mweles and some other old leaders of the John Frum movement. In these times, the Vanuaaku Pati didn't exist and neither did the National United Party nor any other political party. No one but the John Frum and Nagriamel movements were yet present. And in those times, these old peoples had already spoken about independence, about this independence which has become our present (personal recording 15 February 2000).

In any case, if today's nationalist representations of the nation in Melanesia use and abuse a reinterpreted tradition along with other essentialised symbols of the past, it has proved more difficult to assimilate syncretistic religious imagination inspired by millenarian movements. Presbyterian Church leaders, for example, first tried to influence Fred Nase's movement, initially motivated by a desire of revenge against the John Frum movement, which, sixty years before, had given a fatal blow to the Presbyterian mission in Tanna. They thought up a Church-driven cargo cult and opposed it to embedded John Frum traditions. This operation worked too well: the Church leaders who had wanted to rechristianise the John Frum groups were in fact themselves 'Johnfrumised'. Because of the heterodoxies of their beliefs and rituals, they lost the protection of their church hierarchy and of Edward Natapei, the Presbyterian first minister. In May 2003, the greatest police operation ever organised in Vanuatu since independence severely repressed Fred Nase and his supporters, demonstrating a genuine affiliation with the authoritarian and repressive manners of their colonial forerunners.

If it does not make sense to speak about proto-nationalism, could movements like John Frum be characterised as micro-nationalisms instead? After all, they handle state symbols (government, flags, headquarters and uniforms), and their leaders declare themselves ready to die for their *kastom*. Nevertheless, the charismatic power that is their cement is mostly expressed in religious terms. Theirs are nativisms that largely focus on millenarian hope. Their main goal is to transcend the contradictions between Christianity and earlier pagan beliefs (Keesing 1989). A nationalist view of the state cannot furnish a key to such local and non-shared quests for identity.

The John Frum movement did not lead to any routinisation of the charismatic power of its leaders. The Tannese proclamation of a 'Tanna nason' (Tanna nation) or references to the 'John Frum kastom pipol' (customary people) are conceived along the lines of biblical models such as the idea of 'God's chosen people' or of the preserved spirituality of 'Israel's lost tribe'. The people of Tanna are seen by John Frum followers as a spiritual model for all nations in the world, and this spirituality (*wan speretual*) is considered to be the source of great powers (*paoa*) permitting global action. One of my informants, the chief of a village close to Port Resolution, expressed this point of view perfectly in one of our conversations. To a question about the future of the great John Frum ritual feast, held annually every 15 February for fifty years, his reply about the consequences of the disappearance of such cultic display was characteristic of John Frum's deep spiritual dimension:

If they stopped the 15 February celebrations, it would be very bad. They would spoil Tanna's name, Noumea's name, Australia's name or any other place; they would spoil the name of the whole country. Tanna is small, but its power covers the whole country. Tanna is small, small like a head of a match, but our stories tell us that it has the capacities to run the whole world. Over the ground or under the ground, *man Tanna* has power. Imagine if they were to suppress the 15 February celebrations, that means to suppress our ancestors' and John Frum's memory, something would happen. It became like a religion. Why would they stop it? If we stopped it, we would become lazy, we wouldn't be anything anymore (Taniel Sarawe, Fatarepa, March 2004).

#### CONCLUSION: TIME AND UNITY

The John Frum movement has never ceased to rely primarily on supernatural powers in order to contest first the colonial and then the post-colonial authorities. It is this syncretistic tradition that is also used to affirm a unique collective identity with regard to the negative influences of the globalisation process. Tannese millenarianism seems foreign to any political economy. In acting globally, it is based on traditional means that, a hundred years ago, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (1905) called '*le rajeunissement des mythes*' (the rejuvenation of myths). This rejuvenation consists in incorporating new elements of reality in the myth. For Hubert and Mauss, every myth and every religious representation is bound to a suspended time, is seemingly out of time, even if time is a necessary condition for the enactment of periods or cycles in their chronological succession and repetition. Unlike ritual, for which the time dimension is central, in myth the temporal localisation is minimal. It might be placed at the beginning of time (cosmogonical myths), or less frequently at the end of time (eschatological myths). Myths could be considered as conceptualisations of eternity if they were not subjected to this peculiar process: their rejuvenation. Even so, in the case of the John Frum movement,



because of this radical rejuvenation it may be more appropriate to speak of a reinvention of myths.

Myths rejuvenate through history. They draw elements of reality from it, which strengthen the belief they grounded as myths. Nevertheless, the fact that for believers the mythical truth is not easy to distinguish from the historical truth is not a sufficient reason to explain their ephemeral nature. This has more to do with the ever-growing necessity to situate things in time more precisely. The rejuvenation of myths is a phenomenon that is not distinct from the general phenomenon consisting of localising them in the past: it is just a specific form of the same phenomenon (Hubert and Mauss 1905:192; translation M.T.).

A last example will illustrate this point: the John Frum movement's split led the Fred Nase branch to keep US flags as symbols of the *John Frum kastomuvmen*, but it rejected all the other pro-American paraphernalia and beliefs related to the ancient version of the cult. The problem for the John Frum believers is to demarcate themselves from the bad image America has acquired since its imperialist adventure in Iraq. In the opinion of most Tannese, Iraqis are just defending their *kastom*. This immediately led Chief Isak Wan, the leader of John Frum movement's orthodox groups, to react. His intention was to show that his own magical capacities were safe and that his exegetical authority could not be challenged so easily. Chief Isak diffused a new orthodox version of John Frum's myth: Tanna is still America's friend, but the American government of Joibus (Georges Bush) is actually possessed by an evil spirit, by Tiapolo (Satan), John's traditional enemy. John Frum's purpose is to free his American friends from the evil influences of Tiapolo. That is why he gave Tannese sacred stones to Bin Laden, who is in fact America's and John Frum's true friend, who, like them, is just 'difendem kastom blong ol man Muslim' (defending Muslims' customs). But at present the devil is behind everything. Many islanders believe that only Tannese stones could give a man such ability to fight alone against the world's greatest power.

Regular calls to unity, apparent in movements such as John Frum's, would be better understood by paying greater attention to the question of temporality. Worsley's Marxist approach paradoxically failed on that point because in a way Marxism itself could be considered a secularised legacy of Judeo-Christian millenarian traditions. In fact, if cargo cults were described as millenarianisms, it was mostly with reference to the universalistic acceptance of this concept. As Melanesian cults of merchandise, they have not been analysed in their very fetishist aspect, which is precisely to regain control over time. Syncretistic and local dimensions of Melanesian millenarianisms obey a twofold process: to reshape the cult of the ancestors through a Christian reorientation of its cyclical temporality on the one hand, and to provide indigenous overtones to Christian eschatological representations on the other. Such cults manifest the rejection of a lineal temporality, of modern historicity, of the 'homogenous and empty' time defined by Walter Benjamin (1991; translation M.T.). They also represent traditional attempts to counter the 'terreur de l'Histoire' evoked by Mircea Eliade (1969).

By providing an eschatological dimension to symbols such as ‘unity’, ‘belonging’, ‘abundance’ or ‘kastom’, Melanesians categorically deny the novel aspects of such ideas. In the exceptional conjuncture stimulated by these movements, the flow of time is not experienced as mourning, as a dissociation from the ancestors’ past, but as a quest for identity that should very soon lead to the day of salvation. If the birth of these cults can be equated with a collective rite of passage in which the handling of secrets reached the masses in scale, their persistence is closely bound up with a traditionalisation and generalised ritualisation of foreign eschatological representations. The idea of the unity of places and peoples, in its close association with the process of readjusting temporality in its totality, tries to transcend incompatibilities between pagan and Christian representations of time. Replaced in their social context, they reflect what one could call a sort of spontaneous and intuitive politico-religious holism. In Tanna, regular claims to unity have clear resemblances with transcendent ideas of totality and permanence.

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