

## Unit 4: Vanuatu in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century

*Benson T. Raptigh*

Vanuatu (pronounced “Van-oo-a-too”) variously means “Our home”, “Our land”, “Our country” or “the place of the ever-lasting land” depending on which one of the country’s many traditional languages is being spoken. The people of Vanuatu are called Ni-Vanuatu or people from Vanuatu. This chapter explores what Vanuatu and its people were like before and after the arrival of Europeans.



Figure 4.1. Map of Vanuatu

(see Question 2)

**After reading this chapter you will be able to:**

- Recognise some key points about Vanuatu’s recent history
- Understand how Vanuatu’s islands were formed geographically
- Recount the history of human arrivals in Vanuatu from 3000 B.C. to 1745 A.D
- Compare the way Vanuatuan lived *before* and *after* European arrival
- Understand some traditional Vanuatuan customs and daily activities

## Recent History

Before the independence in 1980, the Y-Shaped archipelago of 83 populated islands was known as New Hebrides. Captain James Cook gave the country this name in 1774. The archipelago's tall dark islands reminded him of the Hebrides group on the Scotland's western rim.

Up to 1980, Vanuatu was ruled by a condominium; a joint government operated by British and France. On the 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1979, people crowded in front of the government building to witness the signing of the constitution. The British and French commissioner took part in the signing ceremony. The chief minister, the council of ministers, the representative of the Vanuatu Christian council and the council of chiefs who took part in the preparation of the constitution were also signatories.

The two official tongues of the Anglo French days were widely spoken. Bislama is the language used by most Ni-Vanuatu people. The constitution states Bislama, English and French as official languages.

### Questions and Activities

1. Who took part in the signing of the constitution on October 5, 1979.
2. a) Look at the Map of Vanuatu (*Figure 4.1*). Can you spot the mistake?  
b) Draw or trace this map of Vanuatu and correctly write all the place names on your new map.

## Forming of the islands

Over 22 million years ago, there was empty sea where Vanuatu is now. Then a series of massive, deep-ocean movements thrust a chain of submarine volcanoes to the surface. Period of immense seismic pressure alternated with quieter ones, allowed coral platforms to grow around the shores of the newly formed volcanic islands.

The northern islands were the first to assume their present shapes, especially the island of Santo and Torres group. As many millennia passed by, other more southerly islands emerged.

## First arrivals

Most historians believe that the peoples of the western Pacific originated in South East Asia. At least 40,000 years ago, perhaps much earlier, groups of migrants are believed to have begun moving through Indonesia and the islands of New Guinea chain towards Australia and the South Pacific. The proto-Melanesians, travelling by canoe, colonised the many islands further south, including the Solomons and Vanuatu, beginning about 3000 B.C.

The earliest evidence of human occupation in Vanuatu comes from a site on Malo, in the northern part of the country. Archaeologists claim this was first settled in about 1400 B.C. The islanders who left these remains were people of the Lapita culture (named after an archaeological site at Lapita in New Caledonia). During a millennium of long range canoe voyages, they left their highly distinctive, pinhole-incised pottery at a string of island and coastal sites (*see Figure 4.2 and Figure 4.3*). These go from north-eastern Papua New Guinea all the way to Samoa.

The Lapita people, possibly finding the large islands already occupied by existing inhabitants, chose small islands or coastal areas as their new homes. They brought with them yams, taro, domesticated animals such as pigs, poultry and dogs and a considerable appetite for shell fish.

By 500 B.C. the more intrepid members of Lapita culture had reached the eastern Pacific. Meanwhile, others intent on settlement were spreading slowly into the southern half of Vanuatu including Efate and Tanna. They intermarried with existing Melanesian groups they met.

Between 100 and 700 A.D., the descendants of the earlier Lapita people who had merged with Melanesia, developed a new culture. They exported pottery all over Vanuatu and as far north as the south-eastern Solomons.

Between 1400 and 1600 AD, Polynesian groups from the central Pacific made many long-distance migratory back to the west. Because of population pressures in their new islands, they set off in large sailing canoes in parties of up to 50 people. They were searching for small uninhabited islands to occupy. Vanuatu has tales of cultural heroes arriving around this time from islands to the east, bringing with them new skills and customs.

About 1200 A.D., the trade in pottery abruptly ceased. Clearly a new order had arrived. A wealthy and powerful ruler called Roy Mata, possibly a new arrival from the east, emerged in northern Efate and the Shepherds. He governed benevolently until his death.

Ni-Vanuatu believe that prior to about 1745, there was a large island called Kuwae where the Shepherd Islands are now. Local legends claim this island suddenly blew up, leaving only the small remnants which today make up the Shepherds group.

A new order was required once the quaking earth had settled down. The hero of the time was a man called Ti Tongoa Liseiriki. His funeral some years later was extremely lavish.

### Questions and Activities

1. Approximately how many years were there between the beginning of proto-Melanesian migration and human settlement in Vanuatu?
2. Draw a timeline featuring all the important dates of Vanuatu's settlement and migration from 3000BC to 1745AD.
3. Why did people from the Eastern Pacific migrate to Vanuatu between 1400 and 1600AD?
4. What items did the Lapita people bring to Vanuatu that have formed part of *ni-Vanuatu* culture and daily life?
5. How were the islands of Vanuatu formed?

### Pre-European times

Island communities were separated by thick scrub and broad stretches of sea. People lived in small clans on land which their ancestors had occupied since their first arrival many generations before. Everyone lived under the shadow of their ancestral spirits. Some ghosts were benevolent; others were believed to be always hostile, quick to harass the living with famines, natural disasters or unsuccessful wars. Such spirits had to be placated, so magic was widespread. When anyone suffered a serious misfortune, sorcery was automatically assumed to be the culprit.

In the northern part of Vanuatu, status within the clan was earned by males through grade-taking ceremonies, called the *Ni-Mangki* system. Lavish pig killing rituals and feasts accompanied each grade-takers move closer to achieving chiefly status. On a supernatural plane, the more grades a

man had achieved, the more powerful would his defences be against sorcery while alive and the more potent would his spirits be after death.

Deep suspicion was shown towards anyone from another island, tribe or settlement, especially if they spoke a different language. In some areas, coastal and inland people were hostile towards each other until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Any journey away from the safety of one's own clan was fraught with danger.

War was a regular activity for men. Sometimes these conflicts arose over the theft of coconuts or other crops, moving on to another group's land, or through suspected sorcery.

Although large-scale raids occurred at times, minor skirmishes and ambushes were the more usual form of combat. Often the attackers' aim was only to kill or capture one or two males from an opposing village whom they would carry off to eat. Only men of certain rank were allowed to consume this human spoil. It was always taboo for women to eat any part of a male body.

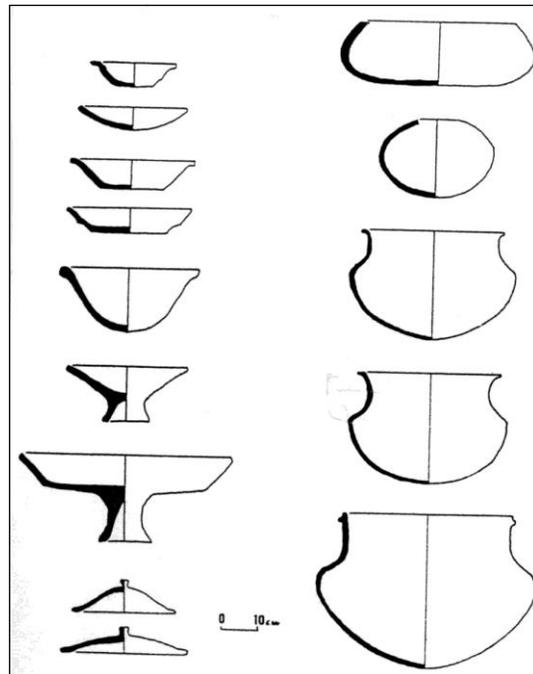
A friendly gesture would be to present a neighbouring settlement with one of the victim's limbs, all ready for cooking. Naturally the injured village would prepare its own form of reprisal. Such hostilities once started often continued indefinitely.

### Questions and Activities

1. Why do you think that the people of Vanuatu were suspicious of those from other islands or clans?
2. List the spiritual and non-spiritual reasons for progressing through the *Ni-Mangke* system.
3. War and conflict could have continued indefinitely in Vanuatu. Imagine you are a village chief. You have been at war for many years. How do you think you might go about finishing the war, and making peace? Write your answer in half a page and report your solutions back to the class.
4. Look at the two pictures of Lapita Pottery below (*Figures 4.2.and 4.3*) and refer back to the *First Arrivals* extract to answer the following questions:
  - a) How is Lapita pottery distinguished from other forms of pottery?
  - b) In *Figure 4.2* there is a scale, which allows you to learn the actual size of the Lapita pots pictured. The scale is 1cm = 10cm. Using a ruler, see if you can write

down the real sizes of all the Lapita pots.

5. Looking at the different shapes and sizes of the pots, what do you think they might have been used for?



*Figure 4.2. Forms of Lapita Pottery*



*Figure 4.3. Fragment of Lapita Pottery in a Museum*

## References

Harcombe, D. (1991) *Vanuatu: A Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit*, Hawthorne, VIC: Lonely Planet. pp. 9, 11, 12, 13, 190, 191, 266.

MacClancy, J. (1981) *To kill a bird with two stones: A Short History of Vanuatu*. Vanuatu: Vanuatu Cultural Centre Publications, pp. 36, 37.