

Unit 7: Vanuatu: Fanla Village and the Nasara

John Obed

Facts	
Capital	Port Vila
Population	218, 519 inhabitants (July 2009 estimate)
Language	English, French and Pidgin
Highest point	Mt Tabwemasana (1877m)
Independence	30 July 1980

This chapter is about a ceremonial site in a village in Vanuatu.

Vanuatu is situated in the south-western part of the Pacific Ocean. Vanuatu's neighbouring countries include the French-controlled New Caledonia to the south and the independent states of Fiji and Solomon Islands to the east and north-north-west respectively.

The Fanla Village cultural site is located on the northern part of Ambrym, an island in the centre of the Vanuatu group of islands. It is centrally located between the three biggest islands of the group – Espiritu Santo, Malekula and Efate. Closer to Ambrym are smaller islands which it controlled in terms of historic trade links.



Figure 7.1. Map of Vanuatu

At the end of this chapter you will be able to:

- Be able to describe an aspect of the culture of Vanuatu
- Understand the local importance of a particular cultural site
- See things from other people's view
- Understand other cultures
- Understand the importance of cultural sites in Pacific history

Fanla – a high-ranking village

The village of Fanla is located about 239 metres above sea level and commands a very clear and picturesque view of the ocean and the neighbouring island of Malekula on a fine day. Its access to the coast is through Linbul and Ranon villages. Sprawling on a gentle slope, Fanla village and its mountainous hinterland support approximately 300 to 500 people. At the top of the village is the *nasara*, or the ceremonial ground.

Fanla village is known for its reputation as the stronghold of “black magic” and heathenism. Fanla village acquired the respect of the surrounding villages when it set itself up higher than the other villages in North Ambrym. No other village, up to date, has taken Fanla’s place as the highest ranked village in the region.

The chief of Fanla village was the only chief in the region that had acquired the rank of *Mal Mor* which is the highest grade that can be bestowed upon a chief.

The *nasara* at Fanla is 50 to 100 metres away from the rest of the village huts. It is the site for many important custom ceremonies or men’s social gatherings. The Fanla ceremonies are performed at this site. The *nasara* also has a spiritual and sacred importance. The carvings, decorations and tools used in custom ceremonies were left behind by the men who performed them. The piles of stones, the trees and plants (usually unique flower plants) and the statues, scattered seemingly carelessly around the *nasara*, each mark the story of a particular ceremony. Each is important to a particular person or group from Fanla village.

Features of the *nasara*

- (a) The *nasara* is a raised piece of land surrounded by slit-gongs and plants of wide variety. With the right kinds of knowledge these plants could be used either for healing or causing bad health or even death. The raised land is approximately 60 metres along the front facing the rest of the village. Ceremonies are held in an area of about 100 to 150 metres in radius. Only the front of the *nasara* is cleared of smaller trees (the larger are kept for shade). The rest of the area is bush.
- (b) Men’s meeting houses (*Nakamal*) – there are usually a couple of houses on the *nasara* serving as the special place where ranked men prepare their meals. Men would also sleep in these houses and use them for feasting during the day. They are highly decorated with pigs’ tusks and other items of customary value. They show the wealth and status of the inhabitants of this *nasara*.
- (c) Slit-gongs – these are a significant decoration of the *nasara*. One purpose of these statues is to give particular identity to the *nasara* and establish the wealth and status of the *nasara*. The other purpose of these statues is that of communication. In the village hierarchy of the north Ambrym region, different villages and their *nasara* have different sounds or rhythms when they beat on the slit-gongs to let other villages know that something is happening in their village.

- (d) Fern tree statues – the number of fern statues around the *nasara* is significant. The status of the *nasara* is shown by the number of fern tree statues on the *nasara*. The fern tree statues symbolise the grade of the ceremonies that have taken place on that *nasara*.
- (e) The *Worwor* (pile of stones) – These stones are weatherproof. They are evidence of the ceremonies that take place on the *nasara*. Once the houses, statues and trees rot and decay and are gone, the stones usually mark the exact site of these grand expensive ceremonies of the past, present and hopefully of the future.

Questions and Activities

1. What is the big island nearest to Ambrym?
2. How many people live in Fanla?
3. What is the highest rank for a chief?
4. Why are *Nakamal* built in the *nasara*?
5. Why are slit-gongs used?
6. If the tree ferns, *nakamal* and slit-gongs are destroyed by age or weather, what is left to show that a ceremony took place?

Pig-killing ceremony site

A system of ranking determines the degree of separation of the chief from the rest of their community.

1. MAL MOR (highest grade of chief)
2. MAL
3. FEN BE
4. BERANG YAN YAN
5. MELEUN
6. NAIM
7. WURWUR
8. SHAGRAN

9. KUL KUL
10. MELBERANG WER (lowest grade of chief)

On Friday July 24th 1970, a *Namange* ceremony took place at the village of Fanla. This ceremony is about the taking of the rank of *Shagran*.

A certain amount of ethnographic material was obtained, either through direct observation or with the help of an informant, Tofor. The informant was approximately 40 years old and is reputed to be the most powerful man in the north Ambrym region.

This ceremony was a grade taking ceremony during which eight men, most of them in their mid to late twenties, took the grade of *Shagran*. The expense of the ceremony, both in pigs and money, was shared equally among the eight men.

About eight months earlier, two of these men had asked Tofor about the possibility of having a *Namange* for them. Tofor then consulted his own father, Tein Mal, the highest graded man in North Ambrym. Tein Mal approved of the idea, whereupon Tofor had a series of meetings with the high graded men of the surrounding villages of Neuha, Metamli, Ranhor and Melwar. Eventually, all of these important men approved of the *Namange*.

After the initial contacts had been made, other young men were in a position to take this particular grading also asked Tofor if they could join. Tofor and the elders approved.

Eleven days before the *Namange* took place, Etoul from Fanla village found the right sized fern tree in the proximity of the village and marked it with a machete. The trunk of this fern tree was to be used for the carving which is associated with this particular grade of the *Namange*. Etoul then told everyone that he had found the proper fern tree and some men from Fanla cut it down to the approximate size they wanted. Some *lianas* were then fastened around it and it was dragged to the *nasara*. While this was done a particular song associated with pulling any heavy object through the bush was sung.

When the fern trunk reached the ceremonial ground the drums were beaten for about one minute. This beating of the drums accompanied the completion of each "phase" of the carving such as the making of the eyes and the face.

Before the carving started a small pig belonging to Wurwurbatik was killed. This pig was eaten by all the men of Wurwur's rank. Tofor was to be the principal recipient of the payments for this *Namange*. The carving of the fern trunk was his responsibility. He did some of the work himself but was helped by others both in the carving and the painting of the statue.

While still standing the fern tree is called *le wulu wulu*. After it is cut it is called *bwerang namange* and after the carving has been completed it is called *magene sagaran*. The carving of the fern trunk took only two or three hours.

Before the actual carving started, Etoul took some leaves of *Narara* and marked the general outlines of what was to be carved. The leaves left a greenish trace which was then followed with an old metal bladed hatchet shaped like a pig killer. This instrument is called *Teyeten*.

A three and a half foot long face shaped like a quarter moon with large circular eyes some 10 inches in diameter was cut into the fern with the top of the face at the thickest part of the trunk and the chin toward the tapered end. Four inches under the chin a two and half-foot lizard was carved with its tail toward the narrow part of the fern trunk.

Two days before the fern trunk was brought to the *nasara*, a tall ceremonial structure, *ye ware ware*, had been erected off to one side of the ceremonial ground. The back of the structure was formed by a series of ten parallel bamboos some 40' high. From this back wall there was a platform about 6' long and 4' wide. Coconuts were tied to the bamboos. On top of the branches making up the floor of the platform there were several layers of leaves including the sacred cycads (*mwe!*).

The fern carving, now called Magene Sagan had to be placed upright under this platform. When all these preliminaries had been completed the carving was finally put in its nesting place and the drums sounded for a minute or so.

Questions and Activities

7. Why was Tofor a good informant?
8. Who paid for the *Namange* ceremony on the 24 July 1970?
9. What rank were the men about to receive?
10. What are the three names given to the carving of the tree fern?
11. Describe the "*ye ware ware*" in two sentences.

The painting of the face and the lizard on the fern trunk took place during the two days preceding the *Namange*. Most of the painting was done by Tofor but on the last day he was assisted by two higher grader men from Neuha.

Before the surface of the fern trunk could be painted it was sealed with a mixture composed of volcanic earth ashes and water. It was applied with the crushed stem of fern tree leaves.

Four different colours were used in the painting. The black is made from ashes and water. The white comes from rubbing two stones together with a little water. These stones are found on Ambrym. The red was made from a powder brought from the island of Laaman, off northern Epi. It comes from a reddish fruit which is crushed, heated and dried. The green comes from hardened

clay which is brought from the island of Pentecost. All these paints were mixed with water and applied with the stem of the *Limalwiwi* plant. Its ends were slightly crushed to form a brush.

On the morning of the *Namange* all the men gathered on the ceremonial ground. When everyone had gathered they all left the ceremonial ground in single file, led by Tofor who was followed by the higher graded men, followed by the others. They walked in a wide circle through the village letting out periodic shouts and yells and clicking together two bamboo splinters. The procession made its way back to the ceremonial ground, entering it by a different path than the one by which they had left.

They gathered around one of the large drums which were then beaten along with a smaller upright one next to it. The men started dancing around the two drums, performing the Ghaumm. The tempo started slowly, then increased in intensity and this was reflected in the dance.

At various times Tofor and one or two other men would dance around the group of dancers, making wide gestures with their drums and letting out yells. While this was going on, the men who were taking their grade climbed up to the platform did a little dance there and limbed back down to be replaced by two others.

Questions and Activities

12. What role do pigs play in the ceremony?

13. Describe what happens after everyone is gathered (in 5 sentences)

14. Describe the role of Tofor in the *namange* ceremony (use a list of dot points)

15. What is the *namange* ceremony?

16. Describe the *nasara* in your own words

A male ceremonial site

The *nasara* site provides strong evidence of the male-dominated nature of the village, region and the island. The womenfolk on Fanla, for example, do not have a high status in the social order of the village.

The custom ceremonies on the *nasara* were exclusively male dominated. The women were physically separated from and prohibited from entering the *nasara* on any occasion. The men of rank became physically and socially separated from their wives and children as they rise higher in the grades. They became bound by the *tabus* associated with the *nasara* and the rank they had acquired.

Despite the apparent lack of status of the women, the womenfolk of the village command a very important role in the village and the region in the following ways:

- (a) The men are regarded by the community as a worthy husband if they perform a pig-killing ceremony and pay tribute to their wife's family. This is a very important consideration when the man wants to take a chiefly grade for himself.
- (b) The men are allowed to pursue *mana* and status for themselves only because their wife is doing all the necessary hard work of keeping the family together. When the man is required by *tabu* to be separated from his family, the woman provides the necessary social control which enables the family to operate efficiently.
- (c) Women have a parallel hierarchical system through which they acquire status. They may not be able to ascend to the position of the paramount chief but the paramount chief is considered worthy only if he performs the necessary ceremonies towards his wife's family
- (d) Women are considered an asset by the men. Men owe most of their connections to other tribes or to other villages to their marriage arrangements.
- (e) During the actual ceremony of the grade taking, the women play the very important role of looking after the visitors from the surrounding villages. This gives the village a hospitable reputation which is just as important to contributing to the village's status as the ceremonies being performed by the men.

Reflections

The *nasara* is a presentation of power. Without the *nasara* ceremonies this power would have to be proven by some competitive act like warfare.

This site provides the setting for a different kind of rivalry between villages – an alternative to open tribal warfare and blood baths, which was a feature of so many earlier periods in our history.

Questions and Activities

17. Describe one role played by women in Fanla during a *nasara* Ceremony (use two sentences).

18. Draw a plan of a typical *nasara*, like the one at Fanla. Show all the main features. Use a heading and name all items include in you plan.



Figure 7.2.



Figure 7.3.

Carvings on display at the Vanuatu Cultural centre, 1999.