

CUSTOM IN VANUATU

*Jamie Molea**

The University of the South Pacific published a series of books compiled by the late Emeritus Professor Donald Patterson of the University's law school with the assistance of colleagues at the University and of local Ni-Vanuatu. The books capture the cultural practices and stories in Vanuatu. There are four books: One on the customs of Vanuatu, and three on custom stories in Vanuatu. Book 3 is trilingual: Bislama, English and French. The purpose of the books is to provide a description of customs and custom stories as described by Ni-Vanuatu people themselves, rather than by overseas researchers.¹

L'Université du Pacifique Sud a publié une série d'ouvrages sur les pratiques et traditions culturelles du Vanuatu. Ces publications ont été rassemblées par le Professeur Émérite Donald Patterson avec l'aide de ses collègues de la faculté de droit de l'Université du Pacifique Sud en y associant les membres des communautés Ni-Vanuatu. Ce recueil se compose de 4 volumes. Le premier est consacré au système coutumier en vigueur au Vanuatu. Le second traite des traditions au Vanuatu qui depuis l'origine ont été mémorisées et transmises de génération en génération sans besoin d'un système écrit. Le troisième s'intéresse au substrat historique de chacune des coutumes. Le quatrième volume rédigé en Bislama, Anglais et Français fait une synthèse de volumes précédents. Cet ensemble ambitionne de proposer, une grille d'analyse des pratiques et traditions culturelles du Vanuatu telles qu'elles sont perçues par les Ni-Vanuatu eux-mêmes, plutôt que celle généralement retenue par des universitaires et chercheurs.

Traditional and Contemporary Custom Practices of the Islands of Vanuatu compiled by Emeritus Professor Donald Patterson (University of the South Pacific, 2018) 212 pp.

The first book of the four, "Traditional and Contemporary Custom Practices of the Islands of Vanuatu", summarises the cultural practice of each island group in

* LLM (VUW).

1 Donald Patterson *Traditional and Contemporary Custom Practices of the Islands of Vanuatu* (University of the South Pacific, Port Vila, 2018) at 3.

Vanuatu. Although there are only 6 provinces in Vanuatu, each province is made up of a number of islands, with almost each island practising distinct cultural practices. Some of the bigger islands are split into separate regions (for example the island of Tanna is split into 7 regions including North Tanna, South Tanna, Middle Bush and so on). This book outlines a simple description of the customs of each island and its regions. Discussion is based on two broad areas: (i) customs relating to the different stages of life, and (ii) customs relating to social governance.

Customs relating to different stages of life

Under the different stages of life, the following cultural practices around the following events or issues are discussed:

- Birth
- Adoption and illegitimate children
- Difference of treatment between sexes (ie growing up as a boy or a girl, and later on becoming a man or woman)
- Marriage
- Death and inheritance

Some issues are discussed in more detail than others, mainly because of their cultural significance. Issues of marriage and bride price for instance are discussed at length. Detail is given to the considerations a man must consider when taking a bride, as well as the obligations of the man's family to the woman's family when marrying. Customs vary from island to island and the appropriate practices are not homogenous throughout Vanuatu. For example, the criteria for the appropriate selection of a wife in one island differs from what another island would deem appropriate.² This same concept applies to bride price with the socially acceptable amount differing from island to island; and then there are other islands where bride price is not a necessity at all.³

The majority of Vanuatu's islands are patrilineal in nature. The best illustration of this is inheritance of land. Land is mostly passed on to the eldest son to share with

2 For example, in Toga Island, part of the Torres Group in Torba Province, culturally, a boy is supposed to marry a daughter of a brother of his mother, but not a daughter of a sister of his father. In North Maewo, men are only restricted from marriage within their own "social group". Each social group is made up of several tribes. At the very least the men must marry outside their own tribe.

3 In North Maewo, bride price includes pigs, bullocks, mats, taro, kava and laplap which are usually worth more than VT80,000 which is recommended by a Chief. In parts of Tanna, only goods such as pigs, kava and clothes are accepted as bride price and not cash. In contrast, in Uripiv Island in the Malekula Outlying islands, in Malampa Province, bride price is not a requirement and is only sought as a means of compensation if any misconduct has happened between the man and the woman pre-marriage (at 114).

relatives in Vanuatu. There are a few exceptions. In Maewo for example, the land is transferred to women and belongs to the tribe through the mother. The children of the woman inherit the land, but because women marry and move to live with their husbands, the woman and their children do not live on their land. Often times they have to return to the land to assert the rights to their land.

Customs relating to governance

Governance over custom affairs is generally overseen by Chiefs, who oversee dispute resolution and impose socially acceptable penalties. Becoming a Chief also varies through the islands. For some parts of Vanuatu, Chiefs are strictly hereditary, and one only becomes Chief through lineage. In other parts of Vanuatu however, Chiefs are chosen by the community and obtain a higher status the more respected they become. They can also be replaced if they are not satisfactory.⁴

This book illustrates the stark differences in custom that are present in Vanuatu. The social norms that are acceptable are different as one moves throughout the islands. Although not discussed, Ni-Vanuatu have an inherent understanding of the difference in culture between themselves and adapt to each others cultural practices when visiting or attending cultural events of significance between each other. An additional illustration of how vast the differences are between the islands is reflected in the number of languages the locals speak, with there being over 100 languages in Vanuatu.⁵

Custom Stories of the Islands of Vanuatu (Books 1-3) compiled by Emeritus Professor Donald Patterson (University of the South Pacific, 2020) (Books 1 & 2), 2021 (Book 3) pp 1-150; 1-146; 1-197.

The remaining three books are a compilation of custom stories which originate from the different islands. Books 1 and 2 relay the custom stories. The story types broadly fall into five categories:⁶

- (1) Human activities or events in a family community, without the involvement of any mythological creatures;
- (2) Human activities or events which include mythological creatures that have magical powers;

4 Patterson, above n 1, at 33.

5 John Lynch and Terry Crowley *Languages of Vanuatu: A new survey and bibliography* (Pacific Linguistics, Canberra, 2001) at 15.

6 Donald Patterson *Custom Stories of the Islands of Vanuatu Book 1* (University of the South Pacific, Port Vila, 2020) at 5.

- (3) Natural conditions (for example rocks or landmarks) which are explained by or expanded upon by reference to mythological creatures with magical powers;
- (4) Activities by animals displaying human characteristics; and
- (5) Activities by mythical creatures having magical powers.

These stories are organised by island, with the number of stories allowed in Books 1 and 2 being dependant on the size of the island (ie the bigger the island the more stories that were allowed into the book).

Book 3 is an expansion of Books 1 and 2, and recognises the need for the stories to be communicated in Bislama and French (the other two official languages of Vanuatu) for it to be more accessible to Ni-Vanuatu readers.

This collection of books does a great job in collating stories that are traditionally passed down orally. The usefulness and need to have such stories and cultural practices written down, especially from the perspective of locals is of great significance in present times. Particularly because of the knowledge slowly being lost by the older generation, and furthered by the fact that more and more of the younger generation are being exposed to globalisation and social media which is resulting in a lack of interest in traditional stories. Patterson does a great job at collating and recording some of these stories with these books.