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## Reflections on Vivid Vagabondage: Ambrym

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## Reflections on Vivid Vagabondage: Ambrym

### Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to the people of West Ambrym for hosting us all during the Sand Drawing Festival, especially Filip Talevu and Jeffrey and Lucy Bong.

## Reflections on Vivid Vagabondage: Ambrym

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On a Saturday afternoon, in mid-May, during a mad and chaotic transit in Vanuatu's capital, Port Vila, I relieved myself of a large container full of carvings, for sale at the Alliance Francaise, on behalf of an artist from Vao. I was also reunited with my adopted family who had flown down from Santo earlier in the day. As usual, the airport was bubbling with transparent emotion and drama. People arriving, people leaving, hugs and longing looks, tired and weary travelers, excited tourists, and old and new friends—all creating eddies of emotion which draw some in and thrust others out. After Malekula's understated yet profound peace, the transit experience in the capital is overwhelming.

A last light rain fell as Air Vanuatu's "Twin Otter" conducted us from Bauerfield airport to Craig Cove airport on the island of Ambrym, via Lamén Bay. As I looked out the window at the aquamarine garden of the Shepherds Islands, the volcanic quintessence of Lopevi, and the landing strip of Lamén Bay, which evokes similar seaside airstrips such as Cairns and Gibraltar, I noticed a cargo ship, the MV Sarafenua—a tiny speck—making its meandering and copra-stenched way to Sesivi.

On landing in Craig Cove airport, my journey traded in its independence for a rich and lively interdependence. Driving through Craig Cove and Baiap to Sesivi, the site of the Sandroing Festival (Sand Drawing Festival), it is impossible not to notice the fundamental differences of life on an active volcano. The black volcanic rocks are scathing and sharp. The bush is less dense. There are fewer big old trees. The ground seems younger. There is practically no mud as the rain seeps straight through the porous ash. Underfoot the ash performs microscopic reflexology on one's feet. The feeling of the soft sandy ash (or is it ashy sand?) between one's toes is a relieving and engaging sensation—it feels like the land itself is massaging itself into one's feet. This was a joyful delight after the continuous deluge that made a quagmire of Sarakata's streets in Santo and was the source of the mellifluous squish of Malekula's mud.

Marveling at the newness, I wondered about my friends from Malekula and whether they had found some fuel, and a truck to make their way down to Lamap, and whether or not the river had sufficiently diminished to allow safe passage. Safe passage. This is an interesting term used extremely loosely in this part of the world.

Our hosts lead us around the village of Sesivi. We heard the arrival of the MV Sarafenua, which included in its cargo the delegation of people from the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VKS) in Port Vila. We wandered over to the top of the steep and craggy black stone staircase that leads down to the pasis (passage) where the ships load and unload their cargo. The VKS delegation disembarked amidst a babble

of excitement and relief. There was much mumbling about the smell of copra and the meandering course that the ship takes to service as many parts of the country as possible, but also much gladness at being on land and meeting old friends.

The group set about finding its first shell of kava on Ambrym. An adoptive cousin (abu or tu—in West Ambrym, the children of your mother's brothers, or your father's sisters, are the parents of your potential husband or wife) invited us to the village for a bucket-sized shell. As I turned my head against the setting sun and washed away the circuitous day with the mysterious alchemies of the peppery drink, inexplicably the feeling of having arrived home overwhelmed me. Now, back in Port Vila, remembering the feeling on the island, comparing it to the feeling of being in town, being in Santo, Malekula, or Australia, I find the concept of home disturbingly nebulous—and comfortably accessible at the same time. I was recently introduced to the poetry of Matsuo Basho, and the following lines speak to the paradox of home:

“The moon and sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wander on. A lifetime adrift in a boat, or in old age leading a tired horse into the years, every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.”

It was not until Tuesday that the last of the contingent from Malekula arrived in Sesivi. When I finally found them and asked about the journey I listened incredulously to their story. I was reminded of something that a friend in Malekula said before I left Lakatoro. “We can plan everything to the last detail but at the end of the day *neja i toktok*”—nature has the final say. Now, sitting in the sunshine and comfort of the capital, I think back to the journey that the people from Malekula made and I am overcome with sympathy. Apart from the canoe, there was nothing “safe” about the journey at all.

There were three trips across the sea from Lamap to Sesivi. The first one was the traditional outrigger canoe that sailed with five or six people. It arrived without incident or ceremony on Saturday morning after a journey of about six hours. The sight of a dugout, outrigger canoe, under full sail is one of the most fantastic and evocative sights that Vanuatu has to offer. I remember the first time I went to North Malekula: Atchin and Vao; I was utterly astounded at the sight of flotillas of canoes—at first I assumed it was some kind of race or festival—coursing between the islands, conducting people from their homes to their gardens.

Back on Sesivi, the first speedboat from Lamap arrived after the opening ceremony of the festival. The exhausted, cold and wet passengers had faced an overloaded speedboat, an increasingly rough sea, and a powerful wind. The harrowing journey was marginally ameliorated by the skill of the driver. After two hours, they had reached the halfway point across the sea when the engine failed. No amount of coaxing and swearing could start it again. Passengers started bailing out the sea water which was licking at them hungrily, while the driver started paddling. No life jackets, no flares, no other way forward than to paddle against the wind and current. The driver paddled and ruddered his way up and down and across the swells, masterfully manoeuvring the boat towards Ambrym, with support from another passenger on the bow.

After five hours of paddling they arrived at Sesivi. Word was sent back to Lamap that the boat would not be returning that day. The delegates who were stranded in Lamap (there were still 18 of them expecting the boat to return for them) were forced to find accommodation, food and warmth as best they could and wait for other arrangements to be made.

The following day, another boat made the crossing with the remaining delegates. This time it was loaded with two bags of kava, a slaughtered bullock, a replacement engine for the first boat, and 18 passengers. The wind was blowing the sea into a frenzy of white-capped waves. Benbow's volcanic gas arrowed directly towards Lamap, showing the force and direction of the headwind they faced. Passengers bailed out water for the entire six-hour journey. Eventually, they arrived.

I listened to this story disbelievingly. I thought again of the term “safe passage.” I wondered at the

courage and fortitude of human beings. I wondered at the nature of these festivals and whether or not there is a better, more appropriate format. Perhaps the national sand drawing event could be decentralised? Would the same effect be achieved if all of the communities in Vanuatu were encouraged to engage in a simultaneous celebration of sand drawing? Communities could be invited to send delegations to other communities by canoe, reviving and celebrating traditional trade routes and cultural links (Lamap to Sesivi; Ulei to Paama; North Ambrym to Vao; etc)? As I looked around at the food, the people, and the activities, I was struck by the thought that the current format seems to promote dependence on fossil fuels, imported staple foods, and the compulsive pornography-of-otherness that the snap-happy, red-faced, tourists and bossy film crews seem to love.

I turn my gaze inwards, and question my own motives—what is my pornography? Do I really love this place? Or do I merely love its “otherness”?

I turn away from the tourists who are clearly enjoying the *kastom* dancing in the middle of the football field. I cannot help feeling a little strange about this dance. It was introduced as a “circumcision dance.” But no one has been circumcised. The dance is deeply moving and powerful. The body art and masks are indescribable. But it still seems out of place. I wonder about this “intangible cultural heritage,” this *kastom*. I wonder if there is not a *kastom* dance for arriving at Sesivi to do some sand drawings, instead of for circumcision. If someone invented a new one would it be considered *kastom*?

As reported by Dr. Kim Selling, Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Museums’ Association, “cultural heritage cannot be safeguarded as an unchanging, static thing, but as a living, ever-evolving and changing way of relating to and expressing a people’s response to their environment.” The people of Sesivi, in fact all the people of Oceania have been crisscrossing the oceans and islands for thousands of years. Myself and all the other visitors to the festival are just the latest in a long history of coming and going that has helped to shape the dynamic cultures of the region in ways that I suspect, the people of Sesivi are far more comfortable with than I am.

I thought about my connection to this place and this feeling of “home.” I thought about Vanuatu as a “living” culture. I thought about how confronting and welcoming it is. I asked myself a question that I have been asked many times: “Why do I love Vanuatu?” and, perhaps for the first time, I had a clear sense of what the answer is for me. I thought about some of the things that are confronting to the undeniable privilege of my upbringing as a middle-class, suburban, white, male: the profoundly different conception of personal space and privacy; the relational construction of identity (versus my individualistic sense of “self”); the linguistic fluidity and expertise—I felt ashamed by my monolingual upbringing; and the imperative to cultivate or catch food. What makes these things so confronting here—when growing up, why was I not confronted by these things? What effect do I have, myself, on these things? What part does “*kastom*” play? Is the cultural heritage of Vanuatu a more or less “living” thing than that of Australia? or Thailand? or West Papua? What is “*kastom*,” anyway? And do I have the right to even use the word? One of the most important lessons I learnt from living in Vanuatu was the importance of situating oneself in ways that respond to issues around power and privilege that underpin these questions.

I thought about the concept of liminality, meaning the condition of being on a threshold or at the beginning of a process. This term is often reserved for transitional stages in life, but perhaps it can also describe a perpetual state of things—not necessarily a desirable one. How does this concept apply to the cultural heritage of Vanuatu? Is Vanuatu (in) a liminal state?

We are all, to some degree, liminal. We are all travelers. In ancient and medieval philosophy, “quintessence” or the “fifth element” (after earth, air, fire, and water) is a concept which describes the interconnectedness of all things. Heavenly bodies were said to be made of it and it was the fundamental essence of things on Earth. Like the moon and Pleiades, we are a negotiated rhythmic patterning looping elliptically through space. Also we are traveling through the temporal microcosm of this planet – exploring

new places, cultures, languages. We all consist of, and subsist on, this same quintessence or stardust, the same principle of interconnectedness. It is even present in the dark unknowable spaces between the stories, between the dreams.

Perhaps in this sense, from this perspective, the garden can be framed as the quintessence of *kastom*: the practical connection between people and the land and the sea, the source of nourishment and security, both fed by and feeding, reflexively forming, informing and being formed?

My journey: my home: the tenuous and fragile dreamscapes of sand drawings and stories; villages and gardens; other people's bookshelves and photographs; amniotic hot springs and the malarial chill of tropical evenings; rivers and quagmires. A vivid vagabondage through the dark space of my own mind where I found pleasure in: the way the sun looked like the moon through the volcanic gas (approximately 20% of all the volcanic gas on the planet comes from Ambrym!); the congruence of nature and culture in the unfurling fern; story as currency; and the fact that even with a 15 horsepower engine I move slower than dolphins through the water. These are the fleeting fragments of my journey as a home—as a fleeting, ephemeral, artform itself.