



**MAGICAL
VANUATU**



Ambrym has very few concrete buildings, and many people still live in traditional houses. The village hosts a « nakamal », a large wooden house which serves as a meeting point for men. Built from wood and leaves, it seems that the Nakamals have saved many lives during the Hurricane Pam. The few who collapsed did not injure the people inside, unlike houses made of concrete. « We built the Nakamal with very deep pillars of wood and a low roof, so they are perfectly adapted wind. », chief Jean-René explains to me. « And for centuries they have been tested by strong storms, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. So we know we can rely on them and on the spirits they host»...



Shown above is the Chief's house in Fanla, a village in the Ambrym island. The presence of women is considered taboo in this area, and they are asked to leave.



The locals of Ambrym are quite the craftsmen. These intricate wood carvings are a testament to their skill. The sculptures they produce always have meaning, and often represent something indicative of their culture.

The eyes on the statue seen below are in a half-crescent shape, representing the moon, while the surrounding ornamentation symbolizes the clouds in the sky. The red and white circles on the body of the sculpture represent their native fruit, "wayou". Often for occasions such as the "grade-taking ceremony", these statues are carved out of the trunk of a fern tree. The "grade-taking" ritual also includes the sacrifice of pigs or boars with an accompanying feast. On the left: a slit drum used to summon the villagers for ceremonies.



Sekor Chieftain from the Olal village explains to me that his father gave him « magic stones » before dying.

After walking through the forest for at least half an hour, as if in a labyrinth, the stones are hidden at the foot of a little tree. « This one makes you invisible » says Sekor, showing me a stone. « The others ones bring sun or rain, depending on what you need. », he adds. His eyes show he really believes in what he says.





The "Rom dance" pictured here, in the village of Fanla, is an initiation dance performed during grade-taking ceremonies called "Maghe."

The Rom masks worn by the locals is the ceremonial garb used in the dance. The body of the dancer is covered with dried leaves, adding sound effects as the dancers move and also providing anonymity to the dancers. When the ceremony is over, the masks are burnt, so the spirits won't haunt the dancers...



The pig tusks worn by these men are of great value to them, notably ones that form a full circle. Taking up to 40 years to be harvested from the pig, it is worn by the chief and is often represented in statues.

When Queen Elizabeth visited Vanuatu years ago, she was offered an extraordinary tusk coiled 3 times over.





The Grade-figures from Ambrym seen here are carved out of the trunk of a fern tree for the grade-taking ceremony. The ritual also includes the sacrifice of pigs and of feast giving. The features carved into the statues reflect the aesthetic ideal of the Ambrym man: broad nose, big nostrils, a long chin and high forehead. The people of Vanuatu consider the ceremonially used grade-figures sacred.



Ambrym women dance.



A "namba" is a traditional penis sheath from Vanuatu. The "namba" is wrapped around the penis of the wearer and is often the only clothing worn. Nowadays, it is worn mainly during ceremonies. Depending on the size of the namba, two names are given to the tribes of Malekula who wear them: the "Big Namba" and the "Small Namba". On the island of Tanna, the natives wear a different kind of namba (shown below).





For marriages in Ambrym, large amounts of bananas, manioc, and other native products are offered to the couple as wedding gifts. The bride and groom stay under a tent while the villagers enter and offer their gifts. The mother of the bride covers the couple in talc. Seen here, couples being wed show no sign of joy or happiness throughout the entire wedding ceremony, as marriage is expensive in Vanuatu. The prospective husband must offer around 8 pigs and 1,000 euros to his bride's family – a high price in this culture.



A boy makes an intricate sand drawing. The stick remains in the sand and is never removed throughout the course of art's creation, which gives the drawing an intricate and multi-dimensional result.

Every drawing tells a story, and pictured here is one about pigs in a field. In 2003, UNESCO proclaimed the Vanuatu Sand Drawing a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity".

Artificial cranial deformation via the process of "head binding" is a form of body modification where the skull of a human being is intentionally deformed.

This was practiced on the island of Malekula, and is still visible amongst some of the natives. The child's head was bound with soft bandage made from the inner bark of a banana tree. The Pidgin English term, "Longfala hed" (Long Head,) is synonymous with intelligence.

People saw these elongated heads as more beautiful and indicative of wisdom.





Throughout all my travels, these were the nicest children I had ever come into contact with. They were polite, always smiling, and never cried!

After I had left a village in Ambrym, a young child ran after me for 10 minutes just to return a single coin, which had fallen from my backpack. Children here follow strict rules. Forbidden to speak at the dinner table, this makes for quite a strange dining atmosphere!



Shown above is a man looking a human skull in the Cannibal village of Malekula. The last Cannibal lived around 1940, during WWII. According to the elders, the cannibals primarily ate people from neighboring tribes and sometimes missionaries.



Victims of cannibalism were killed on a sacred stone, such as the one pictured in this photo, and shared only between the men. Tradition is still very much alive in Vanuatu, and the power of chiefs and of the Ansari sacred ground is still respected. However, visiting missionary groups eradicated the practicing cannibals more than 60 years ago.

Those statues are highly valued by the major ethnographic museums. Before being informed of their value by art dealers and auctions, locals once sold them for next to nothing, and were surprised to see so many caucasian men sailing in on huge ships to haul these giant statues home.

Now understanding the full value of these statues, many have considered taking legal action to retrieve some of the ancient statues which were once in their possession.





Shown here are statue carvers working on fern trees in the forest. This man had just finished a statue they will hang at the entrance of the men's clubhouse in Malekula.



The two main tribes on the island are the « Big namba » and « Small namba », according to the size of the namba they wear. A "namba" is a traditional penis sheath.

Nowadays, it is worn mainly during ceremonies, but elders still wear it. « They cost us nothing. We just need to cut some grass. They're not like the pricey tshirts we purchase ! », says an elder. « But the namba does not protect well against the climate change in this area. We have had so much rain.»

Small Namba Palm Dance



Shown to the left is a circumcision house in the village of Yokel on Tanna Island. This house is where boys must spend their isolated recovery time following the circumcision ceremony. Shown below are Charly Kala and his nephew, of the Yakel Kastom village in Tanna. The newer generations are looking more and more towards modernity. Charly is a big Manchester United fan.





Chief Kovia is from the Yakel village on Tanna Island. The villagers tell me he is more than 100 years old. Upon meeting him I see he is very weak, but still enjoys meeting foreigners and recounting his past. He is still angry in regards to the Australians who "took" people from the village after WWII, many whom did not return. He tells me he is happy about the presence of missionaries because they helped end cannibalism and warring amongst tribes.



The Big Nambas' most striking tradition is the removal of the women's two superior teeth, an indication that they are ready to be married and give birth.



These men are shown wearing Malekula circumcision masks. This is the most important rite of passage in their lives. Boys are ceremoniously circumcised at age 13. These two-faced masks are made with the nests of spiders. Women are forbidden to wear the masks. A fun fact for fans of modern art: Picasso owned a statue from this tribe. Location: Malekula Bitine Village.



There are some blond Big Nambas like this child pictured here. Upon asking the people why there are so many people with blonde hair on the islands, they give you one of three answers: they have white ancestors, spend too much time in the sun, or are deficient in vitamins.



Hurricane Pam has now destroyed most of the crops in Vanuatu. The Ni-vanuatuan eat what they grow, and do not consume any of the junk food the rest of the world has become so dependent upon. « we are proud to say that the food of the whole archipelago is organic » says Jean René, though recently many fear starvation, as it takes months for yams, fruits, or sweet potatoes to grow again. The aid provided by NGO such as rice is not the standard food of these people.



Even though 80% attribute their livelihood to agriculture, tourism has now become more and more important. On the big islands, huge cruise ships drop 2,000 tourists a day who come to see the villages, the dances, and to buy local artifacts. After Hurricane Pam and the lack of local food, tourism may be the best way to aid the Ni-vanuatu in the reconstruction of their country tradition, and art.

eric lafforgue
www.ericlafforgue.com
lafforgue@mac.com