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## Conflict Resolution On Tanna, Vanuatu



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### Abstract

*Both locally and globally, human populations appear to be engaged in almost constant conflict in this new 21st century, offering ample opportunities for those who would help solve problems. In one remote part of the planet, Tanna in Vanuatu, conflict resolution is a near constant activity raised to an elegant art form. Big men and village orators deal with complex issues in a public forum frequently. Understanding the principles and the methods of resolving differences in another culture depends upon an in-depth knowledge of their historical and contextual background. In addition, observation of the spatial and temporal dimensions of actual meetings to resolve disputes provided the authors with a fascinating insight into the structure and dynamics of the inter-village systems. This paper initially examines selected aspects and themes of Tannese culture, including such concepts or bodies of knowledge as balance, reciprocity, politics, ethics, resource availability, kinship, genealogy and the practicalities of everyday living. Then, through presentation of several instances of conflict resolution, some of the non-western, alternative styles of conflict resolution noted, including for example, rapid resolution of differences, maintenance of balance and reciprocity, collective involvement, no imprisonment, and use of healing and ceremony, are discussed. These methods may have application to other cultures and peoples who are trying to resolve disputes within their own frameworks for living.*

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### Introduction

The importance of conflict resolution strategies around the globe is difficult to overestimate these days. As the world population continues to soar, as resources and environments continue to decline in quantity and quality, and as elites, both rich and powerful, continue to monopolise control of the world, wars, conflicts, and hostility seem to escalate. On-going inter-personal, local, regional, and global issues call for mediators to resolve conflicts but they seem to achieve only limited rewards when dealing with what are often exceptionally difficult circumstances. Consequently, locating or inventing novel approaches to resolve conflict creatively becomes more and more vital to all of humankind.

The Internet represents one valuable resource to those seeking ideas. Numerous sources about dispute resolution are readily available, including the excellent bibliography in Morris (<http://www.peacemakers.ca/bibliography/bib9global.html>), another thorough bibliography in Chenail and Scott (<http://www.nova.edu/~ron/medcom.htm>), and a listing of relevant agencies and organizations involved in conflict resolution which can be found at the CAADRS – which stands for the Center for Analysis of Alternative Dispute Resolution System ([http://www.caadrs.org/people/website\\_nonann.htm](http://www.caadrs.org/people/website_nonann.htm)).

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Searching through the practices of culturally distant peoples can offer another source of new perspectives on conflict resolution. Coupling the reported methods of others different in locale and time along with the as yet unreported methods used by people in more remote areas, may lead to ideas for reflection about and evaluation of more familiar ways of solving conflict (<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/example/merr5972.htm>; Nader & Todd, 1978; Merry, 1989, 2002). Wolff and Braman (1999) for example, wrote about the importance of extended family involvement, reconciliation, and the importance of ritual to solve conflicts among the more collectivist Micronesians. Shook (1985) reported that in Hawai'i, the family or community is intensively involved at the beginning, and following a blessing, all parties involved decide whether there is sufficient time and will to proceed. If so, then discussion leads to confession and release of feelings, and eventual forgiveness. When consensus is attained, ritual eating together completes the process. Other samples of insightful work can be found in Asia (Pryles, 1997), Asia-Pacific (Jones, 1991), South Africa (Foraker-Thompson, 1992), Indonesia (Moore & Santosa, 1995), and of course, globally (Huntington, 1993). Merry (1989) summarizes several accounts of mediation in non-industrial societies, indicating that such mediators are "known by the disputants and often have high community status and considerable power" (p. 85). Further she indicates that these mediators are more often directive, that they may "manage" justice so that the strict rule of law accords more closely with local and cultural views, and they often rely on kinship and the broader community to provide pressure for settlements.

In trying to generate alternatives and valuable methods of conflict resolution, standard procedures, emerging innovative approaches, and non-Western alternatives all need to be explored and examined. Given the complexity and urgency of the tasks ahead, those who would seek to resolve conflicts must search widely. This article focuses on the unique conflict resolution methods in one small Melanesian island in the Southwest Pacific as a way of sharing their practices and ideas with others.

### **Tanna**

Tanna is a small island in the southern chain of the many islands of Vanuatu, a nation that gained independence in 1981 from what had been the British and French Condominium of the New Hebrides. The island, roughly 21 miles by 17 miles in size, with rugged internal mountainous terrain, is divided into at least 5 separate language groups and perhaps as many as 30 dialects among the more than 200 small villages. These settlements range in size from 20 to 200 people each and are usually governed by a "big man" who watches over people and activities. The culture is patri-lineal, is strongly patri-local, and maintains an Iroquois cross-cousin marriage pattern. Typically young women move to another village to marry a cross-cousin, and in return, that kinship group must reciprocate with a female marriage partner to move to the initial village. Reciprocation in past times might take a generation or two, but given the influence of missionaries, the entire pattern was significantly disturbed, leading to almost endless disputes in more recent times. The authors lived and conducted anthropological research for 15 months in the highlands in a Nvhaal speaking area, often noted as the "Kastom" or traditional custom area (Gregory, 1993).

On Tanna, frequent public meetings held by adult males sort out disputes. Women are typically excluded from attending although a designated relative will represent their interest.

Boys and young men are encouraged to attend, to listen and to learn from their elders. Sometimes men bring an infant or baby, patiently caring for the child while still attending to the debates and discussions.

### **Conflict resolution**

An initial encounter might serve as an example about the nature of the meetings designed to resolve conflicts. We were sitting at a "nakamal" or the clearing in the jungle that served as the centre of a village, a dancing ground and ceremonial locale, and a handy location for kava drinking in the evening (Gregory, 1994). The nakamal is regarded as the "men's office," whereas the nearby huts, known as the "yelkwanu," spread all around in the nearby bush encircling a nakamal, are referred to as belonging to the women resident in the village. By examining that use of space, the centrality of men and the peripheral role of women, each of whom come from other villages to live in this village, becomes evident.

One day early during our stay, a boy came running up to where we were sitting with one of the "big men" or tribal leaders to whom we primarily related. The boy in question was perhaps 10 or 12 years old, and spoke in a dialect similar to but slightly different from the Nvhaal language we were struggling to learn. He began to address the big man sitting with us, who eventually translated; "Bob, Janet. This boy has been sent by the "big men" of his village to tell you that there is a problem and your presence is requested there in three days time." Fortunately, the big man in our adopted village was able to translate and mediate for us. The exact nature of the problem remained unclear to us, however, and we could only guess at what might transpire in three days time. Our interpreter said he would assemble several other big men to go with us, and represent our interests. We had to argue strenuously for Janet's right to attend the meeting, as women virtually never participated. After some argument, that right for this specific meeting was granted. We trusted the wisdom of our local big man, as we were too new to even begin to understand the context, patterns and details of what was taking place.

We showed up at the designated nakamal three days later with a group of eight or ten men from our own village, with our interpreter/friend in the lead. We were astonished to see approximately 100 men, dressed only in their traditional nambus or penis-sheaths. They were scattered in several groups around the clearing that served as our meeting place. They looked serious, and one big man from one of the groups was standing near the centre of the clearing, addressing the other groups. He was wagging his forefinger and appeared to be already busy putting forth arguments or setting an agenda for the assembly. We entered and quietly sat on the ground designated for our group.

We quickly learned with the help of our translator that the people of a distant village had heard about our visit and about our desire to learn the Nvhaal language, to learn about Kastom, to study the use of kava, and to eventually take back this knowledge to our own homeland. The men of this village who had "called" the meeting had formally accused us of "stealing the language." Our interpreter in a hushed tone explained that this was a very serious matter, and that unless a resolution was achieved, it could result in us being evicted. We sat dumbfounded, considering the enormity of the accusations against us.

Our accusers wanted to and did raise a series of questions, and accordingly, demanded that the headmen who had agreed to host us give answers. The gist of the concerns was that Nvhaal was a "strong" language, meaning it was original, old and traditional and that no one who was not Tannese had ever learned to speak Nvhaal. Further, it was an unwritten language, and had never been recorded in any form. If we were learning and recording the language we might not get things just right, the language would be taken away, perhaps we would misuse the information and harm might come to the people of the island as a result.

The opposing group, the two groups on either side, and our own side each had a speaker. Our interpreter, a big man and influential leader, was called upon to address these and related issues on our behalf. Each speaker consulted with the men in his own group, but the four groups were precisely divided into plaintiff and defendant, and the two other groups were made up of men from neutral villages to serve as witnesses. The plaintiff village leader formally charged us with stealing the language, and our group was left to defend against that charge. Our speaker then in his turn spoke about how writing down the language would make it stronger and less vulnerable to misinterpretation; about serious scientific intent to learn and to teach others, about how "proper custom" and tradition could and would be taken to others, about the negotiations we had been through before a decision had been made to accept us, and finally about our conduct thus far. He brought in other issues about which we could only guess. The debate went on for several hours as discussions continued. We watched the big men stride out into the nakamal to argue their points, with poses, gesticulations, and occasional pointing of fingers and hands that exquisitely articulated what they were saying. At one point our personal history from our day of arrival to the time of the meeting was raised. In our favour, we taught English in their Kastom school upon their request, we worked hard to get the language and its meaning correct, and we had already started a first-aid and health clinic under supervision from elders and from the distant Western hospital doctor.

Finally, late into the afternoon, resolution was reached. We were to be taught a limited amount of the language. Some relatively sensitive things and issues would be taught only after we had resided long enough to further prove our character and intent. Other arrangements were also incorporated, but we were not made aware of their full extent. Our village had to provide the kava for the evening ceremony for all in attendance. The drinking of kava would seal the agreements reached through the lengthy discussions to assure that everything would be honoured over time. Of special interest, the two "witness" villages were there to remember the agreements and arrangements made and to point out any future infringements. And of course, they received kava and food for their day's work and their continued availability to monitor arrangements into the future.

By accepting us and allowing us to reside in their village, the big men of our village took a risk and introduced something new into the territory, something that could possibly be dangerous or lead to unseen consequences. As a result, other villages had charged them with proceeding too rapidly without gaining consensus and approval from all who spoke the language. Our village therefore, had to restrict some of their plans for us, and pay some sort of penalty or fine. The fine in this case was to provide food and kava for all of the men for that evening. Kava plants, sufficient for nearly a hundred men, were consequently dug from

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local village gardens, brought to the designated nakamal, and awarded. Janet left the meeting to join the women and children in the huts that surrounded the nakamal. At the nakamal all men involved drank kava and meditated contentedly as the matter had been resolved appropriately and according to traditional ways of conflict resolution.

We continued our field work, learning as much of the language as we could absorb, studying Kastom, inquiring about the mysterious John Frum cult, and gaining experience about the meaning of daily life with Tannese people. More than a year later, the big man who had defended us, came to our hut and held what appeared to be a scrap of grass in his fist, and asked, "What do you see?" Our response was "A bit of grass". He quickly followed by pulling the scrap higher through his clenched fingers, revealing a little more of the blade of grass. Again, he asked, "What do you see now?" This process continued several times, until he offered the moral of the story. "When you, Bob and Janet, first arrived, we could only see a little of you, and we could not tell whether you were good or bad, or whether your presence would result in good things or bad results. Through the passage of time and experience, we have learned, and we have found more and more good. The village that opposed you did not know, nor did we, but we took a chance. Something new might be dangerous, or it might be an opportunity that would turn out well. You can't really tell when you have had the opportunity to see just a little bit, because you do not know what lies beneath. Thankfully, you shared your selves and lives with us in a positive way. We together now are "yo kaleek" or strictly translated, "another I, another person like me." This statement meant that we were finally regarded as friends.

Similar meetings like our initial experience were held frequently during our 15 months of fieldwork. Issues between disputants included topics such as ownership or use of land, breaking of Kastom rules or beliefs, trespassing of pigs into gardens, determining past obligations and present day responsibilities in marriage agreements and contracts, an insult by a young man to us, a rape followed by the subsequent beating of a young man by the men of the woman's village, and plans by the French to introduce a water-pump. We found that virgin boys or young men were frequently given the role of travelling to other villages to "call" the meetings. Sometimes they attended the meetings, other times they wandered off to hunt, play, or swim, when they lost interest. Invariably they would return to masticate the kava for the older men to carry out the evening ceremony of kava drinking. We attended many such meetings, marvelling at the relative speed that it took to get the word around to remote villages. In the pidgin language they referred to the efficient way in which word travels from village to village as "the bush telephone". Discussions on the other hand were often lengthy, as consensus and a formal agreement by parties involved was essential. We were fascinated to note that upon completion of an agreement, the people involved managed to work together and live harmoniously despite previous difficulty.

The themes of Melanesian and Tannese culture provided an underlying matrix of rules and procedures. The notion of balance was central to conflict resolution processes that carefully weighed all competing interests. The rules and procedures accepted demands and then sought fair resolutions of claims from various factions, whether between individuals and/or various villages for past, present, and potential conflict. Justice was carefully balanced with resources available, personalities, and traditions, just as claimed by Merry (1989). No one would lose their lives, starve, or be jailed for years and years, but offenders and their families

or villages would pay a meaningful and sometimes heavy penalty. The offender's village or kinship group were invariably held responsible and would then monitor the behaviour of the individual. The overhead and finale in this process was always the exchange and drinking of kava by all adult men, which represented a ceremony of agreement by all parties.

We had ample opportunity to see how these competing interests were balanced, how orators and big men scored points and influenced others, and how history and tradition was invoked as guiding principle and precedent. Eventually we learned that sometimes the orators were not the most powerful decision-makers, for they would consult, sometimes openly, sometimes secretly, with those who were still more powerful in the region.

The principle of reciprocity was another central theme on Tanna. Every gift was subsequently matched with a counter-gift, preferably slightly more was given in each and every return than was initially received. This slight increase would ensure that later still, another exchange, trade, or gift would follow. In a sense, by giving freely, one was building up reserves, as in a bank or investment account. In the future, more would return, for everyone was expected to and in fact, would reciprocate. Those who gave away the most were due to receive the most at a later time. As there was no refrigeration, food did not keep long. If someone killed a pig or chicken, it had to be eaten. The meat was shared generously with the knowledge that later when others had surplus, it too would be shared. Those who kept their own resources, whether garden produce, chicken and pigs, kava, or other, were due to receive the least in the future.

We also noticed that some might regard a person who raised and maintained one or more large pigs as "fair game". Resources were limited, and the expenses for labour, gathering food, and housing a pig or even chickens, were real. One of the large pigs might be the result of hard work to raise sufficient food to fatten it up for several years, and therefore the sacrifice or surrender of that pig was a significant penalty. In this way, resources were used to benefit all, rather than built up endlessly by and for one individual, as in some Western cultures.

Invariably, the more important meetings could be discerned by the presence of "witnesses" and large numbers in attendance. Sometimes the penalties given involved the sacrifice of chickens or pigs, and the unfortunate animals would be brought to the nakamal, then either sent on to the "winning" village or in the case of some of the pigs, dispatched by a young man wielding a large club. Special mention might be jokingly made for us at such times about historical accounts of "long pig," as human beings were similarly treated long ago. The pork would be cut up and then carefully distributed to appropriate recipients on the spot. Smaller gatherings might continue vigorous debate, individuals would posture and pose and big men who had served as orators might be surrounded by well-wishers. Eventually any outstanding issues would be resolved and followed by concluding ceremonies with kava.

At one meeting that Janet did not attend, it turned out that some young man had verbally insulted us either previously or possibly during the meeting. Apparently he said something derogatory about us and was overheard by an elder. A minor side issue of other debates going on, our situation was noted. A big man from the village involved was determined to set matters right immediately. He ordered the young man to catch one of his own chickens,

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then awarded it to both of us. The chicken, a very beautifully feathered bird, seemed sickly in my hands, and it proved to be unable to walk. I wrapped it up carefully and took it home to Janet to show her. A few minutes later, a local big man stopped by, and said that, "this is a chicken for eating." I asked why. It turned out that there are chickens for raising and producing eggs, usually given as gifts or payment for services rendered, and another entirely different category of chickens given for eating, as a penalty awarded. After the young man captured the bird, the big man had swiftly and silently broken the poor chicken's legs and wings before he gave it to me. That breakage would assure that the chicken would be eaten, and therefore help to resolve or force the resolution of the conflict. A gift chicken to keep and raise might not have resolved the perceived imbalance that existed.

We felt very badly about this chicken and the breaking of its legs and wings while alive. In our value scheme, this was torture of animals, and we felt dreadful. Fortunately, our local big man said that he would take the chicken in trade with us, and give us an intact chicken to keep for eggs while he and his family would dine that night. But we raised questions about animal rights soon after, resulting in a meeting of important men to discuss that issue. We "called" a meeting. They listened to our concerns and our feelings, then debated and deliberated through the issue carefully within the matrix of their tradition and practices. Eventually, they explained patiently, this was their way of dealing with matters, and that our ways might well differ, but our methods were irrelevant in their locale. At least we had tried, and we learned much as a result.

Another unusual instance occurred when a friend of ours arrived from the United States. On the truck ride from the airport to our location in the interior, we told her of the necessity to be utterly quiet and to keep her head down, as it was nearing dusk and the time for kava drinking by the men. Unbelieving, she laughed, loudly, just as we were passing a nakamal along the road next to a village that was not fully Kastom.

The next morning, a young man turned up and said we had made noise and disturbed the men's kava so we had to pay a fine of a chicken and a kava. Clearly we had responsibility to insure that the kava hours were maintained, (i.e., silence and no raucous laughter). On the other hand, this was a non-Kastom village, so we felt they could not fairly charge us with a Kastom penalty. We consulted with our knowledgeable and trusted "head man" and friend. He agreed that he would pay the kava part of the fine on our behalf, while we could pay a one dollar note, about the cost of a chicken, but symbolically non-Kastom. The conflict was resolved in that fashion, however we carefully warned all subsequent visitors about the sanctity of kava time. Subsequently, we happily travelled by and visited many times with the people of that particular village. The matter was effectively and completely resolved with the paying of the fines. Everyone was able to get on with their daily lives.

It was only much later during fieldwork that we began to understand some of the reasons for speedy conflict resolution on Tanna. When kava is drunk, the mind freely wanders while the body becomes tranquil and numbed (Gregory, 1994). Light, sound, movement or any other disturbances interfere with the quality of the "kava hour" and so the quietness of dusk and the twilight was the proper time for drinking. Indeed, the hour often lasted two or three hours. If any disturbances in the village or life of a man had not been dealt with prior to kava, then

those disturbances would weigh heavily on his mind during the kava hour. In fact, this time of meditation could become distinctly unpleasant. Therefore, each and every man on the island was always ready and eager to deal with issues that might interfere with his nightly use of kava.

Some Tannese conflict resolution strategies might be of interest and value to mediators in other cultures. These strategies include the relatively rapid speed of events and the personal involvement of significant numbers of the entire population in an open or public forum. Even though only males attended, the opinions of women on the matters under discussion were represented. Boys and young men were encouraged to play a role and listen and learn as much as they could but only elderly men knew all of the history, tradition, protocol, and "Kastom". The philosophical and cultural notions and knowledge of the elderly, checked against the ideas and needs of the majority of men, maintained a balance and created reciprocity between past and present. The awarding of costly penalties without forcing anyone into a prison could be advantageous to all concerned, as compared with the frequent and expensive and often ineffective use of prisons elsewhere. Finally, the use of a healing and/or ceremonial conclusion to events with the kava ritual made harmonious relationship for the future not only possible, but also highly probable.

When community and family pressures can be applied as needed to encourage individuals to behave appropriately, and where representation for all is assured, effective social control can prevent, as well as deal with, crime. In many of our Western societies where sometime distant court procedures are lengthy, expensive, or purely punitive, potential benefits in new or different procedures of conflict resolution are significant, and worthy of consideration. Rather than lawyers, solicitors, or other specialists, Tanna relied on a broader representation of adult men. In the final analysis, the Tannese methods and styles of conflict resolution described above can be compared with prevailing methods, as well as those described in other cross-cultural reports, with those presented on the Internet, and with standard practice.

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