

Story and photos courtesy of Michael J. Balick and Gregory M. Plunkett from the New York Botanical Garden.

TANNA'S FIRST KASTOM SKUL

Helping to sustain culture and identity into the future



People often define identity through their culture. When the loss of cultural memory occurs, voluntarily or involuntarily, the usual result is the fragmentation or loss of that unique identity. As James Waller of Keene State College has suggested, social groups develop a collective memory that holds their members together as a community. Communities provide important benefits that help people on their journey through life, such as nurture, norms, and protection. In many parts of the world, this collective cultural memory is being homogenized and displaced, as the forces of globalization and modernization seek to shift societies based on traditional activities, values and beliefs into the worldwide

economic system, where the role of local people becomes focused on production and consumption. As scientists who work with indigenous people in many parts of the world, we have seen both the positive and negative consequences of this shift towards modernity.

Vanuatu is a nation where much of the population relies upon their environment and its biodiversity for many things—for example, healthy food, clean water, housing, clothing, and medicines. In an increasing number of areas of Vanuatu, people are grappling with a transition to a western-style, cash-based economy. As part of that transition, loss of native habitats is occurring in many places, and plant-knowledge is being lost

at an alarming rate as elders, who have been the defenders of habitats and stewards of information, pass away without conveying their knowledge and skills to younger people. The project “Plants and People of Tafea Province, Vanuatu” seeks to preserve what is called plant-based “biocultural knowledge” by helping communities maintain and transmit the information that has enabled Ni-Vanuatu to thrive using their own extraordinarily rich natural resources—the highly diverse forests, the land with its fertile soil, abundant fresh water and marine habitats. During our studies, we have met an increasingly larger group of Ni-Vanuatu who are vocal in their support for preserving the biocultural heritage of their ancestors and the exceptionally



healthy lifestyle it offers—in part by keeping traditional knowledge and activities in practice. Our program, a partnership between many local and international agencies, has been working with local people at all age levels for the past five years to document plant diversity and plant-based traditional knowledge, and, through this work, helping to prepare the next generation of leaders in ecosystem and biocultural conservation.

This past year Tanna Island hosted its first *Kastom Skul* (Custom School), a week of classes with the stated goal of formally conveying traditional plant-based knowledge and practices to the younger generation. The *Tanna Kastom Skul* was the brainchild of our long-term partner and project co-founder Jean-Pascal Wahe, who leads the *Tafea Kaljoral Senta*, a group dedicated to documenting and preserving cultural knowledge of *Tafea Province*. He had the role of Principal of the *Kastom Skul*, organizing a formal curriculum designed to teach and transfer a variety of important life skills. This was an experiment to help foster cultural preservation, planned to involve 20-30 young people, and to stress the vital role of indigenous languages, the school

was taught in the local *Nafe* language of *South Tanna*. After word of the dates for the school went out on social media, we were astonished to see more than a hundred people of all ages coming to the village of *Iatukwei* in southeastern *Tanna* to participate in this historic event.

On the opening day, participants marched to the *nakamal*, the traditional meeting place of the village, which served as the center of the week's activities. One of the first undertakings was the construction of a traditional cyclone house, a structure designed to withstand the strong winds and driving rain that such storms can bring. The men of the village began to prepare the foundation of the house, selecting the strongest woods and placing these deep into the earth. Over that week, the house was constructed using local plants for posts, rafters and thatching. We documented timber trees such as *Hibiscus tiliaceus* (*newou*), *Macaranga dioica* (*nefeng*), *Trema cannabina* (*ring*), and *Glochidion ramiflorum* (*namirau*), which were employed for the main structure. In addition to its characteristic triangular shape, one element that distinguishes this type

of house from contemporary dwellings is the absence of nails for securing the wooden poles and posts. We watched as men came from the forest bearing several different species of vines that were used as lashings, which are wrapped many times around the posts and poles that comprise the cyclone house's structure. These local 'ropes' included the vining fern *Lygodium reticulatum* (*kwanuwaras*) and other forest species, such as *Hoya australis* (*nameramer*). After being cleaned, we learned that the vines must be heated over a fire, which serves to soften them, and that they must be tied while still warm. As the vines cool in place, they tighten and pull the house components together, offering strength and resilience to the forces of nature. By contrast, nails and screws can easily be pulled out when the structure is buffeted by strong winds. Construction proceeded throughout the week, and by the end of the *Kastom Skul*, the village had its new cyclone house.

In another part of the *nakamal*, children learned how to tie knots in order to make fishing nets and hammocks. They first practiced using store-bought rope, and then learned how to weave



the fiber from coconut fruit (*Cocos nucifera*, known locally as *napuei*) into a natural and long lasting rope, known in Nafe language as *nitara*. One person demonstrated how this coconut rope was used to wrap the roots and stem of a *tapunga kava* plant (*Piper methysticum*) to indicate the specific role this plant has in a *kastom* ceremony. As the participants learned, coconut is truly the tree of life in Vanuatu, having many important uses. Women from several different villages taught the participants how to weave coconut leaves into thatch, hats, baskets, mats and siding for houses. The 'coconut group' became a forum for information exchange, with some of the younger women from other areas teaching elders the coconut weaving patterns from their own village. As we saw in this case and with others, information flow was not only from the old to the young, but among all members of the assembled group, no matter what their age—everyone was eager to share what they knew.

On day three of the *skul* there was a session of traditional games or '*kastom ple ple*', with the community learning traditional games that had provided both entertainment and memory-sharpening skills to generations past. A game from Futuna Island called '*Amkea Tasi*' was played with seashell parts. The shells were arranged in rows, in a diamond



shaped array, and the player was given a small amount of time to memorize the pattern in which they were placed. The player then turned his back, while a second person removed one shell from each row as directed by the player, who then announced how many shells remained in that row. With the successive removal of a shell from each row, the diamond shape got progressively smaller, and a circle of observers waited with excitement for the player to make a mistake in his math or memory, and thus be dismissed from the game. According to Dr. K. David Harrison, senior linguist on the project, exercises such as this teach spatial reasoning and mathematical cognitive skills, and also the ability to publicly put one's skills on display. While seemingly simple, this game was in fact quite challenging, evoking loud laughter and catcalls at a person's mistakes and providing respect to those who correctly completed the game.

Throughout the *nakamal* and on the grassy ridge above, people gathered in small groups to teach their particular skills, proudly showing what they learned from their parents and grandparents and encouraging younger people to carry this on. The sound of traditional flute music emanated from one corner, after a master flautist showed how to make a flute from the stems of a local reed. In another, a wood carver demonstrated how to make the spool of a fishing line as well as toy canoes for playing in the streams, providing young boys with visions of one day canoeing on the sea and catching fish. Up on the ridge, the smell of cooking fires wafted over the area. There, women demonstrated traditional food preparation methods, such as how to grind carrots and other root crops with the base of the tree-fern leaf of *Spheropteris lunulata* (*nukwetou*). Once foods were prepared in the traditional way, different customary cooking technologies were demonstrated, such as steaming foods in a bamboo stem over a fire, or wrapping foods in a special tree bark, placed directly on the fire. Experts in local culinary methods such as *Numalin Mahana* spoke about how traditional foods are grown, prepared and eaten—and why they are more nutritious and satisfying than imported foods. When all of the foods were prepared, a special meal was offered to everyone in the *skul*, which gave us all the opportunity to taste not only the traditional recipes for delicious foods but to learn how each preparation method contributed to the taste and texture of the food.





This first Kastom Skul was an extraordinary success, and we are grateful to the three dozen or so teachers, field workers and community members who generously

took the time to excite young people about their kastom and to help bridge the intergenerational gap in knowledge transmission that is fundamental to maintaining cultural memory and

identity as Tannese people. We also express our most sincere gratitude to the Christensen Fund for supporting this important cultural activity, and to the villagers of latukwei who hosted it.

