

## | PLANTS MO PIPOL **BLONG VANUATU** |

*With Gregory M. Plunkett and Michael J. Balick  
from the New York Botanical Garden*

### LEAVES OF OUR DISPOSITION

## Plant *Fashion* in TANNA

Story by R. Sean Thackurdeen, Research Assistant, The New York Botanical Garden, Plants Mo Pipol Program. Mr. Thackurdeen has participated in numerous field trips to Vanuatu since 2014 and wishes to acknowledge the guidance from many communities in Tafea Province that has made this research project possible.



**B**ehind the scenes of Vanuatu's first internationally heralded film, Tanna, is another story that captures the imagination. The traditional lifestyle portrayed in the film draws from the natural beauty of Tanna Island, where plants help animate and guide traditional life. Nearly every

scene in the film is a homage to the verdant botanical culture of Vanuatu. We see neither polyester for clothes, nor plastic bags for sacks, nor precious metals for decoration. Instead, we find their garden equivalents, and the ingenuity and beauty of a material culture intertwined with the forest.

During the filming of Tanna, researchers from the Plants mo Pipol (Plants and People) project had the privilege of visiting the scene of the film, Yakel. There we met Chief Jimmy, Dain and the members of the village, who took us on a guided walk through the bush. During our walk, we collected plants and asked questions about these plants, their names and their

cultural significance.

In Yakel, the most immediate and obvious uses of plant are those worn by men, women and children. As a community that has chosen to revive the cultural traditions of their ancestors, known as *kastom*, all of the villagers regularly wear traditional clothing. The dress is fascinating and often enchanting, as it communicates a lifestyle grounded in local gardens and forests.

The men unmistakably wear *nambas*—a fringed skirt with an erect sheath. *Nambas* consists of several parts, including a strap (akin to a belt), a woven sheath, and a fringe hanging below the sheath. The sheath and the fringe can be made from several plants such as *Wikstroemia indica*, or *Urena lobata*, known as *Kotalileua* in the Nahual language of Yakel.

To produce the fiber used to weave the sheath and used for the fringe, small stems are taken and peeled. Then the outer portion of the stem is peeled again to leave the pale -coloured inner stem. Sometimes, before the stems are peeled, they are soaked in seawater, where they are weighed down by stones. This process, known as *retting*, helps to soften the fibers and makes it easier to remove the inner stem. The soaking and drying simultaneously blanches the stems, and gives the clothing a distinct off-white color.

Women's clothing consists largely of grass skirts, which similar to men, only cover the lower portion of the body. Plants used to make skirts, however, are more numerous than those for *nambas*.

In parts of Tanna, *nambas* are worn sparingly, whereas grass skirts are ubiquitous. *Urena lobata*, a relative of hibiscus, is used to make the skirts. *Dracaena* sp., *Phlegmariurus phlegmaria*, and *Sida rhombifolia* can also be used. Local people weave grass skirts in a method similar to making *nambas*. First, a strap is twisted and sized to the waist. Then, long portions of blanched inner stems are fastened to, or draped over the strap.

Often aromatic plants are included in the preparation of a skirt. *Euodia hortensis*, a member of the lime family, has a potent citrus aroma and is worn during *kastom* ceremonies. Branches of this plant are hung down, fastened to the skirt strap. In the past, aromatic plants such as *Alpinia zerumbet* or *Zingiber zerumbet*, both relatives of ginger, could be used to make the entire skirt. The 3-foot-long stems, each containing numerous long leaves, were twisted and macerated, draped over the skirt strap, to form a sweet-smelling skirt.

Men will often wear aromatic plants as well, though never with the *nambas* or *salu-salu* - a long piece of calico wrapped and worn about the waist. Instead, during *kastom* ceremonies, a *tikinupai*, or armband is woven from the dried outer part of stem from a plant such as *Donax canniformis* or *Flagellaria indica*. Then, a branch of a fragrant plant such as *Euodia*, locally called *nisei*, is placed in the armband.

Fragrance plants play an important part in both clothing and *kastom* ceremonies. In Yakel and elsewhere in Tanna, fragrant plants and fibres are interwoven to make

the clothing worn during significant events. During these times, dancing ensues without cessation from sunset to sunrise, and as dancers move vigorously and waft the plants' aromatic oils into the air, the potent smell of *Euodia hortensis* is released for all to enjoy.

In Tanna, traditional clothing forms an essential part of *kastom*. Though many villagers have abandoned the practice of wearing *nambas* and grass skirts all the time, during periods of celebration this dress is donned to maintain a link with one's culture. Appropriately, when the cast of Tanna traveled abroad to attend award ceremonies, the most portable emblem of Vanuatu was the traditional dress worn throughout the film. On the Red Carpet, Dain and Wawa sported foreign objects that intrigued many and stunned others. *Nambas* on the Red Carpet is not something the world of film fashion had expected to experience! Nevertheless, these symbols most clearly said "Mifala blong Vanuatu".

## Acknowledgements

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**Previous page:** At Chief's day in SE Tanna. Nalau Nasep, an expert in traditional plant knowledge, wears a customary armband (*Tikinupai*), with the blanched leaves of *Euodia hortensis*. By Michael J. Balick. **This page left:** Marceline and Dain wearing the full complement of traditional clothes. By Bentley Dean, Martin Butler. **This page right:** Mungau Dain temporarily traded his bow and arrow for a pole clipper, used to collect plants. By Kate E. Armstrong.

