

| PLANTS MO PIPOL **BLONG VANUATU** |

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Message Plants in an Age of Communication

The people of Vanuatu have a rich cultural history and an intense desire to maintain these cultural practices as living traditions, enshrined in the concept of *kastom*. But managing this in a rapidly changing and globalizing world can prove to be a great challenge.

We are scientists at the New York Botanical Garden who study the plants of the world's tropical regions, along with their uses by local peoples. Realizing that Vanuatu had no national list of its many plant species, we helped to initiate a project to document the kinds and uses of the plants found here. Building on a relationship we had forged with members of the Vanuatu National Herbarium (including curator Chanel Sam and assistant curator Philemon Ala) and the Department of Forestry (especially Presley Dovo), we decided to start the project in the southern province of Tafea, where plant diversity is known to be especially great. We also discussed the project with the late Chief Jacob Kapere of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, who was kind enough to put us in touch with the Centre's local branch in Tanna, the Tafea Kaljoral Senta (TKS), where we teamed up with field worker Jean-Pascal Wahe. Since that time, the Herbarium, Forestry, TKS, and the New York Botanical Garden have been partners in this project.

During our first two visits, we met with community members to gauge their interest in participating in the documentation of plants and plant uses. In many areas, we saw signs of rapid erosion of such knowledge, where grandparents



knew the traditional information, but their children, and even more so their grandchildren, had experienced a growing alienation from the natural world, especially as they became more dependent on modern approaches to life. In village after village, the elders expressed to us how they had been hoping and 'waiting their whole lives' for someone to help them preserve their plant knowledge. In this recurring column, we hope to share some of the results of our work with local people in Tafea.

Today, mobile phones are increasingly important for conveying information. But in the traditional life of the people of Aneityum, before mobiles became common, it was plants that played a critical role in communication. Reuben Neriam, who is dedicated to preserving Aneityumese *kastom*, explained that in the times before the missionaries, people did not exchange greetings such as 'good morning' or 'hello'. Instead, if two men were to cross paths, one would step to the side and look down, so as not to disturb the other person, who might be deep in thought about his garden or other important matters. Likewise, it was

considered disrespectful to deliver news of an important event, such as a birth or death, by telling another person directly what had happened. Instead, the bearer of good or bad news would find a stick from a particular plant species, cut it into small pieces (about 30 cm long), place them at the entrance of the house of the other person, and then wander off. Upon finding the sticks, the other person would immediately know that a message was to be delivered, and he would go in search of the messenger and invite him into his home. Only after completing a polite conversation about other matters would the recipient finally ask if the messenger had some news to deliver.

Such 'message plants' convey important information between members of the same village or tribe, or between different tribes. As Reuben explained, each region of Aneityum had a certain species that represents that tribe when delivering a message to someone from another tribe. The plant that signifies Reuben's area of Anelcauhat is a common coastal tree, *Hibiscus tiliaceus*, also known as *burao* in Bislama or *intophau* in the language of Aneityum.



Left: The team collecting specimens from Aneityum learns about plant uses. **This page top left:** Schizaea Dichotoma. **Top right:** Greg and Reuben talk about hibiscus. **Bottom right:** Reuben placing Hibiscus on doorstep.

Several other villagers from the area near Anelcauhat explained that some plant species may convey a more particular message. Working closely with Wopa Nasauman, Yaiyaho Keith, Dick Mateneke, and two brothers, Japanese and Titiya Lalep, they explained that several small fern-like species of Selaginella, known as ngemas or necemas in Aneityumese (and as spikemosses in English), send a message that somebody has died. The messenger walks past someone with this plant in his hand or on his head, or sometimes hands it to the other person directly, prompting that person to ask the messenger the name of the person who has passed away. Reuben and Yaiyaho explained that a small yellow daisy, *Wollastonia biflora*, known as intop asiej or intop asiejora in their language, was placed on the doorstep of another person to indicate that he wished to break an agreement. Wopa and Japanese explained that a special grass species, *Isachne comate*, known as nautahs in Aneityum, was used to send a message to a songwriter. When a musician received this plant, he recognized this as a request to compose a new song.

Sometimes the messages conveyed are connected to other uses of the plant. As Titiya explained, the small but beautiful fern *Schizaea dichotoma*, known as nirith u numu in Aneityum, is often rubbed on a fishing line to help attract fish, instead of bait. Therefore, by extension, when the fisherman returns from a successful day in his canoe, he places

this same plant in his hat as signal that he caught some fish. He also explained that the ground orchids of the genus *Spathoglottis* can have several meanings. Their beautiful flowers convey a sense of romance, as orchids do in many societies, and when a young man puts these flowers behind his ear or places them on a table, and then stares at a woman, he sends a subtle invitation that the woman should follow him. If instead he should stare at another man, it is an invitation for the two men to meet in the nakamal to share some kava or to go for a swim together.

The beach-bean (*Canavalia rosea*), called nahajcgí in Aneityumese, is a low-growing vine with purple flowers that grows along the beach. Titiya explained that this plant is used to convey the message that a person would like to build a new house or establish a new garden at a particular spot. By wrapping this vine around a stick and placing it in the ground, he signals that this area is tabu or forbidden, and that other people should stay away. He explained that another vine, a parasitic plant known as inwouityuwun (with the scientific name *Cassytha filiformis*), may be carried by a



stranger from another village to convey the message that he is visiting in peace. The same message is conveyed by holding a branch of *Euodia hortensis*, a small tree or shrub with a strong, almost pungent fragrance, known as masing in Bislama and inpa in Aneityumese.

These few examples of the many “message plants” found in Vanuatu demonstrate the rich interplay between plants, culture, and communication. We all benefit from modern advances like email and mobile phones, but the immediacy of these modern methods is so often intrusive, even aggressive, especially when compared to the subtlety of traditional communication in Aneityum, which highlights a gentler and more refined means of conveying messages with greater respect and dignity. We could all learn a few lessons from these great gifts of the ancestors.