

Plants mo Pipol blong Vanuatu

NANGARIA: A Common Plant with Some Uncommon Uses

Story and photography courtesy of Gregory M. Plunkett and Michael J. Balick.

Global economists often describe Vanuatu as a 'poor country', but in their calculations, they often fail to account for Vanuatu's richness in natural resources and culture. The long-term challenge is to maintain these traditional sources of wealth into the future during a period of rapid globalization, just as ni-Vanuatu have done over many centuries in the past. Our project, Plants mo Pipol blong Vanuatu, works with local people to document the country's amazing flora, the traditional uses of its plant species, and their indigenous names. In doing so, we hope to help preserve both the plants themselves, and the *kastom* (customary cultural) practices that so heavily depend on the local flora. In working to achieve these goals, we have often been amazed that a simple question about how a plant is used by local people can lead to a remarkably profound discussion of Vanuatu's rich history and varied *kastom*.

In our last contribution to this ongoing series, we discussed croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*), a common plant cultivated in almost every village across Vanuatu, prized because of its colorful leaves and many cultural uses. Here, we discuss another colorful plant, *Cordyline fruticososa*, known in Bislama as *nangaria*. In English, it often called the 'ti plant' or 'palm lily', but it is neither a palm nor a lily. Instead, it belongs to the plant family *Asparagaceae*, which also includes the cultivated asparagus, as well as *Sansevieria* (snake plant), *Agave* (which gives us tequila), and the hyacinths. *Dracaena*, another plant in the same family, can also be found in Vanuatu, and because the two plants look superficially similar,



LEFT Red *nangaria* with brightly colored red-purple striped leaves.

TOP RIGHT White *nangaria* with yellow-green-striped leaves.

BOTTOM RIGHT Young fruits of *Cordyline fruticosa*.

NEXT PAGE Close up of *Cordyline fruticosa* flowers.

they are sometimes both called by the same Bislama name.

Cordyline fruticosa is thought to be native to southeastern Asia and northern Australia. It can be found growing throughout the Pacific Islands, but no one knows for sure whether it is native here, or introduced by the early Pacific settlers, like so many other important plants used by the islanders. If introduced, it has certainly become a naturalized part of Vanuatu's flora and can frequently be found growing in the forests here, even quite far from any village. In natural populations, *nangaria* is usually an unbranched small tree with uniformly green leaves. To reproduce, the plant generates a huge 'panicle' or cluster of many tiny white to pink flowers, which develop into bright red berries following pollination. Inside the fruit, there are shiny black seeds.

Our project partners Jean-Pascal and Martial Wahe, two brothers from South Tanna, explained that the plant is considered sacred in their *kastom*. In the forest, these plants are considered important markers along traditional walking trails, known as 'kastom roads' (which themselves serve as metaphors for the traditional Tannese way of life). This ancient network of trails circled and traversed the island for many centuries before the arrival of Europeans, and continue to be used today. Some *kastom* roads connect coastal or lowland villages, traveling through well-populated areas. These trails are easy to follow. But others roads cross high mountain passes and are more rarely used, perhaps only to visit remote relatives for important rituals, or to visit sacred sites such as Tanna's two tallest mountains, Tukosmera and Malen. Martial and his cousin Joseph



Kahi Narkahau (from the village of Lighthouse, in far south Tanna) both told us the same story about walking along these *kastom* roads. They explained that local people, at the start of a journey, will leave a small gift to the local spirit of the area along the side of the trail, such as a little meat or some *tabak*, which is locally produced tobacco, braided into cords. Failure to leave such a gift results in the spirit 'hiding the road', and the travelers become lost in the forest as a result. While walking across these remote stretches, people use *nangaria* as an important marker for navigating through the forest, and it is believed that cutting *Cordyline* trees will also induce the spirit to hide the road. So, when we work with local people, we must always be careful to ask whether a plant can be touched, and whether we can take a small sample of its leaves, flowers, and fruits to make a scientific specimen.

In villages, *Cordyline fruticosa* can be found growing around people's houses, in their gardens, around gathering areas known as *nakamals*, and along the roads as hedges or 'living fences'. Unlike the wild populations, which have uniformly green leaves, the cultivated plants in the villages are usually brightly colored. Two important color variations are especially common, plants with bright red or purple-red leaves (known as red *nangaria*), and those with pale green or yellowish-green leaves (known as white *nangaria*). Both varieties often have leaves with striped patterns, in which darker and lighter shades of these colors alternate. Sam Nauka, Sam Natou, and Philip Wahe, all from southeastern Tanna, told us that the stems of the cultivated *nangaria* are important for harvesting kava roots. Metal spades are never used for this purpose, both for the practical reason that they too easily cut the valuable roots, and for the sake of *kastom*. In preparing to dig up kava roots, local people first cut down the stem of a *nangaria* plant, and then use the sharpened end of this stem together with their hands to carefully excavate the long kava roots. In this way, they show respect to the kava plant, which they also consider sacred.

Martial Wahe and many other local people, including Frazer Alo (a project partner from South Santo), explained that the leaves of the white *nangaria* are widely used to wrap food for cooking, either in a ground oven or in a pot of boiling water. A variety of foods can be cooked this way, ranging from grated yam or manioc to fish. While the leaves of this plant are not eaten, the swollen roots can be. Both Takaroga Kuataroga from Futuna and the late Titiya Lalep from Aneityum explained that the plant is pulled out of the ground, and the tuberous root is then

cooked in a ground oven over an extended period of time, for at least two days. After cooking, the root of *nangaria* is eaten in a manner similar to sugarcane, by chewing it to obtain the sweet juice and then spitting out the fibrous material. Titiya had explained that the cooked root can last for up to six months without spoiling, and therefore it is an excellent "famine food" during times of scarcity brought on by natural disasters, such as cyclones or droughts.

Both *Cordyline fruticosa* and the related species of *Dracaena* are frequently used as material for making grass skirts. There are many ways of doing this, but in Tanna, one of the most prized methods involves bleaching the leaves of their color, either by leaving them in the sun or by "retting" them in salt water. The leaves are then folded accordion-style and boiled, then dried. After this process, the long, strap-like leaves take on an attractive pattern and three-dimensional shape that adds to the beauty of the grass skirt. The plant also has other decorative uses. Frazer Alo reported that it is frequently used to mark gravesites, and also during an important *kastom* dance ceremony from South Santo called the *porsusul*. Many other people reported that this species is a highly prized ornamental plant, grown for its bright colors.

Cordyline fruticosa also has several important uses in traditional health care. In West Tanna, Paulin Kalip and Marian Nalau explained that the "juice" of the leaves can be squeezed into water and be given to a teething baby to reduce excessive salivation (but this treatment can also induce vomiting, so care must be taken). In a related use, Jean-Pascal Wahe explained that the young leaves, which are naturally rolled up like a straw, may be inserted into the mouth and down the throat of a young baby, and then twisted, in order to remove mucous from the baby's throat. After the leaf is removed, the infant will vomit a little bit, further clearing out his throat, and is then given a little saltwater to drink. In Aneityum, our guide Rosita explained that leaves from white *nangaria* (called *inrowth* in her language) can be mixed with leaves from one of the native *nabanga* or banyan trees and chewed together, then spat onto the forehead of a person suffering a headache caused by a bad spirit. Frazer Alo noted that leaves from this plant (called *gee* in his South Santo language of Mores) are used by local women as a native version of feminine pads during menstruation. In Aneityum, our partner Tony Keith reported that the leaves can be boiled to make an herbal tonic that helps slow menstrual bleeding. Another local name for the plant in the Aneityum language is *inrowth amya*, in which "*amya*" refers to menstruation.



Back on Tanna, we first learned from Jack Iawia, from the village of Lowkwaria in West Tanna, that the red and white *nangaria* trees represent two Tannese tribes that had long been at war with each other. Today, people plant both color morphs in the same garden to represent the peace that now exists between these two tribes. We asked the Wahe brothers from South Tanna to elaborate on this story, and they provided intriguing insights into the history and culture of their island. In the times before the Europeans arrived, there were tribal wars between two groups of people, who were represented by two ships or canoes. The Kawiameta (meaning “big ship”), came from the western and northern parts of the island, and were symbolized by the red *nangaria*. The Numruhkwen (meaning ‘small ship’) came from southern and eastern Tanna, and were symbolized by the white *nangaria*. These two tribes fought many wars in the past. Today, they live together peacefully in every village, but a distinction is

maintained in the open-air *nakamals* (or “*nemarem*”, as they are known in the Nafe language of South Tanna). There, people from the two tribes still sit in different areas during community meetings or at times of kava drinking. During important *kastom* ceremonies (such as circumcision rituals), a special kava plant known as the *tapunga* is elaborately decorated. The roots are dressed with cord made from coconut fibers, but the stems are decorated with “flags” made from the leaves of either the red or white *nangaria*, depending on the family’s tribal affiliation. The practice of planting these two color varieties together in the same garden, symbolizing the peace that now exists between these formerly warring tribes, is a remarkable gesture of harmony, marked by living plants in the living *kastom* of Vanuatu. ❁

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