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War and military matters in Vanuatu: an overview

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Two or three things about representations of war and military matters in Vanuatu

Since its independence in 1980, Vanuatu has often been described as a paradise. First as a tax haven with one of the least regulated offshore centers. Later on, for tourism purposes, as a tropical paradise. More recently, it has become a textbook case for alternative socio-economic indicators to assess levels of development. Indeed, Vanuatu usually ranks high on the Happy Planet Index. Despite living in one of the least developed countries, the ni-Vanuatu people are supposed to be among the happiest in the world. Even after the huge destruction and suffering caused by Cyclone Pam in 2016, the Vanuatu Tourism Board was still able to announce that "Vanuatu is still smiling" because smiles and happiness is guaranteed as part of the indigenous culture.

So taking an interest in how war is portrayed in Vanuatu, and the interest people have in military matters, might seem paradoxical? It would be ignoring the country's history from colonial times to today. In fact, even though Vanuatu has never officially experienced war since independence, some significant armed actions occurred shortly after independence. However, for a long time, these were depicted as a simple and brief rebellion, which was mocked by international media as a "coconut war".

Since the first contacts with Europeans, initiated by the Spaniards in the 17th century and then by the British in the 18th century, the New Hebrides acquired a reputation for savagery, islands where the degree of primitiveness was matched only by widespread violence. The hostility of these islanders discouraged any attempts at colonial conquest until a Franco-British condominium was imposed in the early 20th century. The resurgence of tribal warfare, fueled by the spread of firearms, was also exacerbated by the anarchic settlement of conflicts between settlers, traders and natives. The ultra-coercive policies of certain churches did not hesitate to resort to physical punishment in addition to usual moral violence. In turn, the murder of missionaries contributed to turn this field of evangelization into a land of martyrdom. Finally, even after the establishment of a colonial control, with armed forces engaged into a "gunboat" strategy against rebellious villages, the archipelago was long considered as a frontier line of civilization, a lawless Wild West.

The first indigenous uprisings took the form of murders of Europeans, some accompanied by millenarian hopes against the colonial rule. On the southern island of Tanna, at the end of the 1930s, protest against the missionaries and the colonial order took the form of a politico-religious movement. Its adherents claimed to be the followers of a mysterious spirit called John Frum, a name derived from the English broom, a messiah who was supposed to wipe out the island of the evil foreign influences. The cult leaders of this movement predicted months in advance, with great hope, the extension of the Second World War in the Pacific and the landing of American troops in the New Hebrides. And it was with these troops, many of whom were African Americans, that the islanders of Vanuatu became familiar with modern military affairs.

From 1942 onwards, the New Hebrides were not the scene of any fighting, but they did serve as a rear base for the American army, which was engaged further north in the Solomons. Thousands of Melanesians from across the archipelago were recruited as manpower alongside the hundreds of thousands of GIs who stayed until 1946 in the two naval air bases in Efate and Santo.

After the war, local militias were formed under the command of the French and British authorities. The first Melanesians recruited as modern soldiers, army in Bislama, allowed to handle weapons and sometimes even trained for parachute jumping.

The 1970s started a new period of highly nationalistic demands, this time to claim independence. The tensions between the francophone and Catholic Melanesian communities and the anglophones

predominantly Presbyterian, influenced by the disagreements between the condominium authorities, were exacerbated to the point of giving birth to a series of separatist movements on several of the archipelago's larger islands.

In Santo, this crisis occurred as a real secessionist attempt, with the Nagriamel movement declaring the sovereignty of its own state. Disregarded as a rebellion by the nationalist leaders, it was mocked in the international press as a folkloric coconut war. This secessionist attempt, which led first to the intervention of French and British troops, ended in a very violent crackdown by Papuan troops on groups opposed to the central power of the Anglophone nationalists. The memory of this repression has left a strong mark on the historical consciousness of the francophone communities.

The aim of my intended paper is to explore these memories of war and the military matters. But also, and above all, to consider the ways in which an older historical memory is now being transcribed from one generation to the next in its vision of war and of martial spirit. From my first fieldwork in the 1990s, I was immediately struck by warmonger considerations, if not fascination, that many of my informants had for martial visions of modern conflicts. From the regret that tensions at independence had not degenerated into open conflict and confrontation between French and British militias, to the enthusiasm among young French speakers for joining the French Foreign Legion, today the range of positive feelings about the value of the military and the idealization of combat is wide.

I'll end this proposal with an anecdote that I think says a great deal about my topic.

During my second research trip to Vanuatu in 1995, I felt particularly anxious and ashamed at the thought of justifying the unjustifiable as a French citizen in relation to the resumption of French nuclear testing in Polynesia. During a group interview with Isak Wan, one of the leaders of the John Frum movement in Tanna, I was told that, on the contrary, I should be proud of these tests. An objection that is often shared among francophones, even when expressed less radically. My reply to Isak was: "But come on, Isak, the nuclear tests were intended to produce bombs, to make war, even though France has no declared enemies"; "Of course", Isak replied with a cynicism I hadn't expected, "France is right, after these tests it will be able to declare war on Australia and then to bomb it!