



Of Men-Place: an ethno-poem

Jacopo Baron, January 2025

On the island of Malakula, part of the nation of Vanuatu, when the time is deemed right by their elders, the youth of the community partake in a coming-of-age ceremony to become *manples*: literally “men-place.” Anthropologist Jacopo Baron reflects on his personal involvement in these rituals and on the profound bond that Malakulans cultivate with the land they inhabit.

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*Welsb: In this world, a man himself is nothing. And there ain't no world, but this one.
Witt: You're wrong, there, Top: I've seen another world. Sometimes I think it was just my imagination.*

The Thin Red Line, 1998

In December 2022, I was in Burbar, a village on the southeast coast of Malakula, South Pacific, to attend and document the initiation rite of my classificatory son.

In a very general way, we may say that this coming of age ritual – once widespread throughout the southern part of the island – aims to foster connections between the boys of a given paternal lineage, their ancestors and the spirits of the land, to promote their rooting as

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manples (English: indigenous inhabitants, lit. ‘men-place’).

This is because in this horticultural society the relation between man and land goes far beyond the mere understanding of the latter as a means of material sustenance: this connection – this bond, this partial identification between man and place – is the fundamental core upon which rests a local form of understanding of the Cosmos, of Life, and Time.

The importance of this link is such that, denying what would seem obvious, according to indigenous myths the Man of Malakula did not come from the sea; he sprung up from the earth, sprouted from its plants, and it is only through the cyclical renewal of the communion with their ancestors and the spirits of the place that present-day people – pale shadows of a pervasive and immanent spiritual world – are able to obtain from the earth the nurture they need. In other words, spirits, men and the place of their fathers form a single, inseparable, necessary unity.

But this unity is not given just once and for all; it must be cultivated through the tending of young men-place. For this purpose, when the elders of a given house believe that the time is ripe, they gather their youth and subject them to their first initiation. A high palisade of wood and coconut fronds is erected in front of the nakamal (the men’s house, whose access is forbidden to women and children) separating it from the nasara (the dancing ground).

This is not a mere spatial separation: crossing the newly established threshold entails entering a world in which the veil separating the lives of the men from those of the spirits becomes thinner, and as such, requires the sacrifice of pigs and the flow of blood. I, too, have crossed the threshold, but respect for the laws of Malakula compels me to say nothing of what I have seen beyond it. All I can share is that, once in



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the ritual enclosure, the boys partake in some of the group's secrets, beginning to *realise* the bond they hold with the spirits of the place – a bond that will take deeper and deeper root during successive initiations.

Then, when judged ready by the elders, the boys are finally reintroduced into the community: the event is celebrated with a whole night of ritual dances and chants, in the middle of which the palisade is torn down, revealing a stunning set of images. These materialise, in their exceptional colours, the tangible connection between men and spirits – the ultimate source of all generative efficacy: pure life-power, through which a new generation of men-place can flourish in the world.

It was an afternoon just before Christmas. We were working within the ritual enclosure, when we received a visit from a delegation of savvy men from the neighbouring community of Ronowie. The high-ranking men welcomed the honourable guests and showed the state of the preparations. The men of Ronowie asked about me – in the local, indirect fashion – and the men of Burbar explained how I had been adopted, made my sacrifices and thus allowed into that holy place. They nodded in assent. The discussions were prolonged, and after the chanting of the cicadas, darkness fell upon us.

We sat together by the glimmering fire and I finally found my peace: with the dying of the day the mosquitos that had tormented my flesh since dawn were no more. To complete my delight, I was offered a large bowl of kava, a traditional drink obtained from a plant of the pepper family, with a pleasant narcotic effect. I stood up, tilted the coconut shell so that the first drops of juice could fall to the ground in homage to the ancestors, murmured the words of thanks, and then emptied it in one gulp.



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The men of Ronowie, impressed by the propriety of my gestures, abandoned their initial reticence and gathered around me, manifestly intrigued. They asked me where I came from, what I was seeking. In a few moments, the familiar numbness of my lips announced that the kava was beginning to take effect. I replied that I had come in search of another World, because I did not like my own. They murmured in approval, then their leader revealed to me that a few days later, another initiation ceremony would be held in the mountains, in the heart of the dark tropical forest. I could attend it with them, if I wanted. It was my turn to be surprised. I had never been into the *dakbus* (English: interior of the island, lit. dark bush), before. My gaze indulged the blue tongues rising from the holy fire. I inhaled the smoky air with pleasure, and then accepted.

In the early morning of December 29th, I made my way to the village landing point, located north of the mangroves that hide and protect Burbar's huts from the fury of tropical storms. I waited there for a while, thinking that perhaps, after all those *shells* of kava, the people of Ronowie had forgotten our arrangement. But then they appeared, coming from the southwest. Engine idling, the yellow fibreglass boat slowly approached the shore: to my surprise, no less than twenty people had already found a place aboard. At the same time, I advanced in the water until it reached my knees, then jumped in. The boat turned around and started to head northeast, up the coast.

Not for a moment the spontaneous, almost lazy unfolding of those events would have ever led me to think that, by embarking barefoot on that overcrowded boat, I was throwing myself into one of the most mind-bending experiences of my entire life. Yet so it was.

I have no words to describe what I felt in the days that followed. They passed quickly, and yet so slowly, and their sounds and smells, at times, still vividly emerge in my mind. I cannot really explain myself how I endured the hammering rain, the cold and the drenched clothes, the river stones hurting my feet while advancing against the current, the perpetual dancing through the night in the mud – spiralling again and again around the bamboo drum, yearning for a dawn that seemed to never come.

Yet I did it, and if I did it, it is because I was not alone. I found strength in the example of my comrades and warmth in the thought of the people I love. And through this, as I sank deeper and deeper into the dancing ground – literally *becoming* a man-place – I found myself ethereally away, thousands and thousands of miles away, in the warmth of my bed, my fingers in the hair of my sleeping son, my eyes, cleansed of mud, in the smiling eyes of my love. Another form of necessary unity.

Three days after my departure, the ceremony over, I returned to Burbar. I said goodbye to my new friends on the shore, and I began walking up the spade-carved path that from the village leads to the hill of Rapeghbo, my family's land. I entered the yard, the chickens clucking at the reappearance of my figure. Winnie, my foster mother, was sitting under the shed, peeling taros. She looked at me with a perplexed frown, in the same way she would do with someone whose identity she could not recall at a glance. Indeed, she was quite right. I felt different – enlightened, unburdened.

I did not say a word, but smiled, to reassure her I was quite alright. She smiled back and I gratefully thanked her for asking nothing more. I entered my hut, and before I got used to the dark, I threw myself on the pandanus mat, grabbed a pencil, and wrote these verses in my notebook. Then, I fell asleep.

Two years have passed since those moments. Yet, I remember them as if it were yesterday.

Or rather, sometimes I can still *feel* them – like a kind of queer, lucid dream.

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We sailed up the coast against the wind in the morning light – the foam of the waves whitened our faces with the salt of the Sea.

We rounded the reef, and touched land at Black Sands.

We crossed the Red Grounds, feeding on coconut shoots on our path to the mountains

and marched into the Dead Waters, making our way through the swaying reeds.

We forded the Pangkumu River – fifteen times, and one time more – in the pouring rain, our bare feet darting between the stones.

We left behind the village of Melken and its dead fires, ascending towards the island's peaks, through misty clouds and mud and rotten leaves, in the dusk, towards the heart of the forest. Six more times the Pangkumu met our swift steps.

With the first darkness, we reached the ancestors' home, and the nembumsara – their dancing ground. We gird our heads with fragrant leaves, prayed, and began to dance.

From dusk to dawn, the drums shall beat the rhythm of the initiates, from dusk to dawn the drums shall beat the rhythm of the ancestors. This is the Nalawan, the Initiation into the Mysteries.

The blackness of the sky rumbles with thunder, water pours over the earth. The fierce storm overpowers our singing – we sink ankle-deep in the mud of the nembumsara, mud in our mouths, mud in our eyes, plots of confused bodies stir in the darkness of quenched torches. But not yet. With the force of the Dream, we dance. Splinters leap from the drums beaten with new vigour, our song pierces the clouds.

From dusk to dawn, we shall dance. The pig's tusk has completed the spiral, the hawk soars high to the glory of the sky. So we, in the spiral of our dance, we are the ancestors – again – and the spirits, once more.

The night gives way.

Shreds of dark vapour open to the dawn, the navilbala sings.

The sky turns blue.

We dance.

We danced until dawn. We won the dawn.

The young men-place can cross the threshold.

The rite is accomplished.

Praise the men.

Praise the spirits.

Praise God.

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Original version:

Abbiamo risalito la costa controvento nella luce del mattino – la spuma delle onde ha imbiancato di sale il nostro viso.

Abbiamo aggirato il reef, e toccato terra alle Sabbie Nere.

Abbiamo attraversato le Terre Rosse, cibandoci di germogli di cocco sulla via.

Abbiamo marciato nelle Acque Morte, facendoci strada tra le canne selvatiche.

Abbiamo guadato il fiume Pangkumu – quindici volte, e una volta ancora – sotto la pioggia battente, i piedi nudi guizzanti tra le pietre.

Abbiamo superato il villaggio di Melken e i suoi fuochi spenti, salendo verso le vette dell'isola, tra le nubi e il fango e il fogliame, nel calar della sera, sino al cuore della foresta. Sei volte ancora il fiume Pangkumu ha conosciuto i nostri passi veloci.

Con il primo buio, abbiamo raggiunto la casa degli antenati, il loro terreno di danza: ci siamo cinti il capo con foglie profumate, abbiamo pregato, e abbiamo cominciato a danzare.

Dal tramonto all'alba, i tamburi batteranno il ritmo degli iniziati, dal tramonto all'alba i tamburi batteranno il ritmo degli antenati. Questa è Nalawan, l'Iniziazione ai Misteri.

Il nero del cielo rimbomba di tuono, l'acqua si riversa sulla terra. La tempesta feroce sovrasta il nostro canto – affondiamo fino alle caviglie nel fango del nasara, fango nella bocca, fango negli occhi, trame di corpi confusi si agitano nel buio delle torce spente. Ma non ancora. Con la forza del sogno, noi danziamo. Schegge saltano dai tamburi percossi con nuovo vigore, il nostro canto squarcia le nubi.

Dal tramonto all'alba, noi danziamo. La zanna del maiale ha completato la spirale, il falco sale alto verso la gloria del cielo. Così noi, nella spirale della danza, siamo gli antenati, di nuovo, e gli spiriti, una volta ancora.

La notte cede.

Brandelli di vapore oscuro aprono all'aurora, il navilbala canta.

Il cielo si fa azzurro.

Noi danziamo.

Abbiamo danzato fino all'alba. Abbiamo vinto l'alba.

I piccoli bagbevo possono varcare la soglia.

Il rito è compiuto.

Lode agli uomini.

Lode agli spiriti.

Lode a Dio.

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About the author

Jacopo Baron is an Italian ethnographer and social anthropologist. Trained in Pacific History (University of Milan), Pacific Ethnology (University of Turin), and Social Anthropology (EHESS - Paris), he has conducted several research projects in Vanuatu. He is currently spokesman in Europe for the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and Visiting Fellow at the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (University of East Anglia). His wide research interests include: Outdoor Education, Pacific History, Pacific Art, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Material Culture, Heritage Studies, and the Ethnography of ritual action. His most recent contributions include the essays *Unlearning to See in Melanesia* (Annales de la Fondation Fyssen); and *Ephemeral Images, Lasting Memories* (RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics).