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C. B. Humphreys

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THE SOUTHERN NEW HEBRIDES

AN ETHNOLOGICAL RECORD

BY

C. B. HUMPHREYS



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TO

M. KING, ESQ., C.B.E.

LATE H. M. COMMISSIONER IN THE
NEW HEBRIDES

AND THE MANY OTHER GOOD
FRIENDS IN THE ISLANDS
WITHOUT WHOSE HELP AND
INTEREST MY WORK WOULD
HAVE BEEN IMPOSSIBLE

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INTRODUCTION

THE following account of some of the ethnological conditions of the Southern New Hebrides is offered with a certain degree of hesitation, especially since Speiser's able and elaborate treatment of the entire group, including these islands, has just been issued after a protracted delay due presumably to the war. There are three reasons, however, which support the venture. In the first place, no other effort has yet been made to set down the general cultures of this area in English: secondly, the German work referred to does not deal exhaustively with the southern islands, with the exception of Tanna: and thirdly, no account has hitherto been published of the ethnology of Eromanga, which, though poor culturally, is not unimportant. This survey of the five southern islands—Tanna, Anaiteum, Futuna, Aniwa and Eromanga—is therefore offered in the hope that it will prove to be an ethnological record in convenient form for reference, guiltless, it is perhaps needless to say, of any literary or popular claim, but not without a certain value for the student of the Pacific area.

A glance at the map of the Pacific will show that, while these five islands are included nominally in the New Hebrides, they are more so by chance than for any other reason. There appears to be no more justification for calling them a part of the New Hebridean group than for excluding the Banks' Islands, for example, from the same. Eromanga certainly has more affinity with the Efatese culture to the north than with that of Tanna and the other southern islands, but since geographically it is grouped with the latter, it will be included with them in the following pages.

Apart from the writings of explorers, such as Captain Cook and Erskine, and of missionaries, such as Gunn, Robertson and Gray, very little has ever been published about this region of the Pacific. Cook describes some of the things he saw when he visited these islands on his second voyage; some of his company have published their accounts; and Erskine, in his journal of

a cruise among the islands of the Pacific, gives occasional references. The reports of Gunn, Robertson and Gray are necessarily more concerned with the missionary side of the question, though the last has recorded some extremely valuable information, as will be seen in the section dealing with Tanna. The work of Speiser has already been referred to, and although he gave some time to the southern islands, he was more concerned to study those lying north of the 18th parallel of S. latitude.

It must be confessed that it is a question if it is not too late even now for any perfect ethnological work to be done in these islands. Certainly four to five months spent in Tanna yielded extremely small returns, if judged by the results obtained in other remote parts of the world. The limited time at the disposal of the investigator is one reason for these rather meagre results; the sophistication of the natives, due to the length of time which has elapsed since they first came under the influence of the white man, is another and much more potent reason. In all ethnological work in the field the period devoted to getting one's bearings and to finding out which men are intelligent and willing to be questioned, and which men are not, consumes so much of the first part of the visit, that one has to leave, perhaps, just as these initial labours are beginning to bear fruit. As to the other reason, it is particularly true in the island of Tanna that the old order is just on the point of giving place to the new. The recollection of the ancient customs is still vivid in the minds of a few of the older men, but the difficulty of obtaining accurate information is extremely great, and the investigator has to be continually on his guard and check his results with unusual care.

This brings us to a consideration of the method adopted in the following pages. The division of the material obtained into subject groups is that suggested by Malinowski, and his plan of treatment of ethnological reports is followed throughout. The field work was largely carried on through the medium of long interviews with older men who were found, after repeated experiment, to be reliable in their recollection of ancient customs. After a sympathetic understanding was established with the native, matters generally went fairly smoothly. Usually several

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of the elder men stood or squatted around the old man being questioned. These were very ready to object to the statements of the latter, if they disagreed with him, and it is on this consensus of opinion that the field worker relies for the accuracy of his report. In certain cases, after mutual confidence had been established, interviews were conducted with one or two old chiefs alone, but this was only done after careful observation of the man and his mental processes, and was, with one exception, unusual. It must be admitted that there is constant danger of inaccuracy in this method of recording native customs, but no better method offers in a place where the field worker has not the time to acquire the language. Most interviews were carried on through an interpreter, and the writer considers himself fortunate that he had the willing and patient help of three men who had lived long enough in the islands (twenty-five, eighteen and ten years respectively) to ensure adequate knowledge of the native languages.

It is this question of the use of interpreters that is the crux of the whole matter in ethnological field work. To obtain the maximum result, the investigator must have an accurate knowledge of the language of the people among whom he is working, but this, for the average ethnologist, is impossible. Unless he has special linguistic attainments, a comprehensive understanding of a native dialect is obtained only after months, perhaps years, of patient effort, and is, for the ordinary field worker, out of the question. The only alternative is the use of the right man as interpreter. A man who has lived among the people, as missionary, as trader, as planter, or what you will, may have no knowledge of the native language beyond a few necessary words, or he may have a wide range of acquaintance with colloquialisms born of long and intimate association with the native in his special field. The writer counts himself fortunate that, in his case at least, the latter condition prevailed, and he finds it difficult to express his gratitude to the missionary and planter on Tanna, and the owner of the sheep station on Eromanga, for unlimited patience and unflagging interest in interviews that must have been, for the interpreter at least, periods of protracted and dreary monotony.

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Cases occur, of course, where some of the older men had experience in the old days on the Queensland plantations, where they acquired a fair knowledge of English, of which use could be made, but, on the whole, the honesty and accuracy of the interpreter are, as noted above, the crux of the matter, and on these attributes, in the cases referred to, the writer is willing to stake his reputation.

It was only in Tanna and Eromanga that these methods of work were adopted. Futuna and Aniwa were not personally visited by the writer, while the few hours passed ashore on the island of Anaiteum served merely to give a general idea of the geography of the place and a cursory glimpse of the inhabitants. The detailed study of Tanna and Eromanga has more value, however, if short accounts of the cultures of the other three islands of the group, gathered from records of other observers, are added in convenient form for comparison.

The three largest islands, Eromanga, Tanna and Anaiteum, extend in the order named from north-west to south-east between $18^{\circ} 30'$ and $20^{\circ} 15'$ S. and, roughly, from $168^{\circ} 55'$ E.—the approximate longitude of the most westerly point of Eromanga—to $169^{\circ} 45'$ E.—the approximate longitude of the most easterly point of Anaiteum. Aniwa lies about twelve miles north-east of Tanna, and Futuna is about forty-eight miles as the crow flies directly east of the centre of this island. Eromanga, which is the largest of the five islands, is about thirty-five miles in length from north-west to south-east, and has an average breadth of twenty-five miles. Tanna is about twenty-three miles long at its greatest length, from north-north-west to south-south-east, and six or seven miles wide at its narrowest point. Futuna has an area of four square miles, and Aniwa is also very small. Aniwa is low-lying, but Futuna is a precipitous mass of rock rising abruptly from the sea.

Tanna has the only active volcano in the group. It is a fairly regular cone of volcanic ash rising from a plain of the same deposit. The eastern side has been broken away by some former outburst and irregular streams of lava have made their way to the sea. These are mainly covered now by a dense vegetation, except in the case of a fairly recent flow, which is

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not yet entirely overgrown. The volcano constantly sends up quantities of incandescent scoria from one or another of the several vents at the bottom of the crater, the intervals between the explosions being very irregular. There is a loud report at each outburst, varying more or less in intensity according to the direction of the wind. Sometimes these explosions occur at intervals of a few minutes for a day or two at a time; sometimes the volcano is practically quiescent for two or three days. The scoria leave a fine jet-like deposit on leaves and roofs to leeward of the crater for a distance of several miles, which, curiously, leaves no smudge if touched by the finger. Parts of the island remote from the crater are alone exempt from this visitation.

The Admiralty Chart of the islands gives the height of the volcano as only 600 feet above sea level, but it must be much higher, probably little less than 1000 feet. The highest point on the island, a mountain at the southern end, is given on the same chart as 3200 feet, but is probably higher as well. The shore line is a succession of coralline cliffs rising abruptly from the beach or directly from the sea. Outlying reefs are found only occasionally on the coast of the island, but there are no good harbours for sea-going craft. Those of Port Resolution and Sulphur Bay are exposed to the prevailing winds and are of no use to the infrequent mail steamer from Sydney. Port Resolution, though available at the time of Captain Cook's visit, is now so blocked at the entrance as to make it practically inaccessible. Several old tracks across the island have been widened into bridle paths and access from one part of the island to the other is easy and secure. Mission stations have been established for many years at Waisisi and Whitesands on the east coast and at Lenakel on the west. There were formerly other stations as well. Many of the inhabitants have been brought under Christian influence, but there are still numbers of bush people in the interior who are unconverted to Christianity. Except in modes of personal adornment there is no marked difference between these two groups. Fighting has been unknown since 1906 and the present population is believed to be a little under 6000 souls. The natives are, on the whole, a healthy folk, and fever and ague seem to be the only serious

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maladies. The population is on the increase and children are in evidence everywhere. There are eighteen or twenty whites on the island. These are the Government Agent, missionaries, planters, traders and their families.

The average annual rainfall for three years—1918, 1919, 1920—was 6.94 inches, but the total rainfall for each year was very variable. In 1918, 17.68 inches of rain were recorded at Whitesands on the easterly side of the island, where all the measurements were taken, but in the following year—1919—only .64 inch. The average maximum temperature at Whitesands, taken at a point about 150 feet above the sea and perhaps 300 yards from it, was 79.0° for the same three years, and the average minimum temperature 69.1°. Both measurements were Fahrenheit.

Eromanga is one of the largest of the islands of the New Hebridean group, the coast line being about a hundred miles in length and the indentations, on the whole, not pronounced. There are two chains of mountains, one running in a general direction from north to south in the north part of the island, the other running more or less from east to west in the south-central part. The extreme eastern extremity, known as Traitor's Head, since Captain Cook's unfortunate experience at Polinia Bay, is an abrupt dual headland rising some 2400 feet above the sea. As in so many other places in the region of the trade winds, the eastern slope is fairly well watered by frequent rains, while the western side is subject to frequent periods of drought. The western slope consists of high tablelands, at an average elevation of from 500 to 700 feet, with a poor soil for agriculture, but carrying grass of an excellent quality for pasturage, so that sheep have been raised there successfully for a number of years.

The island is well watered, there being no less than five rivers of respectable length, two of which, Cook River, flowing into Cook's Bay on the east coast, and the Bunka, or Williams River, rising in the northern hills and flowing south and finally west into Dillon's Bay, are more than twelve miles in length; the former is navigable for several miles of its course, though the latter has barely a mile of smooth water at its mouth. In the south there are two rivers, only one of which bears a native

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name, the *Bunkil*, the other being now called South River by the Eromangans.

Traitor's Head separates two large bays from each other, Cook's Bay on the south of the promontory, and Polinia Bay to the north. Dillon's Bay, on the west coast, at the mouth of the Williams River, is the favoured anchorage for the steamers in their infrequent visits to the island, being sheltered from all save westerly winds.

A word about the native names for these islands may be appropriately inserted here. The native of an insular region of moderate size seems never to have a name for his own homeland until he has been a journey away from it. For instance, the proper native name for the island of Tanna is *Ipari*, which is given it by the natives of the other islands of the sub-group, all of which are in sight of it, when they point to it or mention it in any connection. The word *tanna* means "ground" or "earth" in the Waisisi dialect, and Captain Cook's mistake in thinking, when he pointed to the ground, that the native would give him the name of the island, and not of the object at which his finger pointed, was perfectly understandable from his point of view, but took no note of the workings of the native mind. This error on the part of so excellent an observer as Cook is, after all, of uncommon usefulness to the ethnologist of the present day. It is one of the "awful warnings" of the pitfalls that lie in the way of the unwary. Curiously enough, the name given by Cook has survived to this day, and there has never been any question of calling this island by the native name given it by its neighbours, or by any other. In this respect Tanna has been fortunate, for alternative names of islands in the Pacific have led to serious confusion in the past, particularly in Melanesia.

The native name for Eromanga is, reciprocally, that given it by the Tannese when they speak of it or point to it. Anaiteum—spelled Annatom by Cook—the island to the south of it, Futuna and Aniwa are also terms given to these islands by the Tannese. In return, the inhabitants of Futuna call Tanna *Ekiamo* when they point to it, but the tendency, in the two small islands at least, entirely Christianized as they have been for a long period, is to speak of all islands by their present geographical names.

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The average rainfall for the eight years from 1916 to 1923 inclusive on the west coast of the island—the part most subject to drought—was 72.59 inches. During this period the largest annual rainfall was in 1917, when 107.67 inches are recorded, and the smallest annual amount in 1919, when the average recorded is 56.04 inches. During 1917, the year of the heaviest rainfall, the month of February, the record month for that year, had 18.91 inches to its credit, although the same month in 1923 exceeded it, with 27.80 inches. The smallest rainfall for any one month of the period is August, 1920, when only .52 inch of rain fell. Unfortunately there is no record on the moist east coast, nor is any record extant of averages in wind velocity or wind direction.

Anaiteum is the most southerly of the entire group of the New Hebrides and is about one-third the size of its nearest neighbour, Tanna, to the north-west. It consists of a high central massif dividing the island into several deep valleys separated from each other by the buttress-like ridges running down to the sea. It will be seen later what influence this geographical condition has on the tribal life of the people. There is one good anchorage—Anelgahat—on the south-west coast, which is well sheltered from all winds save the south-westerly. During a hurricane this shelter is useless, but at all other times it affords a protection unknown elsewhere in the Southern New Hebrides. Of rainfall averages or any other meteorological data no records are available.