



# PIGS, PRESTIGE AND COPYRIGHT IN THE WESTERN PACIFIC

**In the Chinese calendar, 2007 is the Year of the Pig, but did you know that the Vanuatu government has declared 2007 and 2008 the Year of the Traditional Economy? In Vanuatu, pigs, shell strings and pandanus money mats, not dollars, will buy you the finer things in life – including happiness – as intrepid anthropologist Kirk Huffman explains.**

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Just to the north and north-east of Australia lie the islands of Melanesia, from the vast island of New Guinea, through the archipelagos of the Solomons and Vanuatu south to New Caledonia. This incredibly diverse area contains just over a quarter of all the languages – and cultures – on the face of the Earth. Vanuatu alone, with a population of just 200,000 indigenous ni-Vanuatu, possesses twice as many languages and cultures as the whole of Europe.

Across Melanesia, pigs have a profound profile and enjoy high cultural significance. Almost all Melanesian cultures, except New Caledonia, have had the raising and use of different types of pigs as an essential and central part of their social and ritual life from time immemorial. Known sometimes as the Melanesian Pig Complex, the area covers well over a thousand different cultures where pigs play an essential or important role and are a lot more than just food.

In no place are the relationships between humans and pigs more complex, intricate or sophisticated than Vanuatu. These relationships predate the foundation of western European nations, which generally have had little to do with the area – until recently that is. In 2005, the agribusiness corporation Monsanto notified WIPO (the World Intellectual Property Organization) of its intention to patent certain pig-breeding techniques – raising concerns that the patents will disregard indigenous intellectual property rights, such as those found in Melanesian cultures.

The area has a long history with pigs. The most recent scientific information, based on genetic studies of wild and domesticated pigs worldwide, indicates that the ultimate origin of the world's wild boar (and therefore pigs) was actually South-East Asia, rather than central or western Eurasia. The earliest confirmed human habitation in western Melanesia (island New Guinea and the Solomons) dates from 40,000–30,000 years BP (before present), and in Vanuatu around 3200 years BP – the latter including definite evidence of the existence and use of pigs.

The first European written record of a visit to Vanuatu was by de Quiros's Spanish expedition of 1606. From this account, complex rituals associated with pigs were already well-ensconced in the local traditions and appeared culturally very similar to those found in Vanuatu today.

Pigs are the only large mammals (besides humans) traditionally to exist in Vanuatu. They are respected and valued above all else, and without them normal social life would be unthinkable. They are the major item of exchange and, in the northern and northern-central islands, form a living, sacred currency with which almost anything can be paid for – brides, fines and more

opposite: Chief Tungorovanuatu Richard Leona of Loltong, north Pentecost, wearing male money-mat costume in front of men's hut and holding rope of his 'Livoala' full-circle tusker pig. Photo Kirk Huffman 2004.









– in these graded societies where even social status is purchased. Here, they are also used as payment for the rights to ritual knowledge, performance, art forms, designs and decorations – an oral system of traditional royalty payment and copyright dating back centuries (called ‘kastom kopiraet’ in Bislama, Vanuatu’s lingua franca), and no less binding for not being written down.

Beyond mere currency, human interactions with pigs in Vanuatu have resulted in complex economic, cultural and spiritual systems that span dozens of islands and cultures. In northern Vanuatu, young male pigs (often previously castrated) will have their upper canine teeth removed, allowing the lower canine ‘tusks’ to grow unimpeded. With careful management, these tusks will grow to form a complete circle in five or six years and even a double circle in around twice that time (see cover photo). It is this tusk curvature alone which determines the value of the pig, irrespective of the pig’s size.

Such tusker pigs are, of course, very well looked after, and the more curved the tusks, the more valuable (and the better looked after) they become, the tusks themselves historically having no economic value once the pig dies. Certain pigs of advanced tusk curvature may become ‘living art’ and celebrities, with people travelling widely to view them (for a price, in pigs). Some become so sacred that they cannot be sacrificed in ritual. Tusker pigs can be lent out at rates of interest and compound interest and there is never really a dull day on the pig stock market in Vanuatu. The travel and trade in pigs link parts of the

nation like a giant pig internet, with individuals, social status, lineages, clans and cultures connected by a vast economic, ritual and spiritual system that spans generations.

In some northern cultures, tuskers are considered to have souls. Through their ritual purchase and activity, such pigs can assist human souls to pass from the world of the living to the world of the dead and to retain their status among the ancestral spirits. Other northern cultures place an even higher value on a rare type of ‘hermaphrodite’ intersex pig that is outwardly female but can also grow tusks. Like other ritual knowledge, the breeding techniques that produce such pigs are indigenous intellectual property and are recognised as such in the traditional economy.

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In southern Vanuatu, however, cultures neither value nor raise tusker pigs, but instead produce vast numbers of their own traditional type of pigs for use in sophisticated clan alliance and other rituals. Not classed as ‘currency’ as in the northern cultures, these pigs, and other valued items such as kava roots, function in a complex series of balanced exchanges perfectly suited to fulfill the traditional needs of the people. Here, traditional rights over certain

opposite: Pig payments to sponsors of 'Maghe' grade-taking rituals, Fanla village, north-central Ambrym in July 2007. Photo © Nick Howlett, Blue Planet Media Vanuatu.

top left: Leitiah Aimangil wearing high-status woven pandanus hat denoting her rank in the (ne)Langpas female graded society of the Nahai-speaking area of south-southwestern Malakula. Photo K Huffman 1999.

top right: Culmination of female grade-taking 'Lekan' ritual from the Sinesip area, south-western Malakula. Photo K Huffman, 1983, courtesy Vanuatu Cultural Centre.

bottom left: Rare glabrous (hairless) pig with forehead daubed with ochre in recognition of its equivalence to a man of status. Interior of south-western Tanna, southern Vanuatu. Photo © Jean-Pierre Rivalain, www.monalisa\_prod.com, 2004.

bottom right: Women wearing traditional money-mat costume in female grade-taking ritual from the 'Apma'-speaking area of central Pentecost. Photo K Huffman, 1991.



tangible and intangible aspects of cultural heritage are bestowed by birthright and inheritance, rather than through purchase of copyright as in the northern islands.

Some southern cultures value one rare pig above all others, particularly on Tanna Island – a glabrous (hairless) pig produced by a centuries-old form of traditional breeding (see photo above). These pigs are classed almost as human and given the respect of a man of status. To mark their special position, the pigs can be decorated with the bark belt and red ochre face paint of a man of high status when used in ritual.

The declaration of the Year of the Traditional Economy is the direct result of an extremely successful Vanuatu Cultural Centre project begun in 2004 to assist and develop traditional wealth items. The project has shown that the rest of the world has much to learn from traditional economies. Classed by many overseas international organisations as one of the world's 'poorest' nations, Vanuatu shows us that much of 'modern' free-market economic and development theory is actually wrong. In 2006 Vanuatu was declared 'the world's happiest

nation' by the UK's New Economics Foundation, whose team of younger, more insightful economists had spent three years surveying the economies of 178 nations worldwide.

To be considered 'rich' in the traditional cultures of Vanuatu, chiefs or men and women of high status and prestige must perpetually divest themselves of their pigs, money mats and food, to the point of bankruptcy, to assist their people. 'Wealth' flows continually upward, downwards and outwards to the benefit of all. To retain one's material riches indicates that one is not really rich at all – but that doesn't mean that the peoples of Vanuatu are about to relinquish their traditional knowledge to outsiders.

In a land where riches are measured in pigs and generosity, it is the white expatriates living in Vanuatu's capital city, Port Vila, and maybe even ourselves, who might be considered as living in poverty.

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The author would like to dedicate this article to the spirits of four recently deceased ni-Vanuatu: Chief Kaising of south-west Malakula (d. late 2006); John Selwyn of north Pentecost (d. 2006); Chief Tom Kiri of southern Erromango (d. 2006) and Macka Silona of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (d. 2007).

Although rights to the cover photograph rest with the Australian Museum, rights to the other photographs associated with this article rest elsewhere.

Kirk has recently been involved in two TV productions: *Meet the Natives*, looking at English society through the eyes of ni-Vanuatu (shown on the UK's ITV 4) and *Vanuatu, the Pig Islands*, soon to be aired on France's Channel 5.

Further reading

Huffman, K, 2005. *Traditional Money Banks in Vanuatu: Project Survey Report*. Port Vila (Vanuatu National Cultural Council/ UNESCO).

Koji Lum, J, JK McIntyre, DL Greger, KW Huffman, and MG Vilar, 2006. Recent Southeast Asian domestication and Lapita dispersal of sacred male pseudohermaphroditic 'tuskers' and hairless pigs of Vanuatu. *PNAS*, vol. 103 (46), pp 17190-5.

McCulloch, AR, 1922, Pigs' tusks and armlets. *The Australian Museum Magazine* vol. 1 (4), pp 117-9.