

At Home in Vanuatu: Tradition in the Western Pacific. Photograph exhibit by David Becker. California Academy of Sciences, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, 7 October 2000 to 18 March 2001.

Greens and browns. These are the colors that dominate an exhibition of photographs from Vanuatu. No maritime blue here. The camera turns away from the sea to focus on inland forests and villages. This landlubber perspective is striking, given Vanuatu's oceanic locale, and given that American photographer David Becker lives mostly on a yacht moored in New Caledonia. But Becker, who cofounded the Society for the Recording of Vanishing Cultures, pointed his camera lens toward Vanuatu's forested hills in a search for tradition, possibly vanishing.

These images of ni-Vanuatu-in-Nature, principally from the islands of Tanna, Malakula, Ambae, and Santo, hang on the walls of a darkened room. A tape of island songs and panpipe music plays softly in the background. Becker took these photographs during several trips to Vanuatu in the 1990s. Exhibition copy explains his motives: "It is important to record this precious heritage before it disappears. I hope that whatever I can do will help future generations realize the beauty, the richness, and the dignity of this way of life Blown by the trade winds I could have sailed here and discovered an extraordinary world. Because it's disappearing before my eyes, I am recording what I can, before it is too late I came neither as tourist nor as anthropologist, but as a friend."

I came to the academy as anthropologist, more than tourist or friend, in order to record something of the exhibition (before it, too, disappears). An anthropological eye immediately remarks an "othering" of the ni-Vanuatu portrayed in these photographs. *At Home in Vanuatu* retells the familiar story of a noble other who reveals the flawed self. Anthropologists, also, often have to apologize for favoring the same theme.

Becker's photo captions, although brief, evoke good, simple people who live in happy balance with nature. Here are Islanders who have "a place to live, a land to love"—a people who celebrate life, home, and family. The exhibition features an enlarged shot of a group of Tannese men preparing kava, sheltered underneath the aerial roots of a large banyan tree. Nature is home, and Becker builds a harmonic story around this. The banyan motif repeats in several spaces in the room that are marked out by palisades of twisted wood. But, no matter the predominance of smiling children in many photographs, these homely life-ways are posed as disappearing.

Photo captions pay little attention to cultural differences within Vanuatu, despite the diverse sorts of dance, architecture, and dress depicted in the photographs. A sequence of "chiefs," circumcision ceremonies, and housing styles all merge together in counterpoint to imperfect modernity. Somewhere in the photographs' travels, labels must have been lost or transposed, since captions misidentify people (and their vanishing traditions) depicted in five or so photographs. Whether the locale is really Tanna or Ambae or Malakula does not matter

much given the exhibition's governing concern to deploy Vanuatu tradition as a whole in counterpoint to modernity, rather than more academically to describe or document it.

Modernity is muted—and fair enough given Becker's photographic goal. One of the few photographs that depicts people wearing T-shirts and shorts and dresses—as nearly everyone always does in Vanuatu—shows a family standing in front of their ramshackle house in one of Port Vila's urban settlements. Otherwise, Becker has photographed only the several communities in the archipelago where people maintain (or have revived) a traditionalist dress style of penis wrappers, mats, and bark skirts (depending on the island), or the ceremonial occasions when people revert to “custom” dress. Reality, however, sometimes intrudes on Becker's desire to depict ni-Vanuatu as unspoiled by modernity. A caption excuses the presence of the brightly colored athletic shoes worn by a circumcised Tanesese boy who also sports face-paint and a penis wrapper in celebration of his return to society. His proud parents, of course, would see no sartorial contradiction. The academy has drawn on what is probably a limited collection of material artifacts from the archipelago to supplement the photographs. These include baskets from the 1920s, wooden clubs, and other early tourist art, probably collected by military servicemen in the

1940s, and a recent knife and smoke-blackened aluminum cooking pot (perhaps acquired by a curator of modernist sensibility). The best piece is a *rambaramp* from Malakula—a life-sized funerary effigy constructed from a dead man's skull, modeled over with clay and set on a body made of plant fibers. This item was presented to the academy in 1882 by a Captain Smunsen. Modernity is here again denied by this juxtaposition of Becker's 1990s photographs with antique artifacts (except for that knife and pot).

But so what? Vanuatu's national tourism office deploys similar language and images on its website (www.vanuatutourism.com) to attract visitors: “You will live in a culture older than time and see a land of extraordinary beauty and sharp contrasts. And you will leave having been enriched by your experiences.” This sort of romantic imagery is at least more profitable than other things one might exhibit, such as squatter settlements, secondhand T-shirts, and rusty automobiles, that also are at home in Vanuatu. Many of Becker's photographs of warm brown skins at home in cool forest greens are indeed beautiful and enriching, even if they show us what we think we already know about tradition, about vanishing, and about people who don't wear a lot of clothing and commune with trees.

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