THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PRUM

A curious tale of power, prophecy, and cargo in the South Pacific

By Will Bourne

The flags go up at eight o'clock on John Prum Day, as they do every morning in the village of Ipikel. At a blast from a bamboo whistle, a color guard emerges from John Prum headquarters. On one edge of the village's central field, eight men assemble wearing tropical-weight khaki uniforms, a gift from the Swiss Navy. Across the field, near a mammoth banyan tree, four others are clad in what seem to be authentic U.S. Marine uniforms. Five flags are raised military-style on five bamboo poles: To the west, the Vanuatu national flag stands alone beside the not quite pig-proof stockade. Thirty feet from it, in a row of three, are the flag of Tafea (the local island group), the U.S. Navy flag, and Old Glory. To the east, a few yards from where I stand, the foursome hoists the official red banner of the United States Marine Corps.

Unlike every other day in Ipikel, however, today the pageant continues: A double file of barefoot troops enter from beyond the village gate. They carry four-foot lengths of bamboo at the "shoulder arms" position, the tops cut to a bayonet point and colored red to evoke fire. Across their bare chests "U.S.A." is lettered in red paint. There is no smiling, only the sound of orders gruffly given, of hands slapping the smooth stocks of the bamboo rifles and feet beating the pig-trufled ground. A second platoon drills in anklets of dried seeds with twists of fresh grass in their hair, their chests painted with medals, their backs with lines denoting the folds of a uniform shirt and the shoulder braids of parade dress. The scene is traversed here and there by bush dogs and the odd chicken. A man standing to my left gargles stage directions into a bullhorn. The crowd of more than two thousand onlookers, some of whom have walked all night from the farthest reaches of the island, is absolutely silent.

John Prum Day falls on February 15, known fondly here as "Namba 15"; today is the thirty-seventh annual. The location is an obscure apostrophe of rock called Tanna, part of Vanuatu, an island nation in the South Pacific that lies between Fiji and New Caledonia. Ipikel, Tanna's largest village, is a place where little boys in ratty shorts pa-

Will Bourne is a writer living in New York.

Photograph by Kal Muller / Woodfin Camp

trol the bush with bows and arrows, looking for birds; where the only fresh water for 550 people comes from a hole scooped from the red and black rocks at the edge of Sulphur Bay; where medicine means filling incisions with leaves and binding them with vines; where there is no glass to speak of and no metal apart from a few sheets of corrugated tin and the steel blades of bush knives. This is a place without money, without hunger, without work beyond a little casual cultivation; a place where the guava and the coconut fall ripe into the outstretched hand.

Most people on earth have never heard of the John Prum Movement. But to the citizens of Ipikel—and to a few thousand of Tanna's twenty-two thousand other residents—John Prum is a messiah. He is a redeemer who speaks all languages and travels to and from America through Yasur, the volcano that rumbles and erupts constantly above this fan-shaped valley and is considered the source of everything in it: pigs, breadfruit, language, ocean. Who John was—and whether he ever walked the earth under this or any other name—no one can say. That he exists is undeniable.

The John Prum Movement belongs to the family of cargo cults, strange religious hybrids that result when the baubles of industry are dropped into a place that has never encountered them before. The best-known examples come from the South Pacific at the time of the Second World War. As Douglas MacArthur pincered his way up toward the Japanese, he leapfrogged across islands that had scarcely seen a piece of steel, let alone vast, floating villages vomiting thousands of white men, Jeeps, radios, refrigerators, and hospitals onto the beach. Understandably, the locals were impressed. But they also were confounded: they never saw these things *produced;* the goods simply appeared. And how do you explain a radio to someone who has no concept of electricity—how it is that talking into a little box can cause a great metal bird to come from a place he didn't know existed and dump things that float down from the sky? How do you explain a cube of cold air to someone living at the equator? What is glass? What is magnification?

In a world crawling with the spirits of the dead, the answer was "magic." Local logic ran that if the white man's magic were copied accurately, the black man's cargo would come as well. Melanesians are great believers in equality, and it seemed obvious to them that if white folks had all this great stuff, they should get theirs, too. Wooden radios were built with vines running out the back as antennae; airstrips were hacked out of the jungle; lookouts were posted.

Not surprisingly, the results were disappointing. People began to suspect that the whites were hiding vital details of their sorcery, blocking the islanders from their due share of the cargo. Some discovered that there were large chunks of text missing from the Bibles the missionaries had translated into local tongues: a sure sign of conspiracy. Others simply assumed that white stinginess was at the bottom of it. In any case, the lack of cargo was taken as one more example of bad treatment stretching back well into the nineteenth century. Most islanders went on to other things.

But Tanna's cult endured, due in part to the charismatic specter at its center. Western researchers have searched for objective traces of John Prum yet have managed to generate only a wealth of unverifiable conjectures. For a brief period in the Forties, area specialists theorized that Prum was a Japanese spy posing as an American soldier. But this hypothesis, as well as the one that he actually was a G.I., overlooks the fact that John's appearance on Tanna seems to predate American military involvement in the region by as much as a decade. It may be that "John Prum" was simply a benevolent trader or missionary who visited the island during the Thirties and vowed—as all visitors do—that one day he would return.

Anthropologists—who are prone to seek universals in the specific—have advanced all manner of theories about cargo cults: as proto-nationalist movements, early examples of class struggle, the expression of anomie. Any one of these seems a plausible enough explanation for the John Prum Movement, given the quality of life on Tanna in the early twentieth century. Before 1980, the Republic of Vanuatu was the New Hebrides, so named by Captain Cook when he passed through in 1774. The first regular visitors to the New Hebrides were sandalwood traders, an unsavory crowd who allowed nothing—least of all the Melanesians—to come between them and their precious trees, destined to burn on the Buddhist altars of China. Christian missionaries began to arrive in 1839. Vengeance being a distributive property here, several were killed by the islanders as payback for the treatment they had received at the hands of the sandalwooders and other traders who'd drifted through. Needless to say, the Lord's foot soldiers persevered.

By 1863 blackbirding had begun: through force, treachery, or guile, thousands of men from all over Melanesia were loaded aboard ships bound for the sugar plantations of

Fiji and Queensland, Australia. After their labors, they were supposed to be returned to their islands, but few ever were. During the worst days of blackbirding, 750 out of every 1,000 men taken died or disappeared. On Tanna, which measures 30 miles by 15 miles, the population fell from about 15,000 in 1872 to 6,000 in 1926, largely through disease, deportation, and murder.

The missionaries, to their credit, fought blackbirding as best they could. By 1906, when the New Hebrides became a formal colony under a joint French-British condominium government, the practice had finally been banned. But the damage, both to the local population and to their image of the white man, was already done. What's more, Tanna's custom—its ancestral spirits, magic stones, and subterranean deities—was a shambles. In 1939, Christians outnumbered pagans by more than two to one. Dancing had been forbidden, as had the ritual consumption of *kava*, a narcotic extract made from a species of pepper plant. As the John Prum Movement collected followers, however, the missionaries' grip began to loosen. By 1941 fewer than a hundred Tannese were showing up for services at the mission's churches. "All they taught us was to pray-pray-pray and sing-sing-sing all the time," one man complained about the missionaries.

The early Forties were tumultuous times on Tanna. There was a run on the stores as people tried to get rid of their tainted colonial currency; some threw their money into the sea. In the north, one village built an airstrip in anticipation of cargo deliveries from America. The men of Ipikel formed what was known as the Tanna Army and marched around the island, enlisting warriors along the way.

The Tanna Army didn't do much —their guns were made of bamboo—but they scared the hell out of the colonial administration, which called in the equivalent of the National Guard. The colonials had assumed that this John Prum business was a hoax, the bridling of shiftless natives under the yoke of a new efficiency. They had thought it would all just go away after they arrested a few likely suspects and tossed them in jail for a while. But in the wake of the Tanna Army incident, the Europeans realized things were more serious than they had imagined. After firing off a few rounds and torching a hut in northern Tanna, they rounded up fifty-six men and shipped them to Vila, the capital. Some of the ringleaders remained behind bars until 1957. Three of Ipikel's leaders—the three men who had "talked" to John Prum—were among them: Tommy Nampas, the old chief in the village; Nikiau Tanimoly; and Tom Meles.

Tom Meles and Isaak Wan, Nikiau's son, stand together in their uniforms, saluting the flags on John Prum Day. They are the leaders of the John Prum Movement, and they despise each other. Stooped and tubercular, Isaak, fifty-five, sports a flashy chestful of medals. On closer inspection, I find that this resolves itself into an odd pastiche of symbols: an Air Force star, an "Airborne" patch, a medal that reads "Mississippi," a "People Power" patch with rainbow motif—all set off by a homemade sash trimmed in maroon nylon. Meles, eighty-two or thereabouts, is likewise adorned. He's crowned with a red Marine cap that fits his smallish head like a bucket; among his insignia are a pair of Northwest Airlines wings and a plastic medallion inset with a hologram of Shiva.

Meles is a visionary, the last man alive on Tanna to have "seen" the shadowy figure of John Prum: John came to him in dreams and visions in the Thirties and Forties. But it has been a long time since John last appeared, and Meles is getting on. Isaak wishes Meles would get on with getting on. He is younger by a generation, and Meles is the last barrier to his sole control of the movement. Isaak has never seen John: he draws his power—his right to lead—from the fact that his father, like Meles, was one of the early seers. Meles's authority stems from a Melanesian gift for prophecy; Isaak's, from a savvy playing of the game.

John Prum made three pronouncements, and life in Ipikel still revolves around them. The first was a command that his followers hold on to their custom, which traditionally served as both the theology and the law of the island. He told them to stop going to the mission churches, stop going to school, throw away the colonials' money, and return to life as they had once lived it. The result was a fusion of ancient custom, missionary teachings, and, later, the memory and "ritual" of the U.S. war machine that passed this way in the early Forties.

The John Prum Movement is not only alive; it is also changeable, fluid. It exists only in the minds of those who belong to it—there are no texts—and therefore it tends to mean whatever someone wants it to mean. This is where the village divides. For John's second decree was that one day Tanna would share the white man's wealth. Until recently, this was a proposition so far removed from reality that it caused only a vague, gnawing yen. But that's changing. About four thousand tourists a year now come to Tanna, and even though only a fraction of them set foot in Ipikel, that fraction is growing. A huge cruise boat has started anchoring a mile or so off Ipikel's beach once or twice a month (its passengers are then ferried up by chopper for a titillating peek into the radiant guts of Yasur). A French developer has begun grading land in nearby Port Resolution for a Club Med–style resort. Lenakel, a town an hour away on the west side of the island, is booming: there are stores, banks, government offices, a couple of small hotels. Vila—an hour's flight north on the island of Efate—is a posh Anglo-French outpost, and glamorous stories of life there filter down to Ipikel from time to time. The white man's wealth is being dragged like bait through this village. And it's pretty enticing.

But many still feel the pull of the past. Few people in Ipikel reject the modern world outright, but they do want it to fit in with tradition. Which brings us to John Prum's third pronouncement: "In the world

there are many nations, but only America is your friend." This identity with America is one of the most moving and paradoxical features of life in Ipikel. It was American soldiers who freed the leaders of the John Prum Movement, including Tom Meles, from a colonial jail in 1942; it was the Americans who had black men among them who were given authority and respect; and it was they who were the source of the flags that became symbols of Ipikel's freedom. America saved this movement once and will save it again—that much everyone can agree on. But just what constitutes salvation this time around is a much thornier question. For Isaak and his crowd, salvation is shiny and fast. For Meles and his, it is a return to a paradise lost back "in the shadows"—before the white man, before the war, before the trucks began arriving.

The road from Ipikel's village gate runs between two steep, bushy spurs out to the Ash Plain at the foot of Yasur and on to Lake Siwi. It is the only road connecting Ipikel to the world beyond. When I walked down it on my first day in Ipikel, I carried a book that belonged to my father: *John Frum, He Come*, by a journalist named Edward Rice. (John's name is pronounced *proom* or *broom*, as in "sweep away the white man"; I've corrected the spelling at the request of the faithful.) The fact that a book existed about Ipikel—and an American book at that—came as quite a surprise to the locals: the men looked at the pictures of their grandfathers and uncles with great solemnity, as if confronted by the risen dead. Tom Meles's face was on the cover. The book was published in 1974, and I had come here to find out how the movement had weathered the intervening years. Little did I know what a lively place I was walking into, or that I would become an object of struggle myself.

I first met Isaak up in Vila before my trip south to Tanna. He was there on some errand of his own invention, and my arrival was pennies from heaven. Isaak assured me I could come to stay in Ipikel, that he would feed me and reveal "some secret." Later, when I had been in Tanna for three days, I learned that Isaak had told everyone that I was an American VIP, and had ordered my little house, which was festooned with pages torn from old magazines, surrounded by bodyguards at night—not to protect me but to make himself look good.

Lolling on the mats in John Prum headquarters, I asked Isaak what he wanted from America. He smiled his crooked, gingivital smile and replied, "Things like building a good wharf or airstrips, make some factories. Cargo—white man's things—trucks, refrigerators. We just want these things to give us an easy life. These things must come under John's promise." He figures that if he can play the John Prum card astutely enough the cargo will come—not *from* John but because John has been well used.

Isaak's reasoning is in the finest tradition of cost-benefit analysis. He spins John Prum and custom as needed. But he knows that people in Ipikel will not consciously abandon their past, that he must clothe his modern urges in scripture. Still, there is no rationalizing the paradox of how to live a white man's life according to custom. On my last day in Ipikel, I asked Isaak what custom prescribes for a man whose wife has died. "You take another one!" he said promptly, man to man. Well, no. A man's wife, others had told me, is "waiting for you on the other side, and you must wait until she comes back to life." Isaak has gone back and forth among women for years and says whatever suits him. That may seem a small matter, but there are many of them, and the effect is cumulative. In a preliterate world where orthodoxy is enforced through word and example, Isaak is a degenerate king—not evil but corrosive.

One of the founding myths of Tanna, as recorded by a French anthropologist a decade ago, is that of a primordial horde of screaming stones: in the beginning, when Wuhngin—a creator spirit—made Tanna, the land was soft and featureless. Wuhngin sent the rains, which then became streams etching the first natural boundaries into the landscape. Then, because Tanna was still malleable and shapeless, he sent a band of stones—the *kapiel*—to give it substance. In some Tannese traditions, the *kapiel* come from the sea; in others, from the entrails of the earth itself. In Ipikel they come, as everything does, from Yasur. The *kapiel* set off around the island in a state of screaming, itinerant warfare: a tumultuous, fantastic combat in which the stones divided themselves into groups that clashed and battled until they came to rest, exhausted. Thus they both created and became the landscape of the island, its mountains and valleys, capes, bluffs, and individual rocks and stones.

Every skill, need, or affliction—from deftness with a spear to a good banana crop to colicky babies—has a stone here that will answer for it. Particular groups or individuals traditionally control particular stones—a kind of division of magical labor that makes for a certain interdependence among villages. Many festivals here celebrate and reinforce the link with others through the exchange of food. This communalism is one of the island's oldest traditions. It grew out of the Edenic myth of the *Nepro*—a paradise lost, a time before the constant cycle of clan war and reprisal so common in Melanesia until the pacifying effects of the missionaries and colonials began to take hold. In the *Nepro*, people circulated freely; the distribution of magical powers prevented one village from dominating another; each village was allied with the next; each was autonomous, equal. If real life on Tanna—war, cannibalism, wife stealing, the poisoning of enemies, etc.—differed from this pretty picture, the mythic memory of the *Nepro* remained an idealized possibility. For some people it still does.

But John Prum is relatively new magic, and Isaak Wan and Tom Meles are struggling for the right to be considered the *stamba*, the root or source, of John Prum. Isaak's mo-

tives are fairly straightforward: he could use the cash. Ipikel is a village with no industry. Its two stores stock a few cans of fish, bits of candy, laundry soap, and crackers. Everything necessary for survival comes from the gardens. But school fees are becoming an issue. Fourteen years after independence, the concept of taxation is just now hitting Ipikel. People are acquiring a taste for rice, an expensive habit practically unknown here until last year. And trucks are mighty intriguing. John Prum is the only cash cow in town, and Isaak knows it.

Isaak is a notorious skimmer, having been busted numerous times for lining his pockets with fees from the few tourists who make it out this far and with loans from Tanna's expatriate population (about two dozen, not including children). He likes to go to Vila on "John Prum–related business" and have a grand time smoking fancy cigarettes and mixing with the city folk. Isaak wants to be the John Prum king, but Tom Meles—the last of the original martyrs—refuses to die. And the longer Meles lives, the more likely it becomes that Isaak will fall from grace. I often asked people why they didn't just get rid of Isaak; they answered that purging him would tear apart the movement. For all his faults, Isaak is a repository of oral history in a place that can't live without it.

To give a sense of how the story of the John Prum martyrs circulates now in Ipikel, I'll let Isaak tell it: "When the Americans arrive in Vila [in 1942], they already know the three are in jail. John has told them. It is Tom Navy who takes them out of jail [Tom Navy was, in fact, Thomas Beatty, a boatswain in the Seabees]. He brings back a thousand men from Tanna to work in Vila and on [the island of] Espiritu Santo. Tom Navy then calls the chiefs to his office and gives one Marine flag to Meles and Nikiau, one to Nampas.

"After the war is over and the Americans leave, the three are arrested again and sent to jail. They stay there for seventeen years. Then the government sends them home, telling them they are free to follow John Prum. But, back on Tanna, the British Resident Commissioner tells them, 'Show me a sign that John is real, like a necktie or some shoes. If you don't show me a sign, I will raise eight flags and you will be under them.'

"The chiefs tell the young men to cut two long pieces of bamboo. Now, for the first time, the people of Ipikel raise the two Marine flags given by Tom Navy. They summon representatives of the colonial government to come and see the sign it had asked for. It comes in two trucks: one French, one British. They put their rifles up against the chiefs and the boys of Ipikel. They ask Nampas where he had gotten the flags.

"'America gave it to me, under John's promise,' he answers.

"The government says it will search for the place the flags came from: 'If I find out that you stole them, I'll come back and whip you. I will kill all of you, leaving only pigs and dogs.'

"The British RC goes to England and asks if the flags had come from there. But England says to go ask America. So he goes to America: the army office tells him to ask the Navy; the Navy tells him to ask the Marines; the Marines send him to the Negro Battalion. There, the person in charge takes a bayonet and a pistol and tells the British RC that if he wants to take that flag away or stop the John Prum Movement or kill the black man, 'first you must kill me.'

"The RC comes back to Tanna. He collects the French RC, the police, and they go to Ipikel, carrying their rifles upside down as a sign of peace. There began the period of peace, freedom."

With peace came a return to obscurity: except for the odd anthropologist and an occasional visit from a much-chastened condominium official, the outside world withdrew from Ipikel.

But if some islanders had been skeptical of John's promises before the American arrival, they needed no convincing now: like some deus ex machina, America had come and pulled the martyrs from their crosses, and although Nampas, Nikiau, and Meles were later sent back to prison, the people of Ipikel never forgot what the soldiers had done for them. The "negro Marines" were further proof of kinship. The Americans had created a brotherhood they couldn't have even imagined.

Elizabeth, a prophetess, is nearly blind, a Melanesian Tiresias in a long, flowered dress. She agreed to meet me at the John Prum church several days into my stay in Ipikel. Her eyes fluttered in spasms as she counted for me on her fingers in Tumorumo, a language she invented. She is waiting—impatiently, because she is old—for the arrival of the "negro Marines" from America. Elizabeth thinks of these black soldiers as her brothers; their arrival will be the last link in a long chain of signs that has been building here for more than fifty years. When they come, she will teach them Tumorumo, she said, so that they can speak to one another about John. When they come, paradise will be at hand. She will shed her old skin like a snake or a crab.

Elizabeth is the keeper of the church, which has two crosses. The first is not so much a cross as a piece of four-by-four set upright in the black gravel floor: this is the "custom cross," and on it the local people crucified Jesus Christ, a black man from Tanna. Later, during the time of Noah's Ark, his spirit went with Mary to "A-Mary-ka," where Mary gave birth again, this time to the white Jesus known to us. The second cross is five feet tall and red: it was given by John Prum as "a sign of the white Jesus, who was crucified in Bethlehem." When the black Jesus was crucified on the custom cross, "all the chiefs of Tanna were decided"; when the white Jesus was crucified, "all the flags went red and the governments of the world were decided."

In Elizabeth's fertile mind, her brothers, the "negro Marines," are the key to America: in her language, "negro" is the name of the first plant

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THESE HARPER'S MAGAZINE ADVERTISERS

HOME LEARNING CENTER, INC.
(800) 915-5515

COLLEGE YEAR IN ATHENS
(617) 547-6413

AN IRISH SOJOURN
(212) 877-0048

LISTENER MAGAZINE
(607) 433-0883

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF INTEGRAL STUDIES
(415) 753-6100, EXT. 240

TEACH HUNGARY
(207) 338-6852

NATURAL AMERICAN SPIRIT CIGARETTES
(800) 332-5595

PROFESSIONAL CUTLERY DIRECT
(800) 859-6994

ATTENTION, PROFESSORS!

For 143 years, *Harper's Magazine* has brought readers the best in American thought, opinion, and humor. Every issue contains articles, essays, letters, and stories that have consistently challenged contemporary perceptions from the Civil War to the present.

Join the growing number of educators who use *Harper's* in the classroom. The richest source of great writing in America today.

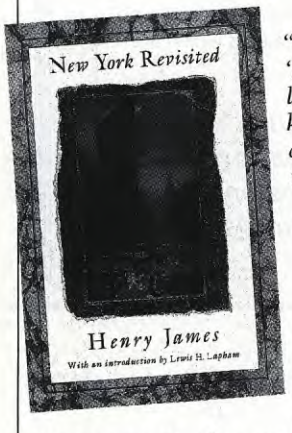
Available for $1.50 per copy (50% off the cover price). Short-term subscriptions available.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT KELLY LYNCH, *Harper's Magazine*, 666 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, NY 10012. (212) 614-6508.

HARPER'S CATALOG SHOWCASE
SPRING 1995

Plan now to include *Harper's Magazine* Catalog Showcase as part of your 1995 marketing plans. Catalog Showcase is our exclusively four-color advertising section for direct response advertisers to showcase their catalogs, services, and products. For more information about Catalog Showcase, contact Debbie Goldberg at (212) 614-6536. Spring Edition deadline is January 3.

Henry James's Tribute to a City's Timeless Spirit



"You care for the terrible town, yea even for the 'horrible,' as I have overheard you call it, or at least think it, when you supposed no one would know. . . you are ready to follow its hypothetic dance even to the mainland and to the very end of its tether."

In *New York Revisited*, first published in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* in 1906, Henry James observes turn-of-the-century New York in vivid detail. Although written in 1904-1905, when he returned to the United States after living abroad for more than twenty years, the essay is as pertinent today as it was 90 years ago. In this volume, the text appears as it did when originally published, and is enhanced with period illustrations and photographs and an introductory essay by Lewis H. Lapham, editor of *Harper's Magazine*.

AVAILABLE IN BOOKSTORES EVERYWHERE OR ORDER THROUGH THE *HARPER'S MAGAZINE* BOOKSHELF ADVERTISEMENT ELSEWHERE IN THIS ISSUE.

FRANKLIN SQUARE PRESS
A DIVISION OF HARPER'S MAGAZINE

in the world, and the "Marines" are those who make grass skirts. Eden and the *Nepro* became one as she explained how these soldiers are linked with the Fall, with the grass skirt—the fig leaf, the symbol of Eve's transgression. The fact that the Marines are black shows Elizabeth that they have held on to their custom more than white men. When she has taught them Tumorumo, they will be able to translate for the white Americans, and together they can come to Tanna to soothe the divisions and enmities that have grown up among the ruins of the *Nepro*. When the new Marine flag—red with the blood of Jesus—arrived in Ipikel recently, it was the last sign before the advent of paradise.

When I learned that Isaak had posted a bodyguard around my house, it confirmed my suspicion that I was being manipulated. As an American journalist I'd become, for obvious reasons, something of a magic stone myself. Initially, I had assumed that the constant tailing I was being subjected to was just the usual fishbowl effect of being a white, blond freak in a small, black town. But after a couple of days, I began to sense the perimeters that had been constructed for me—just how far I could go without a "friend" appearing at my side. Usually that friend was Royal, a solemn and charming man of thirty. (I was staying in his brother's house.) Like most people in Ipikel, Royal is well aware of Isaak's limitations; he is torn, but follows nonetheless. Royal performed his surveillance without much gusto, but there he was.

It wasn't until I met Tom Nako that I understood why I was being watched so closely. Nako is Tom Meles's disciple, and when he speaks he sounds like John the Baptist. Small, dark, and handsome, he is an evangelical—fired by a pure strain of John Prum fundamentalism. He'd been evaluating me from afar. "I am like a dog," he said. "With each new person who comes—*sniff, sniff*—I know their hearts: if their hearts are with business, I let them go to Isaak; if their hearts are with custom, I

bring them to the John Prum church."

Until that day, my dealings with Isaak had left me certain that the spectacle I'd traveled half the world to witness was no more, a bloodless husk. When I met Tom Nako, I realized how wrong I'd been. For if Isaak's thinking is linear, Nako's is thirsty, a millennial frenzy. It is no accident that Isaak has "seen no sign of John" in thirty-seven years: he doesn't have a spiritual bone in his body. But Tom Nako can't swing a dead cat without hitting a sign of John: it is in his mind that John Prum lives on, that the old world and the new are being reconciled.

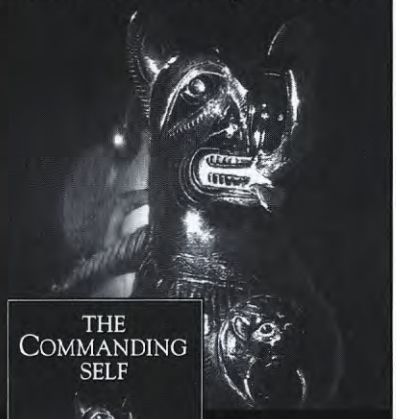
When Isaak discovered I had been talking to Tom Nako, his attitude toward me began to change. To Isaak, Nako represents the threat not only of the rising generation but also of the true believer—the charisma of the possessed. At first, Isaak made oblique suggestions that if I needed to know anything I should feel free to come to him directly. Finally, he lost his patience.

Nako and I had taken to meeting in semisecrecy at his house. But a secret is a valuable commodity in Melanesia. We were having our third such meeting one morning when a knock on the door summoned us to the Community House, the open-walled hut built into Ipikel's central banyan tree that also serves as the John Prum bandshell.

There was Isaak in darkest glower. With him were eight or nine of his sycophants. Gathered under the awning of a nearby house—and looking none too happy about the duty—were twenty young lieutenants, Royal among them. Isaak had clearly ordered them to be there, to show us what we were up against. Nako was uneasy, to say the least. "You've got to help me," he whispered. "I'm alone." To be alone in a Melanesian village is the most extreme form of punishment; even lunatics and murderers are spared it. He was trembling.

Isaak started in on Nako in Narak, the local language, but I knew pretty well what he was saying. Then he turned to me: "If you want to know about John, you come

A major new book on human understanding and development



By Idries Shah

At your local bookstore
Or call 1-800-222-4745

30 Families • 30 Countries
Human Needs • Global Limits
In a time of unprecedented change

"Material World opens a cultural and economic window on our times."
—David Friend,
Director of Photography, *Life* magazine

MATERIAL WORLD
A GLOBAL FAMILY PORTRAIT
BY PETER MENZEL
INTRODUCTION BY PAUL KENNEDY
256 PAGES • 359 COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS
HARDCOVER • $30.00 POSTPAID
A SIERRA CLUB BOOK

TO ORDER CALL:
1-800-359-3373
WOODFORD PUBLISHING

Still the greatest watch value: in the air, on land, at sea, and underwater...

Navigator™ Watch

Now, with new ratcheted safety bezel, and still only $49.95*

**But read this ad for an even better deal!*

•Many successful products are being "knocked off" to the detriment of consumers. The Navigator™ is no exception. Beware of similar looking imitations. There is only one genuine Navigator™ Watch!

Wear this watch to work, to play, to swim and dive—and to rally. The *Navigator™ Watch* is steered by a sophisticated, ultra-accurate Japanese quartz movement that is powered by a tiny mercury cell. It should last at least 18 months before you need replace it. The *Navigator™* has *both* luminous analog dial, *and* LCD display. It gives you dual time capability.The LCD display shows time continuously—in 12-hr. or 24 hr. mode. Push the button and you display day and date. There is a subtle yet insistent alarm and a switchable hourly time signal. The stopwatch/chronograph reads to 1/100 secs. and has "interrupt" and "lap" modes. A light switch illuminates the display.

The *Navigator™ Watch* is totally executed in black metal. It is water resistant to 150 ft. The new, exclusive ratcheted safety bezel helps you stay under water no longer than you had planned. The crystal is "mineral glass"—it is virtually scratch-proof.

We are the exclusive representatives of Rodell-7 watches in the United States and are able to still offer the *Navigator™* for just $49.95. But here is an even better deal: ***Buy two for $99.90, and we'll send you a third one with our compliments—absolutely FREE!*** Take advantage of this outstanding offer while it is available!

FOR FASTEST SERVICE, ORDER
TOLL FREE (800) 797-7367
24 Hours a Day, 7 Days a Week.

Please give order Code **#1005A465**. If you prefer, mail check or card authorization and expiration. We need daytime phone # for all orders and issuing bank for charge orders. Add $4.95 standard shipping/insurance charge (plus sales tax for CA delivery). You have 30-day return and one-year warranty. We do not refund shipping charges.

For quantity orders (100+), call Peaches Jeffries, our Wholesale/Premium Manager at (415) 543-6675 or write her at the address below.

since 1967
haverhills®
185 Berry Street, San Francisco, CA 94107

to me. This one knows nothing about John. I am the chief." Then he said, "If you want to know about custom, about the volcano, you can talk to anyone. But for John, you must come to me."

I quickly began leafing through my notebook. "But Isaak, I *was* talking to Tom about custom. See? I was asking him about the rules for drinking *kava*, the names of the *nakamals* [drinking grounds] in Ipikel, the names of the four spirits that live in Yasur." This placated him somewhat. But above all, I think he was afraid of making a martyr of Nako. Isaak cannot compete with a martyr, and Nako would make a willing candidate. From that day on, Isaak kept asking me when I was going to leave.

Toward the end of my stay in Ipikel, Tom Nako arranged for me to meet old Tom Meles, who lives in Lear-like isolation—partly because that is the way of Melanesian chiefs, but partly, I suspect, because of Isaak's efforts to marginalize him. We were to meet in the dark of night out at the new school, Ipikel's first: three church-like huts with an empty fire extinguisher for a bell. Nako told me that Meles would take a path through the bush; if asked, I was to answer that I was walking out to Lake Siwi.

In that first meeting, I heard Meles's version of the early days of the movement: how John had appeared to him first as a white man, then as a black man; how he had suffered for seventeen years in John's name; how he finally returned to Tanna and raised the Marine flag. A few nights later, he called me back to the school. He wanted to tell me a part of the story that he'd omitted. He'd done so for the same reason anyone hides the sources of his power, I suppose. But as he grew comfortable with me, he began to see that I was very likely his last journalist, his last chance to speak to America.

He waited for me at his pew in a flowery lavalava and an extremely warm-looking wool shirt, a piece of straw bent casually around his toothless head like a peasant crown. His long, brittle frame was a composition in collapse. When he spoke, he moved only his head, while his eyes, set high in that perfect, bony globe, remained fixed on the kerosene flame. He began to tell me about when John had taken him to paradise:

"John opened the barrier and went through, and called for me to follow him. When I went through, I realized I was in paradise. I saw that there were many, many people there. All the people were fat, so that when you prick their skin the blood comes rushing out. In paradise you see no mountains. Everything is flat. And there is no work; they only play in paradise."

When he'd finished, Meles turned to me and said, "Now I have told you about John, and I want to know: When are the Americans going to come and meet me? I am an old man now, and I'm still waiting. I'm afraid that when I die Isaak will take my place."

Meles wasn't able to say what, exactly, he was waiting *for*. ("I don't want any more knives," he said bitterly; I'd just given him one.) Meles is old, a little foggy, and he hasn't quite worked out the mechanics of his own salvation. He knows he wants to get to paradise, and he knows that America is the route to paradise, but he's unable to explain how the one leads to the other. He knows that the time is coming.

Young Tom Nako and Elizabeth, the blind prophetess, *do* know what they're waiting for. For them life in Ipikel is an elaborate preparation for a return to the *Nepro:* the lost Eden of a united Tanna, without conflict or jealousy. The mission of John Prum's disciples, as they see it, is to forge the connections needed to bring the island together, to overcome the rivalries that characterize life here and in most of Melanesia. The community of John Prum followers, which is spread thinly over the entire island, is a model of what must take place in order for paradise to come.

The memory of the cooperative spirit the Tannese experienced during the American occupation in 1942 has survived until now. It was a taste of the *Nepro*. For Tom Nako and Elizabeth, the spoils of modernity are beside the point: tourism and development are an excuse, a divine mechanism, for bringing the Americans to Tanna. They do not want America's cargo; they want our strength. Or, as Tom Meles said in the school that night, "I don't want independence. I want to be ruled by America."

The final irony of all this is that America isn't coming. Isaak will learn eventually that he must scratch his Toyota from the very soil he grew up on. As for the fundamentalists, their fate is more ambiguous. Frank Lambert, now the Catholic bishop of Vanuatu, first met Tom Meles in the late Forties. "He was sitting in his hut like Moses in his tent," with a piece of rope running out the window to pick up signals, news of John. Lambert said he met with Meles a year or so ago and that the old man broke down in tears. "He said, 'I've been waiting fifty years. People are starting to laugh at us. There must be *something* to what we believe in.'"

Such is the undercurrent of despair that runs through Ipikel now. On my last night, in the *nakamal*, a man I'd never met approached me. "Our parents told us that one day the Marines would come," he said. "I need to know: Were they lying to us?" He said he thought that my being there meant they hadn't lied, that America was coming. I told him I didn't know but that I didn't think so. Just then Royal's younger brother walked in carrying a ukulele made from an old wooden box. It was a Friday evening, the John Prum sabbath. People come from all over Tanna on Fridays—many with battered guitars, most on foot—for a folksy John Prum sing-along in the Community House. I asked Royal whether his brother was the next generation of John Prum minstrel. He looked his serious look. "Yes, William. That's how things stay alive."

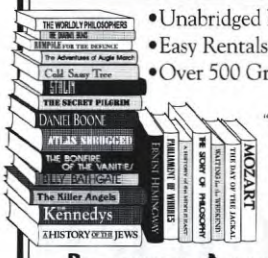
As I walked back from the *nakamal*, I knew Royal was right. Yet somehow it seemed that what the movement needed was another epic moment in its history—maybe an-

other martyr. It is an odd thing to wish for. But America was a pale and distant thing that night: pale compared to an old man shuffling in the lamplight, two feathers in his hair like horns; compared to the women singing piercingly, alarmingly, in their grass skirts and best dresses; compared to the children spinning in the rain. ■

January Index Sources

1 *USA Today* (Arlington, Va.)/*Roll Call* (Washington)/*Harper's* research; **2,3** *US News & World Report* (Washington)/*Harper's* research; **4** Federal Election Commission (Washington)/*Harper's* research; **5** Bureau of Labor Statistics (Washington); **6,7** U.S. Census Bureau (Washington); **8** New York City Health Department; **9** Gareth Jones, UNICEF (New York City); **10,11,12,13** Nkachi Taifa, ACLU (Washington)/ U.S. Sentencing Commission (Washington); **14** ACLU Prison Project (Washington); **15** Federal Bureau of Investigation (Washington); **16** Gary Ruskin, Congressional Accountability Project (Washington); **17** District of Columbia Police Department; **18** National Association of Police Chiefs (Washington); **19** National Football League (New York City); **20,21** Jim Baek, Council of Great City Schools (Washington); **22** Jennifer Marshall, American Enterprise Institute (Washington); **23** Paul Spangler, Smithsonian Institution (Washington); **24** Hayley Sumner, Dan Klores Agency (New York City); **25** Dr. Dudley Chapman, Ohio University (Athens); **26** Cheryl Thurman (Anaheim, Calif.); **27,28** Dr. Richard Katz, California Breath Center (Los Angeles); **29** Claire Vielot, Total Corp. (Paris); **30** Peter the Great Coat Company (Minneapolis); **31,32** Curtis Ebbesmeyer, Evans-Hamilton Inc. (Seattle); **33** National Wildlife Federation (Washington)/Greenpeace USA (Washington); **34** Ted Daniels, *Millennial Prophecy Report* (Philadelphia); **35** National Geographic Society (Washington); **36** Henry Morabang, Patrick Levo, Frank Coma, *The National* (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea); **37** The Gallup Organization (Princeton, N.J.)/ *USA Today* (Arlington, Va.); **38** *Harper's* research; **39** Putnam Township Chamber of Commerce (Putnam, Mich.).

AUDIO BOOKS



•Unabridged Recordings
•Easy Rentals by Mail
•Over 500 Great Titles

"I go through a book a week using time otherwise wasted in taxis, shaving or walking"
—George F. Will

BLACKSTONE AUDIO BOOKS
Dept. H, P.O. Box 969, Ashland OR 97520
For a **FREE** Catalogue Call:
1-800-729-2665

Promotion Interns Wanted

Harper's Magazine seeks college students and graduates to serve as full-time interns for three to five months (unpaid) in the promotion department. Gain hands-on experience in publicity, special events, advertising promotion, and the workings of a national magazine. Work with the vice president of corporate & public affairs and the promotion manager on press releases, merchandising proposals, advertising presentations, media kit pieces. For information and an application, call: (212) 614-6564.

Plan now to include *Harper's Magazine* **Notable Titles** as part of your 1995 marketing plans. **Notable Titles** is our exclusive four-color advertising section for publishers to showcase their books, magazines, journals, and other publications.

Notable Titles offers the perfect environment in which to display your new and established publications, as well as featured titles from 1995 spring and fall lists. Your advertisement will reach over a half million proven book and publication buyers.

Notable Titles appears twice annually, in the April and September issues.

For more information about **Notable Titles,** contact Debbie Goldberg or Ann Clifford at *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012. Or call (212) 614-6536 / 614-6552.

SPRING EDITION
DEADLINE: FEBRUARY 1

The Only Florida Resort Which Features Guaranteed Great Golf Weather!

On the Guaranteed Great Golf Package, if the temperature does not reach 60 degrees during your visit, your room will be free that night!
Package includes:
• 18 holes of golf daily on Pete Dye's Amelia Links
• Health & Fitness Center
• Driving range • Bag storage • Breakfast daily
• Choice of accommodations
For information and reservations call 1-800-874-6878

Amelia Island Plantation®
Amelia, Naturally
Amelia Island, Florida 32034
Available 11-20-'94 to 2-4-'95