

# Grassroots Badly Burnt: the loss of ni-Vanuatu archaeologists whose careers spanned 50 years

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## ABSTRACT

We salute the exceptional contributions of five ni-Vanuatu who passed away over the last year to the archaeological understanding of Vanuatu and the wider Pacific over a 50-year period. They were all at one time members of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre's unique network of *Filwokas* (fieldworkers) who are involved in protecting, promoting and preserving the country's cultural heritage. Their careers spanned the pre- and post-Independence (1980) period when archaeological research itself was transformed from a largely colonial exercise to being fully locally coordinated and regulated with an emphasis on grassroots awareness.

*Keywords:* Vanuatu, *Filwokas*, archaeology, Vanuatu Cultural Centre

## INTRODUCTION

During 2020–2021, Vanuatu lost a number of its most valuable contributors to the preservation and promotion of *kastom* (a *bislama* [Vanuatu pidgin] word meaning cultural knowledge and practices). The same people were key instigators and collaborators in investigating Vanuatu's archaeological record over a five-decade long period. All were members of the unique, Vanuatu *Kaljoral Senta* (vks, Vanuatu Cultural Centre) *filwokas* (fieldworkers) network, which comprises volunteers throughout the archipelago, who are nominated by their communities and who have a broad and challenging remit: to promote, protect and preserve *kastom*. *Filwokas* are key mentors and collaborators with foreign researchers facilitating a remarkably diverse range of research (Taylor and Thieberger 2011). The five individuals memorialised here were senior *filwokas* and all were accomplished leaders in their communities. Archaeology was but one of the many fields they contributed to.

They all had influence well beyond Vanuatu, contributing to projects that shaped international discussions about Pacific Islands migrations, settlement patterns, and cultures. Their formal education ranged from limited to secondary level but all held the equivalent of professorial rank in *kastom* terms. All are deeply missed by their communities, colleagues and the world of Pacific archaeology more broadly but their influence will be felt for generations to come.

**UMINDURU 'JERRY' TAKI (c. 1953–2021):**  
One *filwoka*, multiple archaeologists

Uminduru 'Jerry' Taki was the longest-serving *filwoka* from Erromango Island, a man of high chiefly standing and deep knowledge of local *kastom* and one of the four founders of the Erromango Cultural Association which in 1993 set up a research project to preserve knowledge of Erromango's languages. Jerry was born at Unelei village the youngest of seven children. He started school at Unponyelogi (Happylands) in 1958, then went on to school at Unpogkor in Williams Bay. He was also schooled in *kastom* by his father Maiduru and developed a wealth of knowledge in the culture and history of Erromango (Naupa 2011:128). His remarkable career spanned five decades during which he was responsible for hosting and guiding dozens of foreign researchers, visiting museums across the globe, and reviving a whole range of Erromangan cultural traditions (Carrillo-Huffman 2021; Carrillo-Huffman *et al.* 2013; Huffman 2006; Naupa 2011). Jerry began his archaeological career in 1972. He was employed to guide Les Groube around the island in association with an Australian National University (ANU) research project identifying potential PhD research topics in archaeology. Jerry became fascinated by archaeology and he ultimately accompanied Groube to a number of

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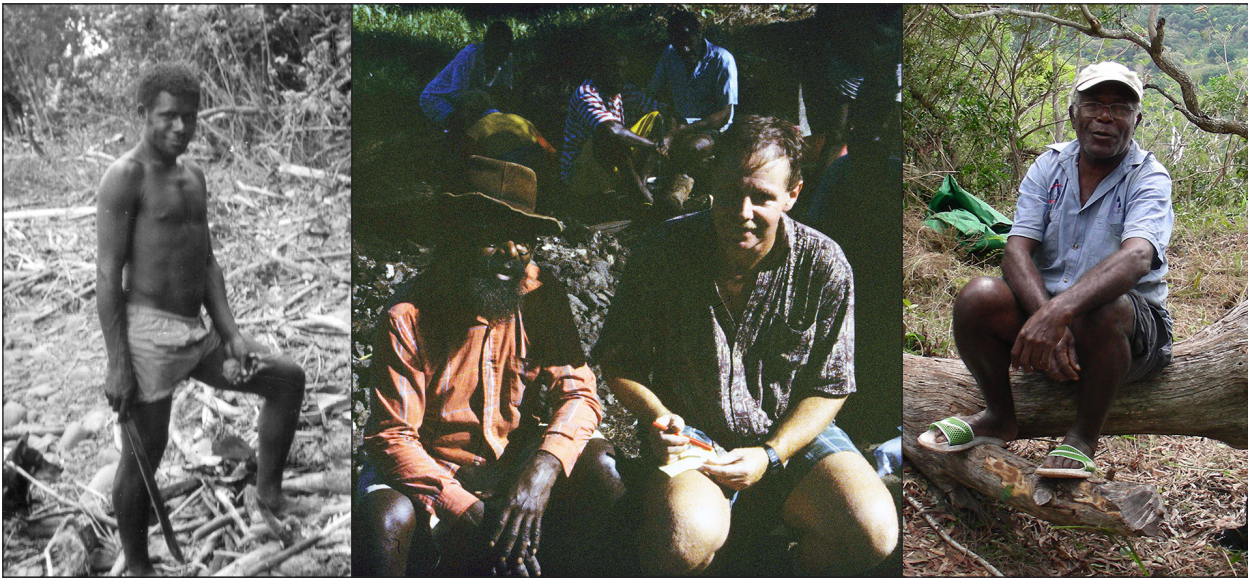


Figure 1. Left to right: Jerry Taki during fieldwork on Erromango Island, 1972 (Les Groube, ANU archives); Sitting with Terry Crowley and discussing linguistics while also co-directing excavations at the Ifo site, southeast, Erromango, 1996 (Stuart Bedford); A pause in fieldwork at the house site of missionaries George and Ellen Gordon, Erromango, 2014 (James Flexner).

other islands including Aneityum and islands in the Banks group in the far north.

Ten years or so later, Jerry started working with Matthew Spriggs on Erromango. Their excavations revealed the first pottery, including Lapita, in southern Vanuatu (Spriggs and Wickler 1989). Spriggs recalls how he had met with the then-*filwoka*, the late James Nobuat/Atnelo and had commenced a survey of the island. Having been a protégé of Les Groube, Spriggs had heard Groube's stories about his travels with Jerry and asked James about him. On 11 July 1983 they were on a bush path when James pointed out Jerry, walking towards them with a small child in tow. On being introduced, Jerry gave some of the things he was carrying to the child who then took off back down the track and Jerry declared he would join the team. When asked what he told the small child he said: 'I told them to tell their mother I'll be back in three weeks' time!' Jerry was with Spriggs on 14 July when the first Erromango pottery sherds were found, and again during excavations at Ifo on 3 August when the first undeniably Lapita sherd was found. They worked together again in 1988 when Spriggs was called in to assist with an environmental assessment of the proposed Erromango Kauri Forest Reserve (Spriggs 1988), spending days stumbling around in a cyclone-devastated forest still partly under water at the time looking for sites.

Jerry formally became a *vks filwoka* in 1987. With the lifting of the research moratorium in 1994 (that had been in place for 10 years [Regenvanu 1999]), Spriggs reconnected with Jerry on Erromango yet again excavating and surveying around much of the coast of the large island. Jerry visited Spriggs at The Australian National University twice in 1994 as well as attending an Australian academic

conference, and was able to repatriate cultural materials collected by Groube in 1972 following a request from the Erromango chiefs. The pair, along with prospective PhD student Stuart Bedford, then attended the 3rd World Archaeological Congress in New Delhi, India in December that year. Jerry took part in a roundtable discussion at the Congress which led to a joint publication on Erromango languages with linguist Darrell Tryon (Taki and Tryon 1997). In 1995 Bedford, now a PhD student at ANU, joined Jerry and Spriggs at the site of Ponamla in a remote part of northern Erromango for a two-month excavation. A substantial, early occupation site was revealed along with indications of Lapita once again. A land dispute threatened to derail work there and had led to a radio message from Director Ralph Regenvanu at the *vks* calling the team back to Vila for consultations. Jerry's overnight hike back to the nearest tele-radio station far to the south eased tensions and he came back the next day with the welcome news that work could continue. Jerry worked with Bedford for another two months in 1996 at the Lapita site of Ifo, on the southeast coast, where he had dug with Spriggs in 1983. The combination of the results from these sites led to the establishment of the full 1000-year sequence for Erromango pottery beginning at 3000BP (Bedford 2006).

During this period Jerry hosted two other ANU PhD students, Meredith Wilson and Nicola van Dijk. Wilson carried out a survey of rock art sites in Erromango in 1996 and 1997 with Jerry and with woman *filwoka* Sophie Nempai Sei serving as the primary sources of local knowledge. This was the first comprehensive survey and dating of rock art undertaken on the island (Wilson 1999). Van Dijk surveyed burial caves and recorded human remains *in situ* in

1995 as part of a bioanthropological study (van Dijk 1998). In 2010, Bedford and Spriggs reconnected with Jerry in the field at Williams Bay (Dillons Bay/Unpongkor) where an early pottery bearing site had been reported in 2006. On the same excavation yet another ANU PhD student was left under Jerry's wing. Mathieu Leclerc's focus was clay sourcing and he and Jerry covered much of the island collecting samples from a whole series of locations that connected to pottery bearing sites (Leclerc 2020).

In 2011, Jerry facilitated the first archaeological survey of colonial landscapes in Erromango, hosting James Flexner from Washington and Lee University on a project requested by the Williams Bay community. Flexner soon afterwards became an ANU-based postdoctoral fellow, focusing on the missionary period research. Flexner worked with Jerry on the island over four field seasons (2011–2014) (Flexner 2016). Most of Erromango was claimed to be successfully converted to Christianity by the 1890s but as Jerry repeatedly emphasised, becoming Christian did not mean people lost their *kastom*. Indeed, the missionary landscapes were as much about *kastom* beliefs regarding *natemas* (spirits), traditional places, and local oral accounts of history as any introduced ideas and traditions (Flexner and Taki 2021).

During his 49-year association with archaeology Jerry Taki made a massive contribution to training generations of graduate students and postdoctoral researchers, bridging the gap between scientific research and Erromango *kastom*. In addition to his work as a *filwoka*, Jerry played an instrumental role in the locally comprised Erromango Cultural Association, which began in the 1980s, recording 'disappearing' languages and stories. Few archaeologists working in the region can claim such a long career, and fewer still can claim to have trained as many generations as Jerry.

**SEMPET NARITANTOP (1951–2021):**  
Erromango's *somul* of *kastom*

Sempet Naritantop was one of Erromango's dominant figures in terms of *kastom*, a *somul* in the Sye language. His pioneering work as both a *vks filwoka* and in helping set up the Erromango Cultural Association from the 1980s onwards has left a great legacy – he was one of the original four local *filwoks* researching the 'lost' languages of the island. Sempet was born and grew up in Williams Bay where he learnt the *netai tangkli* (Bible) at the Presbyterian school. After completing schooling in 1968, he taught for two years at Punaluat then moved to Ipotia where he learned the *tempor* (*kastom* songs) from his uncle Tom Wolala (Naupa 2011:121). In the 1970s Sempet worked in community development and taught at Tangarak until 1981. During this time, from the early 1980s through the 1990s, Sempet became a *vks filwoka* for north Erromango. In 1994 he alerted Matthew Spriggs to the recovery of large pottery sherds at the remote northern location of Ponamla,

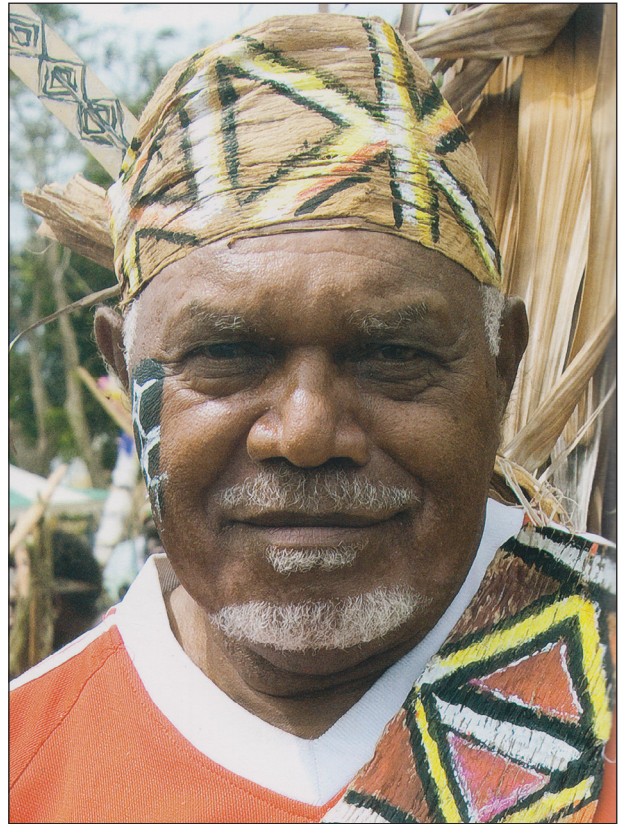


Figure 2. Sempet Naritantop at Williams/Dillons Bay reconciliation ceremony, 2009 (Anna Naupa).

found while digging postholes for a fence line. Spriggs visited and immediately recognised the importance of the site. A return trip in 1995 resulted in extensive excavations at the site (Bedford 2006).

Although no longer officially a *filwoka* after c. 1994 due to pressure of other commitments, Sempet continued to record *kastom* stories and *tempor* for decades, as well as working with the Erromango *Natmonuk Simanlou* Island Council of Chiefs to help nurture and grow inter-generational knowledge of cultural heritage. It was through this that he, Jerry Taki and others, formally established the previously informal Erromango Cultural Association in 2008 (Naupa 2011). Due to Sempet's knowledge of *tempor* and his tireless contributions to the Council of Chiefs, traditional knowledge about the land and the various rights of *nompunorop* (clans), has a much reduced threat of dying out. Ever on the lookout for any archaeological evidence on the island it was he that alerted Spriggs yet again to the chance discovery of pottery at Williams Bay in 2006, followed up by Bedford and Spriggs in 2010. Sempet's sagacity had once again led to the discovery of an important site.

**FRANK INHAT ASJINJAP (1964–2021):**  
From a proud lineage of researchers

Frank Inhat was born at the Yorien Dispensary at Anelcauhat, Aneityum on 8 May 1964, son of Jack Yauotau and Masanrosei. He was first exposed to archaeological research as a young 14-year-old when Spriggs came to the island to begin his PhD fieldwork in 1978. Spriggs worked closely with his father Jack Yauotau, for 10 months over a three-year period. Frank had ongoing exposure and gained increasing inspiration for research through his marriage to the daughter of Philip Tephahae who had also been involved with Spriggs' research and was recruited as one of the early *vks filwoka*s. Frank was also involved in linguistic and anthropological research from the late 1980s onwards.

Frank joined the *filwoka* network in the 1990s. His first direct involvement with archaeological research was during Spriggs' 1995 field season on Aneityum when he joined his father Yauotau, Spriggs and Geoff Hope and Brad Pillans in a wide-ranging project refining the dating of landscape change on the island. He then attended the *vks*-ANU archaeological training program on the west coast of Efate in 2002 (Bedford *et al.* 2011). In 2012 Aneityum once again became the focus of archaeological attention when test excavations at Anelcauhat turned up pottery for the first time on the island. Three seasons of fieldwork (2013–2016), which involved large numbers of students, were guided and managed by Frank (Bedford *et al.* 2016). His satisfaction with having led the group that finally found Lapita pottery on the island was palpable. During this time, he was also the Chairman of the *Nelcau Aneityum*, the Aneityum Council of Chiefs, a position he held from 2006 until his death. In that position he played a leading role in ongoing settlement of land boundaries on the island.

**JIMMY WILLIAM SANHANBATH (1954–2020):**  
Leader, mentor, performer, raconteur

Jimmy William Sanhanbath was born on Aore Island in 1954 and grew up on neighbouring Malo Island. The family were originally from northwest Malakula but had fled the region in the 1940s due to tribal violence. Jimmy connected with Malakula when he attended school there and his interest in learning about his heritage blossomed. He returned to the northwest after Independence and established a village named Albalak from 1987.

In 1995 his involvement with promoting *kastom* and mentoring foreign researchers began in earnest. When planning archaeological fieldwork in the northwest area of Malakula, a small group, comprising Ralph Regenvanu (then Director of *vks*), Matthew Spriggs and Stuart Bedford, visited the area to explain the research and to encourage the communities there to nominate a *filwoka* for the area. Jimmy was ultimately appointed by the communities as he was located in the middle of the region and spoke several languages. Bedford's focus was establishing when people first arrived on Malakula and over field seasons with Jimmy in 1995 and 1996 they were to confirm that Lapita peoples had been the first to arrive 3000 years ago. Bedford teamed up with Jimmy regularly over the next 25 years on various projects. Lapita was again the focus on the small islands of northeast Malakula from 2001–2003 (Bedford 2006; Bedford *et al.* 2011). Jimmy was the first to find pieces of Lapita pottery on three out of the four islands of Uripiv, Wala, Atchin, and Vao. Jimmy was also instrumental in another major project with Bedford which is still on-going, the recording of often politically-sensitive stone ceremonial sites known as *nasara* across Malakula. Jimmy recognised the challenges and applied his usual enthusiasm



Figure 3. Frank Inhat preparing kava, ANU Fieldschool, Anelcauhat, Aneityum, 2013; ANU Fieldschool group in front of the 1860 stone church, Anelcauhat, Aneityum, 2015. Frank manages the crowd from the far right (Stuart Bedford).



Figure 4. Chief Kalman Apsai and Jimmy Sanhanbath (right) excavating on Uripiv Island, northeast Malakula, 2002; Excavating at the Teouma Lapita site, Efate Island, with Numa Fred Longga, 2008; Recording nasara in northwest Malakula, 2015 (Stuart Bedford).

and communication skills to the project which has now recorded more than 400 *nasara* sites across the island.

Bedford was only the beginning of a long line of researchers who were mentored by Jimmy throughout the next 25 years. In 1996, Meredith Wilson started her rock art research in Vanuatu in the northwest, an area which has many important sites (Wilson 2002). Through his work with Wilson, Jimmy attended a conference and visited rock art sites in Indonesia in 1998. He worked again with Wilson and others to conserve rock art sites in his area and looked at the possibilities of establishing ecotourism around them (Wilson *et al.* 2000). Mathieu Leclerc continued his clay sourcing project with Jimmy in the 2010s. A major new research initiative focusing on the diversity of languages in Malakula, and then extended to genetics, was started in 2014 by Professor Russell Gray from the Max Planck Institute in Germany. Gray initially recruited Aviva Shimelman to collect language information across all of Malakula and due to Jimmy's linguistic skills and his extensive connections in the north he trekked many long distances with her introducing the project to different language communities. Other researchers from the Max Planck team arrived soon afterwards in 2015, including anthropologist Heidi Colleran and population modeller Adam Powell.

Nobody could have predicted what an influential figure Jimmy would become in promoting *kastom* and culture locally and internationally over 25 years. He had attended the annual two-week vks *filwokas* workshops in Port Vila since 1996, arriving as a novice and over more than 20 years developed into a wise leader of the group. Similarly, when he attended the International Lapita Conference held in Port Vila in 1996, he was just starting out as a *filwoka* and researcher. When he attended the same Lapita conference in 2015, again held in Port Vila, along with more than 100 foreign delegates, he was recognised as a seasoned researcher having led in the discovery of five Lapita sites on Malakula (see <https://vimeo.com/486683510/a98eaae068> for a summary of his involvement in research).

**ELI FIELD MALAU (1954–2021):**  
An intricately carved career

Eli Malau was born in July 1954 at Vurës, on Vanua Lava Island, one of the Banks Islands in the far north of Vanuatu. He went to school at Port Paterson (near Sola) in 1966 where his science teacher, Bob Field, identified him as a promising student. Eli finished school in 1969 and he worked in the office of the Condominium government in the 1970s in Santo. He returned to Vanua Lava in 1975. His interest in *kastom* was evident early on and was initially expressed by his attendance at the first National Arts festival held at the capital in Port Vila in 1979. He developed a particular interest and focus on carving, an art that was rapidly being lost on Vanua Lava. His dedication over decades led to a major revival and to his attendance at a whole range of venues, including the 1988 World Expo in Brisbane, where he promoted Banks Islands' carving traditions. He was instrumental in reviving the carving of traditional drums of the region.

Eli was one of the longest serving *filwokas* in the country, joining the network in 1983, and remained a leading figure until very recently when his health began to fail. His first direct experience with archaeology was attending the vks-ANU research and training program on west Efate in 1999 for a 5-week period. This inspired an interest in pottery and the potential for identifying it in the Banks. Serious involvement with archaeological research on his home island began in 2006 when he collaborated with ANU PhD student Christian Reepmeyer in identifying obsidian sources on Vanua Lava, one of the two islands where obsidian is found in Vanuatu. They spent many months in the field covering much of the island in their search for sources (Reepmeyer 2008). Pottery was much easier, found in the first week of survey with Reepmeyer and Stuart Bedford when preliminary test pits were excavated at Ambek village in the northwest of the island (Bedford and Spriggs 2008).



Figure 5. Eli Field Malau sharing kava, Dives Bay, Vanua Lava 2006; Carving during a break, 2006; Collecting water in bamboo container, 2006 (Christian Reepmeyer).

## FAREWELL AND PERSISTENCE

Vanuatu has developed over many decades a unique, community-oriented approach to archaeology led by the vks and the network of *filwokas* (Bedford *et al.* 2011; Flexner 2021) including the individuals described above. The loss of cultural knowledge, not to mention archaeological knowledge, during 2020–21 is notable as well as being profoundly sad. One of the challenges for the immediate and more distant future will be recruiting and training a younger generation of *filwokas* to carry on the tradition of maintaining *kastom* while supporting research, following in the quite substantial footprints of those now passed to the realm of the ancestors.

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