

Fieldnotes on some cultural aspects of marine resource use in four coastal villages of Vanuatu

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Introduction

As a member of a JICA mission to several South Pacific nations, I conducted a brief field survey in Vanuatu in April 1988, to examine the development potential of inshore fisheries and aquaculture. Among the locations visited in Vanuatu were Port Olry (Espiritu Santo Island), Uripiv Island, Makatea Village (Emae Island), and Anelgowhat village (Aneityum Island). Although the main purpose of the mission was to describe the status of local fisheries, opportunities were taken to seek information in my own particular areas of academic interest. Since relatively little is known of the cultural aspects of fishing communities in Vanuatu, some preliminary information from that wider survey is reproduced here.

Local ideas on marine resources

The general terms used to signify marine resources in Aneityum are *numu* or *mu*. Within these, different categories are distinguished. These include shellfish (*nesungamo*), sea crabs (*numu dalenget*, lit. 'crawling *numu*'), finfish (*numu sungan*, lit. '*numu* with meat'), seaweeds (*nelom*), octopus (*nith*), turtle (*nahou*), and the other categories shown in Fig. 1. Seaweeds, shellfish, crabs and lobster, finfish, octopus, and turtles are divided into named generic and specific categories. With the exception of holothurians (*nesiahao*), most marine species are used as human food.

At Makatea village, Emae Island, the generic term for marine organisms is *nea tai* (lit. 'things of the sea'). It includes finfish (*ika*), shellfish, octopus (*feke*), spiny lobster (*ula*), sea urchin (*sawaki* and *watuke*), seaweeds (*rimu*), turtle (*fonu*) and holothurians (*makasun*), all of which are consumed by humans.

In Uripiv the generic name for marine food-stuffs is *mesal*. It includes fish (*naŋ*) and all items taken from the reef (*nal*).

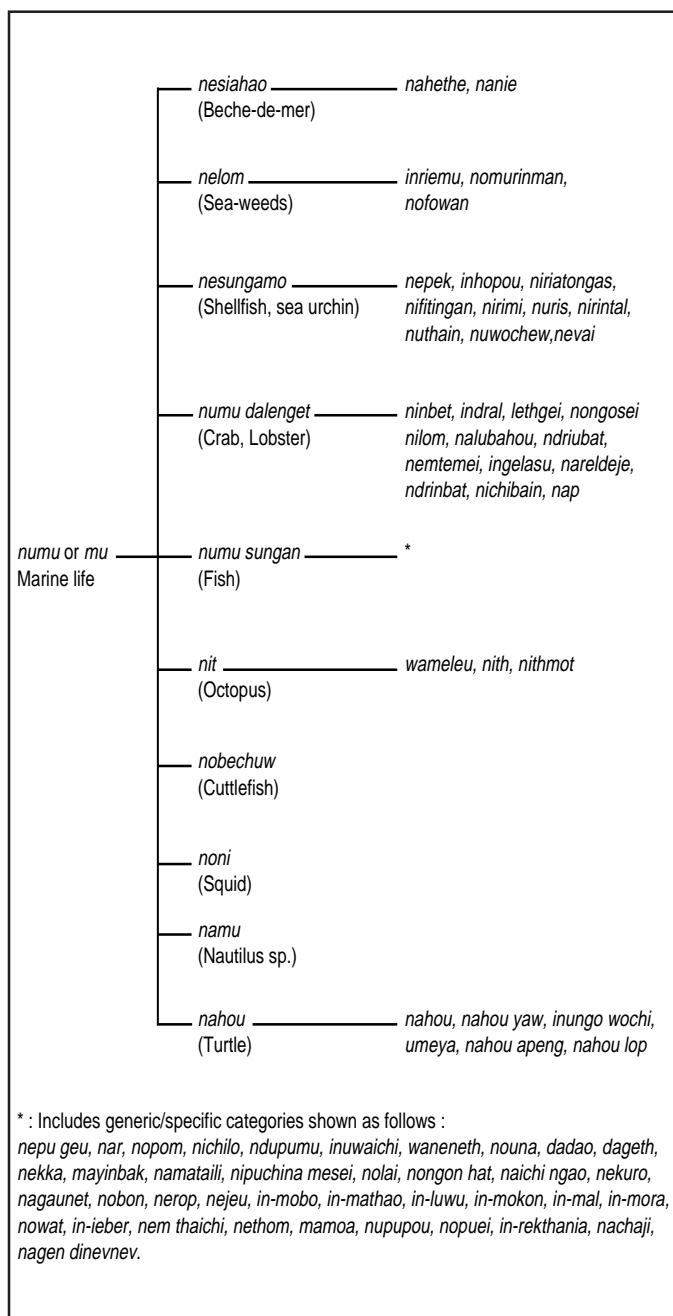


Figure 1: Classification of marine life in Aneityum

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In all the societies surveyed, classification of marine resources is basically hierarchical. The classification is arranged first with unique life form, followed by either two or three generic or specific sub-categories. For example, at Aneityum *numu* (marine life), *numu sungan* (fish) and *neju* (tuna) form such a hierarchy (Fig. 1).

A second basic distinction is made between reef and off-shore species. For finfish, for example, the prefix *in* indicates a reef (*in*) species, as exemplified by *in-mora* and *in-ieber*.

Local knowledge regarding ciguatera poisoning

Ciguatera poisoning is widespread in Vanuatu². In the four villages surveyed four fish were identified as poisonous by informants. Of these, sea perch (*Lutjanus* sp.) and jacks (*Caranx* sp.) were the main groups identified.

According to Emae villagers, ciguatera is associated with the growth of specific kinds of corals (*tuputupu fou*), during the period April – December. Similarly, Aneityum Islanders recognise that fish become poisonous when feeding on those soft corals that also cause a diver's skin to itch.

The special use of marine resources

During ceremonies and feasting, certain species are reserved for consumption by specific persons or groups. This is a widespread practice in Pacific Island cultures. For example, at Uripiv, at times of the

yam harvest, weddings and childbirth, *Naso unicornis* (*natiw*), blue parrotfish and *Hemipteronotus pavo* (*bulbul welum*) are dedicated to village chiefs. On Aneityum the heads of turtles as well as large fish are given to the chiefs. And at Makatea, when large fish and turtles are caught, the head of the fish, or even the whole fish, and the forefins of the turtle are given to the chiefs.

Methods of cooking seafood

Traditionally, fish and other seafoods were cooked using a variety of methods, including grilling, baking, steaming in an earth oven in *laplap*, and smoking. Seafood is also consumed raw. The most common methods are grilling or baking either on a fire or hot embers. Steaming in an earth oven is widely used to prepare seafood for a large number of people on ceremonial occasions or for feasting. Usually the seafood is cooked along with grated banana and taro, and meat, flavored with coconut milk and wrapped for cooking in *Heliconia* leaves. Bamboo containers are used for roasting. Fish smoking is probably not common. Cooking method by village is shown in Table 1.

Acknowledgement

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Table 1: Cooking Methods for Fish and Other Seafoods in the Four Locations

Method	Port Olry	Uripiv	Emae	Aneityum
Fire/embers	NA	NA	NA	OB
Stone	OB	OB	OB	OB
Earth oven	OB	OB	OB	OB
Raw	NA	OB	OB	NU
Bamboo	NA	NA	NA	OB
<i>Laplap</i>	OB	OB	OB	OB

Table Notes: NA = Not Ascertained; NU = Not Used; OB = Observed.

2 Ciguatera is known as *kalo* (Port Olry), *aru-eci* (Uripiv), *ekona* (Emae), and *agen* (Aneityum).