

TWO TRIBES. ONE LOVE.



30. Venice International  
Film Critics' Week

# Tanna

# SYNOPSIS

*Tanna* is set in the South Pacific where Wawa, a young girl from one of the last traditional tribes, falls in love with her chief's grandson, Dain. When an inter-tribal war escalates, Wawa is unknowingly betrothed as part of a peace deal. The young lovers run away, but are pursued by enemy warriors intent on killing them. They must choose between their hearts and the future of the tribe, while the villagers must wrestle with preserving their traditional culture and adapting it to the increasing outside demands for individual freedom. *Tanna* is based on a true story and performed by the people of Yakel in Vanuatu.

VANUATU

Torres Is.

Port Vila

Efaté

Yakel

*Tanna*

New  
Caledonia  
(Fr.)

CORAL  
SEA

GREAT BARRIER REEF

AUSTRALIA



# BACKGROUND

People first arrived on Tanna in Vanuatu about 3,000 years ago when the Lapita sailed from the Bismarck archipelago in Papua New Guinea to colonise the islands. They brought along pigs, chickens, pottery and a host of crops that are still the mainstay on Tanna today.

The English Captain James Cook was the first European to visit Tanna in 1774, followed by missionaries in the 19th century. In the mid 20th century, a powerful local movement rejecting the colonial presence emerged, advocating a return to Kastom and abandonment of western clothes, money and schools. Though the leaders were arrested, exiled, and imprisoned, the movement swept the island and still retains respect to this day.

Today, Yakel is one of a number of villages in Tanna's central mountain chain that have held on to their fully traditional Kastom lifestyle, maintaining its belief system and social structure despite contact with the modern world. There is a deliberate choice to protect and nurture the old ways.

# DIRECTORS' NOTE

The Yakel tribe of Tanna island, Vanuatu, still hunt with bows and arrows and make their clothes and houses entirely from materials gathered in the surrounding jungle. Their days begin with the rising sun and end with a kava ceremony at sunset. It's a life that has all but disappeared in modern times, yet people here are proud of their culture – 'Kastom' – and want to share it with the rest of the world.

For seven months we lived together, exchanging food, stories, ceremonies, laughter, pain and adventures. Bentley's children played with theirs, learning their language and way of life.

One day the men sang a deeply moving song about two lovers who dared defy the ancient laws of arranged marriage, some 20 years earlier. They said the young lovers' story changed the course of Kastom on the island.

*Tanna* is a cinematic translation of that song – which is at its heart a story of the universally transformative power of love.

Working so closely with the people of Yakel has been one of the most rewarding experiences of our creative lives. Together we have opened a rare window into a rapidly-vanishing world full of hope and dynamism.



Peter Kowia , Martin Butler, Lingai Kowia, Bentley Dean, Caha Toata, JJ

# GLOSSARY

**Tanna:** An island of 30,000 people in the south of the Vanuatu's archipelago, which became independent from Britain and France in 1980.

**Kastom:** The traditional cosmology of Vanuatu, a system of laws, beliefs, songs, dances and patriarchal social structures.

**Kastom Roads:** The metaphorical roads that link Tanna's Kastom groups together, which can be closed by war and opened by peace, allowing the exchange of goods and people to resume.

**Burying the Club:** A formal ceremony to end conflict between tribal groups. A peace-making chief calls the disputing parties, in front of a witness chief, to agree on terms and exchange pigs, kava and brides to seal the peace.

**Yahul:** The Yakel name for the active volcano that dominates the southern part of Tanna. She is their Spirit Mother.

# AN INTERVIEW WITH THE FILMMAKERS

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## How did such an unusual film come to be made?

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**BENTLEY:** Back in 2004 I found myself on the lip of Tanna's very active volcano discussing geopolitics with the leader of the millenarian John Frum movement for SBS' international current affairs program, *Dateline*. With deep concern Chief Isaac explained how he was beginning to doubt whether the USA would fulfill the prophecy of returning to Tanna and questioned their recent invasion of Iraq. "In World War 2, they stopped the Japanese here. They did good. But why are they in Iraq? I think it's for money." On cue the volcano ejected lava and ash in an almighty eruption. Perhaps responding to my wide eyes Chief Isaac reassured me: "Tanna is one special island". He's right. Just 50km by 20km it contains dense rainforest, black and white sand beaches, brilliant coral and a stark ash plain. But it also contains one of the most diverse and unique set of belief systems in the world. Among all the Pacific Islands Tanna is probably the strongest for following Kastom. I remember thinking

it would be great to find an excuse to stay longer, learn more, maybe make a film here one day.

**MARTIN:** In mid 2013 we had just finished a landmark series on the Aboriginal history of Australia and were between projects. Bentley told me he wanted to live with his partner and two young children in a very different culture before they started school and proposed we make a feature film on Tanna. Given that neither of us had made drama before and we had no money I thought it a particularly ambitious plan, if not foolhardy. But we knew we had a couple of strong advantages. Our two person crew using equipment we owned, enabled us to film for many months without huge expense and we had developed a successful way of filming with traditional people based on respect, patience and personal rapport. We went to Tanna to test the waters.

The head of Tanna's Culture Centre, Jacob Kapere, suggested visiting the village of Yakel to discuss the idea. We were

welcomed warmly by the men, all dressed in nambas (penis sheaths), and invited to drink kava. The next morning we played Rolf De Heer's *Ten Canoes* on a laptop to demonstrate the type of film we might make – a film based on their stories, with them as writers and actors. They had never seen a feature film before. But what they wanted to know was: Can we start tomorrow?

During those first few days on Tanna, we were taken to the other side of the island where a big meeting was taking place between all the tribes from the area. A young couple were in love but she had been promised to another tribe as part of an arranged marriage. We were fascinated. Passions flared and in the end it was agreed that each side should exchange kava and pigs and that the couple could stay together and marry, as long as her tribe provided another woman in the future. We were told after that these disputes were not resolved so easily in the past. Star crossed lovers, tribal disputes, challenge to the old ways – some powerful dramatic themes were emerging.

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## How did you do the casting?

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There was a lot of life meeting art in the process of casting. The Chief of Yakel

plays the Chief of Yakel – **Chief Charlie**. The medicine man plays **the Medicine Man**. Everyone agreed that Mungau should play the leading man, **Dain**, because he was the most handsome. But he was petrified of showing physical affection with a woman in public – something that is strictly taboo. Collectively, we convinced him and by the end of the film he was quite comfortable lying on a beach having his nipples squeezed by the ravishing Marie Wawa.

Marie, who plays **Wawa** was a one of a kind but took a long time to find. Every other girl we auditioned could barely look Mungau in the eye – light years from the feisty teenager the film called for. But the instant Martin saw Marie, he knew she was the one (Bentley could only see blurred shapes at the time due to severe viral conjunctivitis) – stunning, with an infectious laugh and great emotional depth in her eyes.

The **Peacemaking Tribe** and **Witness Tribe** were drawn from neighbouring tribes more or less in line with their traditional roles. Astonishingly, the men thought the enemy tribe, **The Imedin**, should be played by the tribe with whom Yakel were having a real-life bloody land dispute.



Dancing and singing in the Nakamal, Yakel

They saw great potential: just as the enemy tribes come together in the film, so too will they. Lingai went across the valley to ask. It didn't go well. Their chief flatly refused, calling Lingai a bastard – which is the worst possible thing you can say to a Tannese man as it implies he has no right to his land. Lingai beat him up, and several other men when they tried to ambush him. The film nearly ended before it began but all was eventually resolved by a meeting where pigs and kava were exchanged. They decided it would be better to cast **Supreme Chief Mikum** and his people as **The Imedin**. With a real-life nickname, Tangalua (Snake), he couldn't have been more menacing.

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### **How did you work with the Yakel people to get their impressive performances?**

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*Tanna* was shot in an unusual way. None of the actors are literate or have had any experience acting. The story and dialogue were developed through workshopping and improvisation on location.

At the start of filming each scene we would ask everyone on location what would happen in real life. Say for the *Burying the Club* ceremony – they would block out the direction tribes would come from, where they'd sit, the order that chiefs would speak, when they'd sacrifice

pigs and exchange kava, what the men would say, and what the women would whisper in the background. Essential lines were hit, but we always left room for the spontaneous performances everyone excelled at. Because we had discussed the story together over many months, everyone knew the emotional arc of each scene and could move freely within character as if it were happening for real.

We began filming rehearsals in March 2014 to get ourselves and the actors used to working with the camera. We weren't sure what the style of filming would be until this moment. Amazingly this very first rehearsal is in the final film – the scene where Chief Charlie teaches the peace song to the men of the Yakel. Bentley remembers feeling goosebumps as he began capturing extraordinary nuanced performances – Charlie goading and persuading, group acceptance, reluctance overcome from Lingai and defiance from Dain. We decided there would be no more rehearsals. We'd shoot for real.

The atmosphere on the shoot was deliberately low key. We teased each other a lot and there was much laughter. It's our view that this 'embedded' and intimate filmmaking style is probably the only way this film could have been made.

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## How do you share your tasks in your film production?

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We've been working together for more than seven years, always co-directing, with Bentley filming and Martin recording sound. We co-produce all our own projects and only work on one at a time. We know each other's thoughts and aesthetics so well now that often we don't talk while filming. We just know what feels right. We also write together, flinging the script between us – often on a daily basis. Sometimes we'll argue a point passionately, sleep on it, then argue the other's point of view just as passionately. It's an enormously stimulating process.

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## What are some of your most memorable moments?

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**MARTIN:** My very first afternoon in Yakel was certainly memorable. It was kava time. In Yakel, the kava is prepared in the traditional way. Uninitiated men clean the roots and chew them for about five-ten minutes until they are a soft brown mush. This is spat out onto a broad leaf, mixed with water and squeezed through a coconut leaf into a coconut shell. It's a grey/brown cloudy liquid that tastes and smells of the earth. This was my first experience of traditional kava and it blew my mind. The kava in Vanuatu,

and Tanna in particular, is much stronger than elsewhere in the Pacific. First off it numbs the mouth and lips, but within ten minutes there's a warm flow of elation in the brain and as the soft light of dusk turns into night a wonderful sense of empathy with nature and the people around you. After taking kava the chatter dies away and the soporific effects tend to a silent meditation. Slowly and quietly the men drift away to separate corners of the nakamal, carrying a fire stick to make their own fire. I sat at the fireside with Albi, who plays the Shaman, and meditated about our plans. It was an intoxicating experience and one that was repeated almost every evening that we were in Yakel.

**BENTLEY:** Every time we filmed at the volcano – the Spirit Mother, Yahul – was a memorable moment for me. There was no need for CGI – every eruption was very real and at times scary. Selin had never seen Yahul before making this film – it felt special to capture her awe and nascent understanding as she met and got to know Yahul for the very first time. It was a feeling that I shared over dozens of visits. Yahul has many moods. On the very first trip She killed the camera with acid rain. On the last trip with Dain and Wawa, a perfectly timed eruption created what could be one of the great rendezvous of

lovers of cinema! It was impossible for me to be in the presence of Yahul and not feel our planet is alive.

**JANITA (LOCATION PRODUCER):** Within days of arriving, it was clear my fear of our two and four year olds getting lost in the jungle wouldn't be realised. There was no going anywhere without a gaggle of Yakel kids holding your hands. Even if you managed to sneak off, it was moments until a 'lewher!' (hello!) and someone's head would pop out from behind a tree. It was surprisingly hard to find privacy on a remote island! So our kids were absorbed into village life, picked up the language, went on adventures and visited families we'd never met up the mountain, and ate bats and BBQd pigs intestines wound on sticks while we'd go off to film. We'd discover what they'd been up to at the end of the day when we scrolled through the photos from our stills camera lent to the older kids. I'll never forget the first time I saw our two year old gingerly wielding a machete that was almost as big as him.

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## What do the tribe think of the film?

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We promised the people of Yakel they would be the first in the world to see *Tanna*. But a few weeks before the scheduled Cast and Crew screening, Cyclone Pam devastated Vanuatu and Yakel was not spared. Every house, except

a specially built traditional cyclone proof hut, was destroyed. Thankfully no one was killed. Incredibly they insisted we come to show the film as planned. Yakel was barely recognisable – trees were flattened, crops destroyed, but already about a third of the huts had been rebuilt and they'd buried enough food before the cyclone to keep them going short term. Spirits were high as they erected a screen we had brought – two white sheets sewn together – lashed to a massive banyan tree that had survived the winds. Tribes from all directions came to watch. It was an unforgettable experience. No one had ever been to a cinema. It was their first film and it starred them in their own language, telling their own story. There were whoops of joy and laughter, tut-tuts when the lovers did the wrong thing, teenage boys sniggering during the love scenes while young girls at the front shouted at them to keep quiet. The following day, after much internal discussion, the chiefs gave us what will be our best review. "We know you came here with your equipment and idea to make a film, but we want to inform you that we consider this our film." They said the film reflected the truth and would help keep Kastom strong. They gave us a chicken and sacred kava root.

# BENTLEY DEAN

## Co-Director/Co-Producer/ Cinematographer

Bentley Dean was a participant in the ABC's inaugural *Race Around the World* series in 1997. After working as a freelance director and cinematographer, he started working for SBS's international current affairs program *Dateline* in 2001. Bentley went on to make a number of award-winning powerful social documentaries including *Anatomy of a Coup*, *The President Versus David Hicks*, *The Siege* and *A Well-Founded Fear*. In 2009, he teamed up with Martin Butler to make *Contact* – a film about the last desert peoples' first-contact with modern Australia. They made the four part documentary series *First Footprints* about Australia's 50,000 year Aboriginal history in 2013. They have been making *Tanna* since then.



## Awards:

### *Anatomy of a Coup* (2002)

- Best Political Documentary, Reel: Life on Film.

### *The President Versus David Hicks* (2004)

- Best Documentary, Logie Awards.
- Best Documentary, Australian Film Institute Awards.

### *Contact* (2009)

- Gold Hugo for Best TV Documentary, Chicago Film and TV Awards.
- Best Documentary – Sydney Film Festival, Australian Film Institute, Miradas Film festival, Walkley Awards.
- Prime Ministers History Prize.

### *First Footprints* (2013)

- Best Documentary, Walkley Awards.
- Best Documentary, ATOM Awards.
- NSW Premiers History Prize.



Martin Butler reviews a scene with JJ and Chief Mungau Yokay

# MARTIN BUTLER

## Co-Director/Co-Producer/Sound

Martin studied politics and economics at Oxford University and then went to work for the manager of 'The Who' at his palace on the Grand Canal in Venice. In 1981 he migrated to Australia and spent the next 25 years producing award winning documentary reports on ABC's *Fours Corners* and *Foreign Correspondent*, and SBS's *Dateline*. In 2009 he teamed up with Bentley Dean to make *Contact*, a film about the last first-contact in the Western Desert of Australia. They made the four part documentary series *First Footprints* about Australia's 50,000 year Aboriginal history in 2013. They have been making *Tanna* since then.

## Awards:

### *Frozen Asset* (1989)

- Best Documentary, New York Film and Television Awards.

### *Contact* (2009)

- Gold Hugo for Best TV Documentary, Chicago Film and TV Awards.
- Best Documentary – Sydney Film Festival, Australian Film Institute, Miradas Film festival, Walkley Awards.
- Prime Ministers History Prize.

### *First Footprints* (2013)

- Best Documentary, Walkley Awards.
- Best Documentary, ATOM Awards.
- NSW Premiers History Prize.

# JJ NAKO

## Cultural Director

Jimmy Joseph Nako (JJ) was brought up traditionally in the next village to Yakel, but as well as learning the Kastom ways he also attended school, completing high school on the island of Espirito Santo. He speaks impeccable English and returned to his village to found the school there. He knows everyone, is hugely respected and has deep knowledge of Kastom. He was our translator, cultural interpreter, guide and advisor. On location he would suggest script lines, guide the actors and even record sound. He was the essential lynchpin of communicating and negotiating with the tribe. Without his constant input over 6 months this film would not have been made. He continues to live traditionally and wants to start a Kastom School that combines traditional knowledge with the national curriculum.

In 2007 JJ translated, narrated and starred in the British documentary series *Meet the Natives*, where along with Albi Nangia, Posen Yarbitang, and Chief Yapa, he met Prince Philip in Buckingham Palace.



Treasured photo: JJ (4th from left). Albi Nangia (far left) playing The Shaman uses his real life meeting with Prince Philip to explain arranged marriage to Wawa





Mungau Dain plays Dain

## MAIN CAST

Dain	Mungau Dain
Wawa	Marie Wawa
Selin	Marceline Rofit
Chief Charlie	Chief Charlie Kahla
Grandfather & Shaman	Albi Nangia
Father	Lingai Kowia
Grandmother	Dadwa Mungau
Mother	Linette Yowayin
Kapan Cook	Kapan Cook
Peacemaking Chief	Chief Mungau Yokay
Imedin Chief	Chief Mikum Tainakou

None of the cast had ever acted before. All have lived only at Yakel or neighbouring villages. They have not been to a state sanctioned school, most have never left Tanna, and they all lead a completely traditional life.

## MAIN CREW

Directed by	Bentley Dean and Martin Butler
Cultural Director	Jimmy Jospheh Nako
Written by	Bentley Dean, Martin Butler and John Collee in collaboration with the people of Yakel
Produced by	Martin Butler, Bentley Dean, Carolyn Johnson
Location Producer	Janita Suter
Cinematographer	Bentley Dean
Edited by	Tania Michel Nehme
Sound Designer	Emma Bortignon
Composer	Antony Partos
Vocals by	Lisa Gerrard



Marie Wawa plays Wawa



Women of Yakel collect shells

# CONTACTS

[www.facebook.com/TannaMovie](https://www.facebook.com/TannaMovie)

## SALES & PROGRAMMING

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# TECH SPECS

Country of Production:  
Australia, Vanuatu

Language: Nauvhal  
(English subtitles, Italian subtitles)

Runtime: 104 min

Format: DCP (24fps), color

Aspect Ratio: 1.78:1

Sound: 5.1 surround

Stills: Philippe Penel, Design: Rachel Arning

Principal development and production investment by Screen Australia  
Developed and produced with the assistance of Film Victoria  
Developed with assistance from Screen NSW

