



Tribal feud resolved by swapping children in Vanuatu

By Online Editor

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Warring tribes on the tiny Pacific island of Tanna in Vanuatu have agreed to swap two children to settle a long-running land dispute that descended into violence.

The clans, who have been arguing over property rights for two decades, revived the ancient and controversial custom of child swapping in an attempt to end hostilities after the feud turned violent and several people were injured in a brawl.

In a move designed by tribal chiefs to heal the rift, a young boy and girl will be exchanged, a practice that has not taken place on Tanna - part of the Vanuatu chain - for more than 200 years.

Seth Kaurua, from the Vanuatu Council of Chiefs, said the feud between the two tribes had been going on for 27 years, but the chiefs had to step in when it turned violent and several people were injured.

“The practice on Tanna for resolving a dispute, whenever it turns to violence, is that we have to use our traditional way,” he said. “One tribe gives away a child, female or male, to the other tribe and the other tribe has to do the same.”

The aim of the exchange was to “build a bridge between the two tribes and make the relationship stronger”.

Kaurua acknowledged that the practice might raise eyebrows outside the Pacific, but said it was “a normal part of our traditional life” in Vanuatu.

Exchanging children is frowned on by the court system, but it does take place from time to time. It is not uncommon on the island for a female child to be given away to replace a lost family member - for example if a child is killed in a car accident, the driver could offer one of their own children as reparation.

However, a swap involving two large tribes giving up a child had not taken place for more than 200 years, because peace had prevailed, Kaurua said.

“We had a tribal fight 200 years ago and no one has been killed, no fighting since then. So when this dispute happened, people just go back to what happened in the past to resolve it.

“Many people in different countries might think it is strange but for us its normal practice. It is a highly respected custom. It is the way we make peace.”

The child swap itself takes place in an elaborate ceremony in which both tribes gather. The child is paraded in front of the new tribe and the leader of the tribe shakes hands with the child and its parents, indicating that he will accept the boy or girl. While the child does not have to move to its new tribe immediately, he or she will grow up in the knowledge that they will eventually have to leave. So far, one part of the swap has taken place, involving a girl aged seven. The second, involving a boy, is due to take place in the coming weeks.

Kirk Huffman, an anthropologist who has studied the clans of Vanuatu, said the practice was an effective way of rebalancing relations between groups that had become strained or dangerous. “This is not a barbaric, savage custom at all, it is a very sophisticated means of re-establishing a broken peace between two groups,” he said.

“It used to be done in the royal families of Europe, who would swap women to make the bonds between the families stronger. But it has been happening in Tanna since before the nations of Europe were formed.”

The children involved often benefited because they could remain in contact with their family, while gaining a new extended family, he said.

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