

LAPLAP SOSO'UR: TRADITIONALLY GRATED AND BAKED YAM

BERGMANS IATI

*Partager le sosour c'est communier avec les vivants
et les ancêtres*

(The sharing of sosour is a communion with the living
and the ancestors)

—Vanuatuan oral tradition

Laplap is a Vanuatuan traditional baked delicacy scraped from cassava, taro, yam, and green banana combined with coconut milk, chicken, fish, and beef or pig meat. The whole is wrapped in large banana leaves, also locally called *laplap* leaves, and steamed in a traditional oven. There is a wide variety of *laplap* in Vanuatu. Indeed, the *laplap soso'ur*, originating from Malekula Island, presents a particular and unique feature determining both social and cultural identity considerations of Malampa's local population.

Laplap soso'ur's preparation process is so rich and complex that the know-how required to prepare such a meal deserves protection and promotion of its tangible and intangible heritage. *Laplap soso'ur* is an effective example depicting social cohesion involving a strong sense of conviviality and communion between the community members irrespective of their status or rank. The meal is shared during large family reunions, celebrations, and various diverse occasions.

Laplap soso'ur is facing the threat of disappearance as result of modern living styles. Indeed, subconsciously, everything today has to be done efficiently and effectively at a fast pace. Such attitude does not allow such time-intensive practices of taking time to spend with relatives to perform such community acts as cooking and baking the laplap soso'ur. This leads to a rapidly changing tangible environment and island lifestyle, and it certainly contributes to the erosion of the local tradition and culture. Youths in particular are influenced by foreign cultures and standards. In terms of cuisine, people increasingly rely on easily and rapidly cooked meals prepared in large saucepans. Moreover, massive rice consumption and other Western- and Asian-made products tend to inhibit Malekula inhabitants from regularly baking laplap soso'ur.

Vanuatu's integration into the global system and the advent of new lifestyles hamper the transmission of laplap soso'ur know-how. This has directly affected the capacity of the local youths to properly learn its preparation and understand its importance and significance in terms of cultural identity and social cohesion for the local communities on the island.

The promotion of this traditional meal necessitates a descriptive study of laplap soso'ur, including the complexity of its preparation, its social significance, and the threats hampering the indigenous mechanisms for knowledge transmission.

LAPLAP SOSO'UR: DESCRIPTION

Physical Aspect

Laplap soso'ur has a circular shape of about one-and-a-half meters in diameter and is about two to five centimeters thick at its edge. At the center, the thickness due to the accumulation of the scraped tuber can reach fifteen to twenty centimeters. The quality dough obtained from fresh scraped tubers is rolled out manually on laplap leaves and is distributed in such a manner that the central part is curved to form a slight bulge. Meat, two to four red-hot stones, island cabbage (*Abelmoschus manihot*), and seasoning are placed within the central area. The whole dish is then wrapped with and covered by laplap leaves and steamed in a traditional oven.

Ethnolinguistic Aspect

In local Northeast Malekula languages, *soso'ur* (or *hoho'ur*) means the act of “dipping food in sauce or water to savor it.” The name given to this laplap perfectly describes the ancestral gestures, called “soso'ur,” performed while eating it. This term is pronounced in most Melanesian languages by clearly distinguishing the *o* from the *u* in the second syllable. The designation of these delicacies in Austronesian languages enables us to locate their origin in relation to early settlements in the northeastern part of Malekula Island, though accurate archaeological studies are required to support our hypothesis. .

Special Characteristics of Laplap Soso'ur

Laplap *soso'ur* is distinguishable from other types of laplap throughout the Vanuatuan archipelago due to the abundant quantity of coconut milk used before and after baking it. Before the preparation of the actual laplap takes place, coconut milk is used for oiling the laplap leaves to avoid any adherence between the scraped tubers and the wrapping leaves once the baking process is complete. The laplap dough is then mixed with water and coconut milk in a receptacle before being laid out on the laplap or banana leaves used to wrap it. This mixture provides a delicate, tender texture and enhances the taste, releasing a unique, unrivaled flavor. Once baked, warm volcanic stones are doused with coconut milk and dispersed in the center with meat and island cabbage. A slight hole is then formed, into which coconut milk is also poured.

It must be acknowledged that the perpetuation of this particular local and traditional gastronomy item—prepared and consumed from the dawn of time until the recent postmodern era—enables depositaries of this intangible cultural heritage to know and experience wide varieties of laplap *soso'ur* recipes along with a wide diversity of flavors enhanced by the steam-baking process of such delicacies. Among different recipes, the “banana moon fish” recipe can be cited for its particular taste. In this context, it is also locally well-known that strong wild yams go very well with chicken while beef fits well with plantain bananas.

Consumption

While eating the laplap soso'ur, the guests sit around the delicacy. Tasting the laplap involves grabbing a small dough slice and dipping it in the central hole containing coconut milk, cabbage, and meat before eating it. The seating arrangement around the meal brings the guests closer together, allowing them to share a convivial moment in which elders transmit and exchange their knowledge with community youngsters. It is recommended to consume the laplap warm, with fresh coconut milk and steamed hot tubers to accentuate the unique aroma.

THE COMPLEX NATURE OF THE PREPARATION PROCESS: AN ANCESTRAL SKILL

Laplap soso'ur's preparation requires various and multiple skills. Its complexity thus requires plenty of knowledge, particularly in achieving and executing the tasks involved in making a traditional oven, extracting coconut milk, and selecting ingredients such as meat, cabbage, and tubers. The amount of banana or laplap leaves used to wrap the delicacy will depend on the size and strength of the fire.

Selecting Dry Wood for the Fire

Traditionally, wood logs and branches used to cook, steam, and bake such a local meal are carefully chosen in terms of their function and capacity to burn and consume themselves and their ability to warm the volcanic stones up to a sufficient level to guarantee efficient baking. Hard woods are favored since upon reaching a certain temperature they produce hot embers that bring the volcanic stones to their incandescent point. Very often, softer branches are mixed with hard wood when the latter is scarce.



Oven Temperature

The oven's temperature is estimated at about 800°C. Experimental archaeological research undertaken by Dr. Philippe Andrieux from Université de Paris II supported our analysis of these ovens. To accurately evaluate the oven's temperature, it is necessary to observe and study how both hard- and softwood behave while in contact with fire.¹



The chemical composition of hard- and softwood used for steam-cooking the laplap enables the assessment of reactions occurring under specific fire conditions and, therefore, the temperature reached during this process. From the outset, as the temperature is below 100°C, the water stored within the wooden cells is expanding. Once the temperature reaches 100°C, the wood releases the water under its steamed form, which moistens the volcanic stones. Thick smoke is generated at this stage.

Upon reaching 180°C, the wood is subject to complete water evaporation while low-tar expands. At this stage, smoke decreases and flames arise from the stones laid on the now-burning wood logs. Additionally, the wood's hemi-cellulose, or, in other terms, the fibers constituting the external layers of the hardwood, is disintegrated by the fire.

Between 200°C and 280°C, the distillation and roasting (or torrefaction) of low-tar stored in the wood take place, thus releasing a strong odor of calcination. At this point, the temperature will continuously increase to reach the exothermic reaction point, at which time the energy stored in the wood is transferred toward the

1. Philippe Andrieux and Christiane Andrieux, *La Maîtrise du Vitrail: Création & Restauration*, Bordas Editions, 2001.

3 Preparation of *laplap* leaf. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

4 Vegetables and chicken as ingredients to flavor *laplap*.
© Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

volcanic stones. This process brings the stones to incandescence. This energy transfer happens at temperatures between 280°C and 380°C.

The temperature reaches 500°C once the oven is cleared of all embers, and only a few flames are left rising because of residual hydrocarbon emanating from the remains. The oven is now ready to bake and awaits the laplap soso'ur. This baking process lasts at least one hour minimum.



Oven Preparation

Wood and stone arrangement has been developed over time so that enough air can circulate within and between and so that wood is effectively and properly consumed by fire. The baking site shall first be pre-leveled, or a thirty centimeter-deep hole could also be dug in order to place the volcanic stones within the selected area. The oven's diameter shall be of about two meters.

Shredded coconut shells, dry coconut coir (husk fibers), and a few coconut leaves are then thrown into the oven along with dry branches to start the fire. Thicker pieces of wood are then placed on the fire. From that moment, one hour is required to allow the stones to reach their incandescence point. Finally, the stones become red; embers have evaporated while the temperature is reaching almost 500°C.

According to local tradition, oven preparation can be done by men and/or women. As the oven is ready for baking, hot volcanic stones are removed, mostly by men, and the laplap is placed in the oven.

5 Coconut milk is added. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

6 The *laplap* covered with leaves and ready to be baked in a traditional oven.
© Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

In traditional villages and communities, each household owns a permanent oven. In the capital city of Port Vila, though, few households own traditional ovens of such kind, and their use remains sparse since there currently is conflict between tradition and modernity. The cost for preparing a laplap soso'ur is quite expensive in town and requires at least four hours for collecting ingredients and baking. In Malekula villages, following local culinary practices, ovens are used one to four times a week. As of today, laplap or traditional ovens are less frequently used than they once were in the past.

Coconut Milk Preparation

Coconut milk preparation starts with the selection of coconuts. Experienced individuals are able to appraise coconut quality through shape and color. It is often the men who are in charge of the selection and the preparation of coconut milk.



Peeling a coconut is performed with a wooden tool. It consists of vertical stakes firmly fixed into the ground with a sharp-pointed tip. The gestures required to perform such an act must follow specific steps; otherwise, the peeling process might become an extremely difficult exercise. Today, the peeling of coconuts can also be done using a bush knife.

7 Baked meat and ingredients being watered one last time with coconut milk before eating. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

The bare coconut shell is then split by hitting specific spots. The coconut is known for bearing on one end “one mouth and two eyes.” In order to crack the coconut, one must hit its side, which will result in a regular split of the shell. In the past, coconuts were cracked by using volcanic stones while today people tend to use the back of a knife. The grating of coconuts also follows specific standards in order to extract the juicy coconut flesh from the shell.

Extracting coconut milk is done by hand using a coconut-fiber filter. A proper mix ensures the quality and taste of the laplap. To extract enough concentrated milk for four persons, five coconuts must be grated. The pulp is only mixed with water and is then blended in a bowl before being squeezed to extract the coconut milk.

SOCIAL PERCEPTION

Laplap Soso'ur: Background

According to oral tradition, the laplap is said to have originally been brought from the northeastern part of Malekula Island. This traditional culinary practice has spread through many villages in the region. Along with dispersion through the local population from the northeastern part of Malekula, laplap soso'ur is now widely known in Port Vila, Luganville, and Noumea. In general, it is a much-appreciated delicacy, particularly by tourists and foreigners living in Vanuatu's urban centers.



8 Girls sitting around *laplap soso'ur* and eating. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

An Identity

Laplap soso'ur is a representative delicacy for the people of Malekula Island and Vanuatu. For almost every major event happening in local communities, laplap soso'ur is baked and shared among their members. Following traditional practices, laplap soso'ur is often offered to guests. This meal has important social significance in the eyes of the local inhabitants of Malekula Island.

ENDANGERED HERITAGE

The Limitation of Knowledge Transmission

Knowledge transmission for the preparation of laplap soso'ur is threatened today by the fact that the young generations are often forced to leave their home island to pursue their studies in the capital city; this restrains the number of youngsters available to catch the essence of the particular knowledge related to the preparation of laplap soso'ur.

On the other hand, the living conditions in the capital do not allow city dwellers to bake laplap. This lack of practice limits the younger generation from the effective learning of the skills required to prepare such a delicacy, which today still retains a high social significance.

Adoption of New Culinary Practices

New culinary practices involving the use of big saucepans and requiring sources of energy other than firewood have led the local population of Malekula to drastically reduce its laplap consumption. Apart from a few households today, laplap soso'ur consumption has almost disappeared in towns and urban areas. The complexity of the preparation explains this actual trend.

LAPLAP SOSO'UR'S HERITAGE: PROMOTION AND ENHANCEMENT

A Monographic Study

The protection, conservation, and promotion of laplap soso'ur require the development and analysis of a monographic study of this delicacy and all of its social and cultural implications. In order to do so, technical aspects in addition to aesthetics and social considerations must be revealed by the promotion of activities involving, for example, the participation of community members in general, irrespective of age, rank, or status, in which the members perform laplap preparation and experience the communion between themselves by sharing their stories and feedback. It is then hoped that such activity will bring sufficient awareness to generate a broad change of mind by becoming a true eye-opening event raising consciousness over the current threats laplap soso'ur and the heritage bound to it are facing today.

An Essential Ingredient of Laplap Soso'ur

The preservation and promotion of laplap soso'ur also imply the preservation and promotion of various yam species (*Dioscorea*) found in Vanuatu. Some of these species are harvested only once a year while others can be harvested throughout the year. An in-depth work involving this theme would, for example, oblige youngsters from Malekula to regain the associated competence and skills for cultivation of yams along with the understanding related to the use of the traditional calendar once used by their ancestors in more than fifty different vernacular local languages. This would allow them to rediscover and experience the meaning of the yam cycle based on their ancestral traditional moon calendar. A successful yam harvest is a pre-condition for performing major customary events on Malekula Island.

The study of yams can also lead toward an accurate classification of their species, which is closely linked with these traditional events. In this context, it is also required that elders and adults show youths the wide variety of yams available and how they are usually consumed.

A specific description and differentiation should be made in which “noble” yams (or “class one yams”) can be identified as well as those selected for traditional or customary exchanges. Likewise, local and traditional tales, legends, and myths related to yams should be collected and analyzed to appreciate the symbolism and significance of this tuber cherished in Vanuatu and other parts of Melanesia.

Laplap Soso’ur Festival

A laplap soso’ur festival would be the most appropriate and efficient promotional tool to raise awareness toward the people of Malekula Island. This festival could be supported by educational institutions to facilitate knowledge transmission to the country’s younger generations, particularly the youths from Malekula Island.

Cooperation among the Educational Institutions

It is also important that the National Tourism School, which includes within it a whole cuisine and culinary department, add to its program a traditional cooking class to train its students in the art of performing such meals as laplap soso’ur and many other traditional meals.

CONCLUSION

Laplap soso’ur is an integral part of Vanuatu’s intangible heritage as it represents and symbolizes strong identity and social values in the eyes of Vanuatu’s population, particularly those of Malekula Island. Its preparation involves the participation of both men and women. The know-how needed for its preparation is of great complexity and requires a high level of technicality not only held by one or two individuals, but by the group or community as a whole, reinforcing its status as an identity feature for Vanuatu. The oven and fire preparation consists of choosing the appropriate wood and volcanic stones as well as the skills to place these items properly in the oven. The coconut milk preparation starts with coconut selection, peeling, cracking, and grating while meeting the technical standards in order to produce the best quality coconut milk possible. Meat and tuber selection are made following their respective taste and flavor and how their aromas blend

with other ingredients while baked. The amount of banana or laplap leaves is determined by the oven's size as well as that of the dish itself. Laplap soso'ur plays an important social role in many traditional communities on Malekula Island. How laplap soso'ur is distributed determines the unity and harmony within a group or community. Getting together around laplap soso'ur reduces certain social barriers existing between individuals in a group. Discussions have no limit, which allows a certain level of freedom of speech. Moreover, the way people are sitting around the laplap shows a form of humility and respect much appreciated during these kinds of events.

Laplap soso'ur's endangered existence is directly linked to the lack of commitment in the transmission of the know-how required to perform such meals. The limitation is due as well to an increasing rural emigration often coupled with the lack of education facilities in their area of origin, thus forcing the youngsters to leave their home villages and home islands to settle in towns. This preservation and conservation issue should lead us toward the creation of an annual laplap soso'ur festival. This event shall be supported and organized by educational institutions located in the capital city in order to provide easy, complete, and comprehensive access to this traditional heritage for junior and senior secondary students. It is also highly recommended to give the opportunity to Malekula Island communities living in Port Vila to take part in such events.

REFERENCES

Andrieux, Philippe and Christiane Andrieux. *La Maîtrise du Vitrail: Création & Restauration*. Bordas Editions, 2001.

Gédéon, Jacques. Untitled. *Littératures Francophones d'Asie et du Pacifique: Anthologie*, edited by Jean-Louis Joubert. Paris: Nathan, 1997: 136-137.

Layard, John. *Stone Men of Malekula (New Hebrides)*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1942.

Lebot, Vincent. *Tropical Root and Tuber Crops: Cassava, Sweet Potato, Yams and Aroids*. Oxfordshire: CAB International, 2009.

Lebot, Vincent, Annie Walter, and Chanel Sam. *Jardins d'océanie*. Paris: IRD –CIRAD, 2003.

Liatlatmal, Marie-Alexis. “Laplap.” Port Vila, Vanuatu: South Tanna Translation Committee, 2005.

