

NOGOYTAM AND NELET: DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

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Bien manger c'est déjà le début du bonheur
(Eating well is already the beginning of happiness)

—Vanuatuan oral tradition

Nogoytam and *nelet* are traditional meals from Torba Province, in the far northern area of Vanuatu. Torba is located at a tropical cyclone crossroads where five to six cyclones hit each year. Its people have lived for centuries on these islands in such auspicious environment and are well adapted to it.

Nogoytam and nelet are both delicacies made of cassava (*manioc*) and island cabbage or *malvaceae* (*Abelmoschus manihot*). The know-how required to prepare such dishes shows the ingenuity of the population as it was and still is able to extract and exploit the manioc and its multiple derivatives. This particular use of local manioc aims to avoid waste of food and related resources in order to preserve them, especially in times of natural disasters.

To prepare both *nogoytam* and *nelet*, we use manioc, whereas for *nogoytam laplap*, manioc resin is extracted, and for *nelet laplap*, manioc paste is used. However, as the resin is removed from the manioc, the latter has no more taste. That is why *nelet laplap* is then mixed and washed with caramelized coconut milk to provide it with a sweet and pleasant flavor.

This article will first introduce the different steps for preparing such traditional meals from Vanuatu's Northern Province. The second part of this reflection will outline the history of cassava, which constitutes the main ingredient of this delicacy. Drawing the historical patterns involved in the preparation of such meals seems necessary in order to best understand the migration flows in the Pacific region. This part also enhances the art of cultivating the land in Vanuatuan communities. While this heritage has been studied little, it is filled with abundant and sophisticated know-how on Vanuatu's natural resource governance. Finally, the article will propose a potential roadmap to help concerned stakeholders preserve and promote this Vanuatuan intangible cultural heritage.

PREPARATION STEPS FOR NOGOYTAM AND NELET

Nogoytam: Cassava Resin

The following descriptions of traditional dishes were obtained by observing students from Torba Province in the francophone high school of Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville.



The first step involves peeling and grating the cassava. The cassava is then squeezed to collect its juice, which is stored in a locally made container for half an hour. This period is necessary to produce a concentrated liquid or to produce a dough that will be sufficiently dense. While the juice is left aside, the cassava resin slowly drops to the bottom of the container. Finally, island cabbage is prepared and coconuts are grated. Once the preparation steps are complete, the cassava dough is then mixed with the island cabbage and coconut

milk to achieve a fine, soft result. Grated coconuts are used to form a central circle in which laplap or banana leaves are spread. The leaves' veins are removed and will be used as ropes to wrap and fasten the meal, which will be thrown in the oven and covered with hot volcanic stones. The last step consists of covering the oven and stones with the remaining laplap leaves. The approximate time for steam cooking is thirty minutes.



Nogoytam is the fastest-cooking laplap. Generally, laplaps in Vanuatu are cooked for at least one hour in traditional ovens. A particular aspect of this laplap is the elastic texture of the dough. Kids today have given it the nickname “laplap chewing gum” due to the chewy sensation coming from the dough texture.

Nelet: Cassava Dough

Nelet is a specialty made from cassava dough whose resin has been used to prepare the nogoytam laplap. Many coconuts must be grated to extract sufficient amounts of coconut milk. The milk is then boiled and stirred until a caramelized sauce is produced, which is then left aside while the cassava preparation takes place.

Slices of cassava laplap are covered in *navenu* (*Macaranga spp.*) leaves and dropped into a saucepan for thirty minutes to one hour for baking. The leaves containing the laplap are then removed and pounded on a large wooden plate, called *natbe*, that has been specially made for the occasion. One or two persons pound the laplap with a *negelet*, a tool used to obtain a more elastic dough. The pounded laplap is laid on the *natbe* using coconut husks while pouring caramelized coconut milk over it. The nelet is then served in small slices to guests and members of the community.

3 Grating a cassava tuber. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

5 The pulp being boiled in a pot. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

4 Cassava paste wrapped in a leaf. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

Nelet brings in its preparation tangible culinary heritage from Torba Province. The natbe used is a locally-carved wooden plate of around one meter in diameter on which cassava dough is laid and on top of which two men use their negelets, measuring one-and-a-half meters long and around ten centimeters in diameter, to pound the laplap. Nelet's conception requires both men and women to take part in the preparation process. While performing their respective tasks, they share unique moments of communion. Children are present most of the time, but their role is limited to observing their parents and other adults.

Cassava and Intangible Heritage

Origin and History of Cassava's Domestication

According to Vincent Lebot,¹ cassava is the sixth most important crop globally after wheat, rice, maize, potato, and barley and is the main staple for more than 800 million people around the world, mostly in poor tropical countries. Lebot explains that the term “cassava” most likely derives from the Arawak word *casavi* or *cazabi*, which means “bread,” with the term “manioc” having been derived from the Tupi *maniot*, later adapted to “manioc” by the French.² Lebot further underscores the importance of the crop as follows:³



Cassava plays an essential food security role because its matured edible roots can be left in the ground for up to 36 months. The crop, therefore, represents a household food bank that can be drawn upon when adverse climatic conditions limit the availability of other foods. The variety of foods that are made from the roots and nutritious leaves are reasons why cassava cultivation is expanding worldwide.

1. Vincent Lebot, *Tropical Root and Tuber Crops: Cassava, Sweet Potato, Yams and Aroids*, Oxfordshire: CAB International, 2009: 1.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

6 The paste is crushed using a pestle on a wooden tray. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

7 Coconut milk cooked over low heat. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

8 Skim milk is deposited on the dough in preparation for eating. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

Geographical origins of the crop are not universally agreed upon, nor are the circumstances surrounding its development. Use of the cassava, as well, is difficult to pinpoint in a historical and archaeological context. On this issue, Lebot explains as follows:⁴

It is sometimes argued that sweet varieties of manioc that do not need special preparation were domesticated first. Present distribution of sweet and bitter cultivars shows that sweet types are predominant in the east of South America and especially in the Amazon while bitter types are more frequent in the West and in Central America and Mexico. In fact, sweet types are mostly cultivated where cassava is consumed as a vegetable and bitter types are cultivated where cassava is processed, but the situation is not clear cut.

Two varieties are cultivated for their roots: bitter cassava (*Manihot utilissima*) and soft cassava (*Manihot opi*). Soft cassava can be eaten once cooked, but bitter cassava, containing cyanides, requires a longer and more careful preparation. Cassava leaves are also consumed.



The Art of Gardening in Vanuatu

In Oceania, particularly in Vanuatu, gardens bear witness to an ancestral rural tradition in which culinary plants are at the same time essential resources, community symbols, and tradable goods.

4. Ibid., 3.

9 The cassava dough mixed with island cabbage and coconut milk to give more flavor to the *laplap*. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

Vanuatuans nurture a passion for their gardens, from which they collect, select, and diversify a vegetal heritage of great importance.



Cassava, which captures our attention here, has entered Vanuatu's culture very recently while yam, taro, and banana are among the most ancient tubers, leading the population to develop very sophisticated techniques to cultivate and harvest such crop species in sufficient amounts for their own subsistence. Cultivating their land is the central preoccupation of most Vanuatuans. Community life is regulated by the rule of custom, or *kastom*. *Kastom* utilizes earthen products and produce such as cassava to strengthen and build up links and sustainable networks among the tribes and villages.

The art of cultivation reflects the regard and respect given to a precise calendar or almanac. Weeding parcels of land to cultivate crops is usually done between September and October each year. In this time, the dry season is at its peak and the cleared plants can easily dry up in the sun and be burnt by the gardener. Once the garden has been cleared, the cultivation of foodstuffs, including taro, cassava, and yam, takes place during the same period, considered to be the summer in this particular region. In Vanuatu, cassava stems are cultivated in order to plant them. It is necessary to plough an area of sixty centimeters in diameter and to shape a short mound thirty centimeters high for each cassava stem. Planting cassava stem

¹⁰The *nogoytam laplap* baked and ready to eat. © Lycée Louis Antoine de Bougainville

at this period of the year allows the ground to keep a certain level of temperature and to collect enough water during the upcoming rainy season for the stems to blossom.

This technique goes back as far as the Lapita era. Our ancestors used fire to clear their parcels of lands and to hunt. The environmental consequences of such practices still remain current today, as confirmed by some desert islands in Vanuatu and in the Pacific. Many animal species have already disappeared because of the constant use of fire by the first inhabitants and, later, the colonizers of the Vanuatuan islands.

NOGOYTAM AND NELET: PROMOTION AND AFFIRMATION OF CULTURAL EXPRESSION

Nogoytam and Nelet: Disaster Preparedness

Nogoytam and nelet are perfect examples of traditional knowledge that is reflective of a strong need for adaptation in a specific environment toward natural disasters and cataclysms. Both meals demonstrate the two-phased use of cassava. Nogoytam consists of extracting cassava resin; in other words, cassava dough is mixed with water in order to collect as much cassava juice as possible, which is then filtered and left aside for a while for the resin particles to drop down into the container. The resin is then mixed with island cabbage, and this mix is finally thrown into the laplap oven.

Cassava dough is filtered and used to bake the nelet laplap. As the dough has been filtered, it has lost its taste. It is therefore baked and pounded to create an elastic texture. The dough is then mixed with caramelized coconut milk in order to provide a sweeter flavor to the delicacy.

This meal has recently been prepared by youths from Torba Province as part of the cultural activities designed by the Lycée Louis-Antoine de Bougainville and the Vanuatu Cultural Center. The primary objective of the showcase was to transmit to the younger generation an ancestral foodway or knowledge. The Vanuatu Cultural Center has developed over the years a close partnership with educational

institutions throughout the country with the aim of promoting and documenting traditional knowledge to the younger generation. In the islands, the teaching of such traditional survival techniques has nowadays become a priority for educational curricula. The Vanuatu National Education Ministry's policy has ensured that traditional knowledge such as that discussed here is transmitted in the curriculum together with other Anglo-American knowledge. The idea is that such a balanced curriculum will ensure traditional knowledge is promoted to positively contribute to island community life in Vanuatu. Such a curriculum that is inclusive of local cultural knowledge and wisdom ensures the "colonial curriculum" is checked and given some degree of balance.

The Lycée Louis-Antoine de Bougainville and its partners, including the Vanuatu Cultural Center, the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs, the National Council of Women, and the Ministry of Education, have put in place a cultural project of traditional knowledge transmission inserted into the secondary education curriculum as an arts and culture class. This activity has led the Lycée Louis-Antoine de Bougainville to search for men and women from each Vanuatuan province who are holders of such knowledge to transmit it to younger generations. Timetables are adapted to allow such classes and courses to take place, and the teaching corps assists speakers and panelists during the preparation and follow-up of such activities.

In 2013, the Lycée Louis-Antoine de Bougainville built a school center for cultural activities. A *farea* has been erected where secondary students learn to perform sand drawings and bake and cook traditional meals. The school calendar also allows one cultural day per year, at which time the students can be exposed to traditional aspects of their home islands. These events must also be the subject of written publications by the students themselves. By doing so, the students propose their own personal reflection over each event.

CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this work realized by the youths is to allow the young generation to envision the true value of their cultural

heritage. The project, which was initiated in local schools, is aimed at transmitting and affirming Vanuatu's intangible heritage for students. The engagement of all the partners, including the Vanuatu Cultural Center, in the promotion of such a project is truly promising.

The impact of such cultural activities in schools is a plain academic and social success. School management and teaching personnel note that the majority of youngsters have communication problems and have certain difficulties in expressing themselves, particularly in public situations. Thus, it should definitely be noted that such cultural events taking place in schools bring trust and confidence to the young generation. The youths, therefore, show better perspectives on life and better results at school.

Teaching traditional knowledge and cultural practices responds to a universal engagement made by the Vanuatu Cultural Center and its partners in preserving, promoting, and affirming Vanuatu's national cultural intangible heritage.

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