

Charles Montgomery -- Questions and Answers about The Shark God

Where is Melanesia?

French explorer Dumont D'Urville invented the word "Melanésie" for the parts of the Pacific inhabited by dark-skinned people. (*Melas* and *nesos* are Greek for "black" and "islands.") Unlike Polynesians (who populate the many—*poly*—islands to the east) the people who live in the archipelago that stretches from New Guinea to Fiji are frizzy-haired and often as dark-skinned as Africans. My book takes place in two island nations: Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands.

Why did you go there?

I have been obsessed with these islands ever since discovering my great grandfather's diaries back in my teens. My great grandfather was a missionary bishop. He sailed through the islands with the Anglican mission in 1892, and described full of cannibals and headhunters, and so full of supernatural power that it transformed him into something of a mystic. I hoped that if I followed the bishop's route through the archipelago, I might find some traces of the myth and magic of Melanesia's pagan past. It was a childish idea, but the journey became something very different in the end.

So what did you find? Did the missionaries change the islands completely?

Yes, the islands were changed, but in ways my great grandfather could never have imagined. There are still a few pagans here and there: people who sacrifice pigs to spirits and ancestors, just as they always have. But though most islanders call themselves Christians, they have mixed shreds of the Bible together with their old traditions. For example, I met a devout Roman Catholic who made blood sacrifices to a shark in his lagoon. Then there was the Anglican businesswoman who insisted that her uncle could turn into an owl. In the Solomon Islands, people were sure that their recent civil war ended because a group of indigenous Anglican monks used the power of God to stop bullets with their walking sticks, and to turn machine guns into snakes.

How was your role as a detached observer shaken by your immersion in a world of faith and magic?

All my new friends, even educated Melanesians, insisted their world was a place where miracles happened constantly. You cannot live among these people and not be affected by their faith. Even as I attempted to examine the construction of myth, I found myself tempted to believe in the strangest things: rainmaking stones, magic walking sticks, even a shark spirit conjured from a darkened lagoon. I suppose, in this way, I began to understand my great grandfather.

What was the strangest thing you saw?

On the volcanic island of Tanna, local people worship John Frum, a mysterious prophet who appeared to their chiefs in the 1940s. Frum ordered them to stop going to church and to return to their old traditions. Sacred dances, kava drinking, pig sacrifices, that sort of thing. The prophet promised to return one day on a great white ship loaded with American cargo—Spam, refrigerators, jeeps—if people just obeyed him. Well, Frum hasn't come back, but the Tannese still raise the Stars and Stripes above their villages, and they still dance and sing the prophet's praises every Friday night.

In writing the book you say you experienced a tug-of-war between journalistic and storytelling / mythmaking impulses. Explain.

Creative non-fiction writers have two souls: The journalist in us insists we pass on raw data. The storyteller in us yearns to manipulate that data, to trim, shape, remember and forget in order to give life to greater truths. Writing this book forced me to reconcile these two forces, because in Melanesia I was offered many versions of history, most of which featured captivating elements of magic.

You've described the situation in the Solomon Islands as a microcosm of global geopolitics. How so?

The country was in turmoil when I arrived. Armed militants had driven thirty thousand people from their homes. More than a hundred had died in ethnic skirmishes. The economy was in chaos. There were complex social, economic and political factors behind this crisis, but you'd never know it by asking the islanders. They were certain that their civil war was a riddle handed to them by God or angry ancestor spirits. All this would have seemed outrageous if George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden weren't invoking the divine in their own fight on the other side of the world. The difference is that Solomon Islanders were proved right in their mythical outlook: their country seems to have been saved from the abyss by a grand act of sacrifice by a band of magic monks.

How did the trip, and writing the book, change your perception of faith and myth?

Melanesia brought me to faith, but nothing like my great grandfather's faith. What I have come to believe in is the power of stories, the power of myth to change and guide us. Melanesians wrap their political events and heroes in an aura of magic. I argued with islanders about these stories for months, but then I realized they weren't entirely false. The miraculous aspects were a way of turning history into a vehicle for spiritual truths. Of course we in the West have been just as creative with our mythical heroes. Think Joan of Arc, JFK, and, for that matter, Jesus.

The ninth installment of the hit reality TV show "Survivor" was set in Vanuatu. Comments?

The news certainly had my anthropologist friends sniggering. After all, Vanuatu is home to the John Frum cargo cult (described above). Folks on Tanna Island have based their religion on John Frum's promise of the arrival of unimaginable quantities of American consumer goods. Well, the John Frum myth is not much different than the Survivor myth. Both wrap the American dream in an aura of magic. Both offer a fantasy of miraculous abundance to the blessed and the fortunate. And both inspire an almost evangelical faith. Ironically, the arrival of the Survivor franchise (and the subsequent tourist boom) was expected to create a huge influx of American cash in Vanuatu: It was as though John Frum's prophesy had finally come true.

www.thesharkgod.com