

"Before noon on yesterday's trip, we stopped at Atchin Mainland where a tourist was killed by a shark four years ago, so I asked about it and got the whole story. (A Swiss tourist got off the plane, went by truck a half-hour north, ran into the water, and immediately lost an arm and shoulder to a shark. A ni-Vanuatu packed the wound with sand, and he was taken immediately to the hospital, but he died upon arrival — see *GSAF 1983.00.00.c*)

"I ask these things of as many people as I can, because I'm trying to get the real story about shark attacks - all the expats won't go near the water, but the locals insist that there's no problem (of course, I've yet to see one of them actually swimming).

"A few minutes after leaving Atchin, we picked up a farmer a few km north (near Vao, 30 km north of Lakatoro), and he told us that a boy had just then been dragged out to sea by a shark. They later found his head and shoulders on the beach. Actually, they found his head, arm, and leg. Poor kid; what a way to go.

"Luckily, we've gotten better at Bislama, because they give two versions of local news here, one in Bislama and one in English. The English version on the radio just said he was "swimming in two metres of water, when tragedy struck", but the Bislama version included all of the gory details, along the lines of how he was swimming (generic word here that includes everything from taking a shower or sponge bath to scuba diving) with some friends at lunch hour from school (he was eight), and a girl held on to his hand (i.e. somewhere between fingertips and shoulder) after the shark struck, but he was dragged under anyway. His friends went to get some adults, but when they returned, they only found blood. They like their news spicy here. Thank goodness they don't have TV, or we'd get "film at eleven".

"The traditional story on shark attacks here is that someone who is spiritually powerful transforms himself into a shark and eats an enemy. I think they still half believe it (I was still learning at this time; this is universally believed, regardless of educational level or religious affiliation) - it was brought up in a half-joking manner today when I was discussing the incident with a bunch sitting outside my office. I guess that's why they don't worry - you can't fight that kind of power anyway. . . . Once again, they all told me that there's lots of sharks down here, but they only attack on the other side of the islands offshore here.

SOURCE: Excerpt from letter dated Thursday, April 2, 1987 written at Lakatoro, Vanuatu, written by Stan Combs, Regional Development Planner.
<http://members.shaw.ca/scombs/letters/870402.html>

"I heard on the radio that they caught the shark that killed the boy north of here April 1 - it was 4.3 metres long and had a dog and cat in its stomach. I'd say that they caught a shark - there are probably more 4.3 metre sharks around here than you can shake a stick at."

SOURCE: Excerpt from letters, April 21-23, 1987, Lakatoro, Vanuatu
<http://members.shaw.ca/scombs/letters/870421.html>

"For what it's worth, I later bought the dug-out canoe that was used to retrieve the remains. Nobody on Vao wanted it any more, although I was assured by my neighbours at Lakatoro that it wasn't considered cursed or anything. Indeed, one of them bought it from me when I left.

He also writes: "Just north of Atchin Island is Vao Island, where visitors are free to wander among several nasara, or traditional family dancing grounds. Note that the design of NE Malekula slit drums has not changed since the '20s. A ni-Vanuatu's nasara is the link between him and his *kastom graon* (family traditional land base) and as such holds immense

psychological, spiritual, and cultural importance. When new roads are built, great care is taken to ensure that they do not intrude upon any nasaras; there is no argument about re-routing around them.

"During my two years on Malekula, I collected as many "custom" stories as I could about shark attacks, which are all attributed to men changing themselves into sharks and attacking enemies.

"The custom explanation for the small boy at Vao in 1987 did so because the boy's uncle had stolen some stones from the attacker's nasara to build a bread oven with. To get revenge, the nasara's owner changed himself into a shark and attacked the boy. When I pointed out that this man's house was next to the church and asked if there was any inconsistency between his Christianity and the shark transformation, I was told that "his kastom spirit is stronger than the Church's spirit".

SOURCE: Stan Combs, scombs@aol.com



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A Vao nasara. A slit drum, on which the dance beat is played, is on the left. The rack holds the lower jaws, with circular tusks, of pigs that have been killed (by clubbing) in namangi, or grade-taking ceremonies in which men rise in the traditional social structure.



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Catholic Church on Vao Mainland.