

Solomon Time

Just another everyday visit to Pacific panpipe ensemble Narasirato at home. Christopher Conder gets all inrepid.

The clear water rushes between my grubby toes, a cooling relief in the 40°C heat. Vincent has taken me to the stream to get clean. After sixteen hours on a rusty old Japanese boat from Guadalcanal to Malaita, I am desperate to wash the dried sweat from my face and lower my precariously high body temperature. A makeshift pipe runs down from the mountain in front of me, water pouring enticingly out.

Vincent is one of the leaders in Oterama village. He has short, neat, white hair, a small, wiry build and sparkling eyes that dig right into me. He's talking to me about the village and about his role. "I'm the chairman of the committee... we are waiting to hear your programme... I have a plan for my tribe..." His accent is thick, my head is spinning. I smile, trying to understand. He's asking me about my visit. "I met Narasirato in England," I tell him. "I wrote an article for *fRoots* magazine about the band back in 2013. Your brother Donation invited me to visit you to see how you live in the rainforests of the Solomon Islands. It seemed too amazing an opportunity to let pass. So here I am."

I look longingly at the water pipe. Vincent is still talking to me, those eyes flashing with intensity. What's the protocol here? Is he going to leave me to shower once we've finished talking? Or is he waiting for me to make a move towards the pipe? I hesitatingly peel off my shirt. "My father was called Christopher, the same as you," Vincent tells me. "He was a heroic man of the panpipes. No one in 'Are'Are could blow as well as him. He knew the place to cut bamboo for the panpipes. It is up this mountain. Maybe one day we can show it to you, but it is a sacred place."

I'm trying to pay attention, but I'm feeling woozy now. Liven up, Chris! This is important stuff and I don't have my dictaphone, so I have to commit it to memory. Vincent has a lot to tell me, it seems. I guess we can keep talking while I wash. But what do I wear? Clothes were a rarity here a few generations ago, but my battered *Lonely Planet* (published in 1997 and the most recent guidebook I could find for the Solomons) warns me that nudity can cause offence in these deeply Christian islands. I pull off my shorts and stand there in my boxers.

"We were born from a snake, our tribe. The first snake, the largest snake, this is our tribe." The sun glares through the trees at me. "The snake moves to other areas in the

'Are'Are, west and east. So wherever you go, you will find some different types of panpipes." I blink at him blurrily.

"A snake you say? Wow. Umm, I think I need to go under that shower now Vincent." He nods in acquiescence. I walk to the pipe and immerse myself in the chill water, which runs down my body and soaks my boxer shorts. Vincent looks at me quizzically from a few paces away and asks, "Do you normally wash in your clothes?"

The Solomon Islands, of which there are 992, lie in the Pacific, east of Papua New Guinea and north-west of Vanuatu. It was a British colony until 1978. Independence hasn't been an economic success, with the Government absolutely dependent on foreign aid. The majority of the population live rural, subsistence lifestyles in the jungles, but my first experience of the country was the capital (and only) city, Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal.

I'd been plotting a visit to the Solomons ever since meeting Narasirato, the extraordinary panpipe ensemble from Malaita island, at Womad 2012 (see *fR* 355/6). To be finally here was mind-boggling. The Solomon Airlines plane from Brisbane played bamboo music as we landed and a string band was performing at the modest airport. Finding ourselves surprisingly sprightly after our 39-hour journey, my travelling companion Kate and I were met on arrival by the saintly John Bosco and Winifred Houanihau, who draped us both with garlands of sweet-smelling, white Pacific flowers. We were to stay in St Agnes Mother's Union Guest House, an immaculately clean, sturdy concrete building with a view out to sea. On our second day, Donation Manu'asi came to visit us. Donation is the leader of Narasirato, and was in the capital to teach panpipes in a local school. Agelessly handsome, with a wide Melanesian nose, he sat with us under a tree and we discussed developments since I'd seen him last.

Narasirato's acclaimed 2012 album, *Warato'o*, was recorded at Studio Sonante in Amsterdam. I rave reviewed it at the time, but with a mere nine players involved the group felt that it didn't represent their full sound. The follow-up, they decided, had to be recorded at home. In late 2013, the band's manager and producer Jason Mayall, sound engineer Maurizio Cianciaruso and artist Mr Wim took the trip to the Solomons, stopping in Australia to collect eighteen Rode microphones. Arriving in the

band's village, Oterama, they proceeded to create a makeshift studio in the cultural house. "We just made it with leaves and these bush materials," smiled Donation. The resulting thirteen songs, all written by members of the band, comprise the album, which is called *Inoni Ana Totoraha* (*Man Of Culture*) and features no fewer than seventeen musicians.

Donation feels that *Inoni Ana Totoraha* is "totally different" to *Warato'o*. "We have three major things within our music," he told us. "One is music groove. Two is the dynamic and three is the music tempo. When we recorded *Warato'o*, some of my musicians, they weren't familiar with these three points; they didn't have the feeling when they played. Because when you do a recording [in a studio], it's a different environment, a different feeling. They have to reach that feeling, and with *Man Of Culture* we got it."

Donation had brought the youngest of his twelve children with him. Absalom clamored without fear in the trees above us, dropping twigs and fruit from above as we talked over Narasirato's history. I explained in my last feature that the group began in Honiara before reforming in Oterama village, but at the time I hadn't grasped the social context of the move. Between 1998 and 2003, a bloody period of ethnic tension held sway over Guadalcanal. The trigger was the perception by the native Guales that Malaitans held a privileged status, getting many of the top jobs and subsequent housing in Honiara. Rival paramilitary groups emerged and Donation, like many others, returned to his native Malaita in fear of his life. John Bosco (who sent his family away but stayed on for his job) describes a terrifying period when men with guns would routinely appear at his door demanding food and money.

Forced back to their home village, Donation and founding members Michael Manepaewa and Peter Hahau rebuilt Narasirato. Alongside the now defunct Wasi Ka Nanara Pan Pipers, they were soon considered as the leading proponents of panpipe music in the islands. They were spotted playing in Honiara by Australian musician Peter Keelan, who became their manager and organised a number of international tours. "He's a nice guy, a very committed guy," Donation told us. "Unfortunately, our former vocalist, Charles Maimoarosia, he got a wife from Melbourne and off he go."

Just like that?

“**Y**es, he ran off. And Peter Keelan, he felt hurt and said, “Oh, I don’t want to manage you guys!” Luckily, a guy from England, Jason, he just came and connect with us.” Jason Mayall had initially booked the group to perform at Fuji Rock Festival in Japan, but found himself agreeing to become their manager. “By the time Peter Keelan decide to go away from us, here was Jason. It’s quite strong and quite special. It’s Warato’o.”

Donation smiled broadly at us as he reflected on the mysterious ways that Warato’o has steered the group’s fortunes. “Warato’o – it’s a man but it’s a spirit. It’s an image that came from our ancestors. You and Kate, you are with us in our country capital. We believe you will have no difficulties now you are in our community. You are in our family, even though you’re white and I am black, it doesn’t matter.”

I asked how Warato’o fits in with his Christian beliefs. “When Christianity came to our society we had no differences because it was similar to our culture. God is an English word; Warato’o is an ‘Are’Are word. The ‘Are’Are people can call God ‘Warato’o,’” he explained.

Narasirato’s music is only performed on bamboo tubes and the odd drum, but

Donation had his guitar with him. He’s been learning it to help him compose and wondered if he could play some songs for us. We of course were delighted. Displaying some nifty guitar skills, he sang to us in his rich, gentle voice and complemented it with a set of panpipes tucked under his mouth like Bob Dylan on his harmonica.

In 1969, the Swiss-French musicologist Hugo Zemp travelled to the north ‘Are’Are coast of Malaita to join anthropologists Daniel and Christa de Coppet. Although he wasn’t a professional film maker, he returned twice more in the ‘70s and captured traditional ‘Are’Are customs and music in his acclaimed documentaries *‘Are’Are Music* and *Shaping Bamboo*. They’re available now on DVD and make compelling watching. Narasirato’s sound is easy for the Western ear to attune to, incorporating reggae and rock rhythms and underpinned by the thunderous bass of the beaten thongophones. The traditional panpipe music in Zemp’s films, by contrast, is slightly uneasy and discordant. The documentaries capture much more of the blown panpipe traditions though. We see energetic log percussion that recalls Japanese taiko drumming in its physicality and choreography, stamping tubes that are held in the fingers and toes and clashed together, and intricate water music made by rhythmically splashing above and below a pond’s surface. What most fas-

cinates me though are the lullabies sung by the ‘Are’Are women. Slow, half-hummed, grumbling, they are strangely mesmeric.

After my shower in the stream, Vincent has offered to show me around Oterama. I ask if any of the women still sing these lullabies. “Yes,” he replies. “There is this one mammy who might be able to sing for you.” He leads me through the village, over a stream and into a wooden house where an elderly woman sits, her face half lit by the sunlight poking through the open doorway. Her bare breasts hang low amidst long necklaces of shell money. She is chewing, most likely on the mildly intoxicating betel nut that turns the locals’ teeth red, and she periodically spits on the ground. Her name is Miriam Kaehanisiwa. I ask Vincent how old she is. “I ask her today and she is more than 90 years. She’s around 100 or 99 or 98 years. Some of her grannies [grandchildren] got married already.”

I get Miriam’s agreement and set my camera filming. “Can you make some stories before she’s starting?” Vincent asks me. Storytelling is an important part of Solomons culture. I explain how I have ended up here in Mariam’s house and Vincent translates. Miriam laughs, rubs her nose and clears her throat several times. Then she starts singing. I watch, silently transfixed as the birds thrum and chirp outside in chorus.



Photo: Kate Spencer



Photo: Christopher Conder

Donation Manu'asi

The lullaby tells of the ancestor-snake of the 'Are'Are people. "Those who are related to the snake," explains Vincent after she finishes, "they can cure people. However broken bones are, they can still try to fix you up with the power of the snake. Mammy here, she's a healer." I ask if anyone else in Oterama sings these songs, aware of the tradition for lullabies to be sung in duet. "Oh yes, I've got one", Vincent tells me. This is Donation's wife, Elizabeth Wai'siwa, who has taken to learning these endangered narratives. I never get a chance to hear her sing, but I hope she can pass on her knowledge. Otherwise, unlike the virile, masculine bamboo music, this gentle tradition risks dying out.

Over the next few days I start to get a routine in the village. Gender divides are clear here. Kate is contentedly cooking with the women and playing games with the children, whilst I'm escorted by teenage boys and get to spend the nights 'storying' with the men. The nine players who make up Narasirato for our visit have been given instructions from Donation, who is still in Honiara, to practice hard for our arrival. They put on a show in the band house and are as tight and funky as I remember.

I walk with two of them – songwriter and bass pipe player Jimmy Ho'asimarana and singer Jeffrey Houairia – to the house I'm staying in. I talk about Miriam's song and the similar recordings Hugo Zemp made in the 1970s. They know about the ethnomusicologist's time in 'Are'Are. "It's not a good thing for us. He just come and take all our traditional music to his own home and he make a business out of it. We don't achieve anything from him, so it's a practice [a lesson] for us in the region," Jimmy says.

I'm saddened by this perception but not surprised. I've read a number of Zemp's writings and it seems to me that he went to great lengths to get what little money he made from his recordings (as well as the material itself) back to the 'Are'Are musicians. But his reputation in the Solomon Islands has been largely undermined after a recording he made of a woman by the name of Afunakwa, from north Malaita's Fataleka tribe, was sampled by French electronica outfit Deep Forest on their massive worldwide hit *Sweet Lullaby*. Zemp has publicly and vociferously stated that Deep Forest should have paid the Fataleka people for the use of their music, but the matter is clear to most Solomon Islanders – Westerners profited from their music whilst they continue to struggle. I leave the band with a copy of Zemp's essay on the fiasco and move on to happier subjects.

Whilst 'island style' reggae and auto-tuned rap rule amongst the youth in Honiara, Narasirato remains the Solomons' biggest musical export. A bit of online digging before I got here unearthed a number of fellow 'Are'Are bamboo bands. Nuku'uruwara and the Inamauri 'Are'Are Orchestra have got albums available, albeit tailored for the local market and therefore heavy on the keyboards and treated vocals. There are also some excellent live performances on YouTube by Arasuka'aniwara and the Tarawasiwasini Au Cultural Pan Pipers Association. "We speak the same language, but the tunes are different," I'm told. "These groups, they started after Narasirato." Given Narasirato's success, it's hardly surprising that the band is emulated.



Photo: Christopher Conder

Boy in Narasirato's 'Little Warriors' youth band

Sitting in this wooden house as the women cook rice and slippery cabbage over an open fire next door, I'm starting to realise what a massive culture shock the band's international travels must have been for the members. Many in Oterama will rarely have left the village, and yet Jimmy and Jeffrey reel off an envy-making list of countries they have played in: Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, England, Denmark, Hungary...

"It's quite different," Jimmy concedes, smiling.

"What surprised you?"

"The big buildings. Skyscrapers. Big bridges. And the road was very smooth; the speed of the traffic was very fast. And especially the terminals. Very big airports and many planes landing and taking off at the same time."

I think about the difficulties of life in the jungle. The ever present threat of malaria. No real medical supplies. Hurricanes. Rising sea levels. Flash floods caused by foreign logging companies. Poverty. I wonder if they ever want to escape to these thriving, prosperous countries that they visit. Jimmy and Jeffrey look at me incredulously. "No," they affirm in unison. "We saw there were too many people," Jimmy says. "We saw them going around and doing something very fast. It's very important to them that they move fast. Here, we just relax, moving slowly."

"Solomon time," I grin, having picked up the local phrase. And as we wind up the interview and the delicious smells of the cooking mixes with the balmy jungle air, I think to myself, no, I don't want to leave here either.

www.narasirato.com

Inoni Ana Totoraha is available now digitally and will get a full, physical release in 2016. Hugo Zemp's Are'Are Music and Shaping Bamboo films are available at www.der.org/filmslare-are.html.

For videos of the trip, go to Christopher's YouTube page at <http://tinyurl.com/lo43yeob>.

Narasirato member with pipes



Photo: Kate Spencer