

Sandrine Bessis



Alexandre François



Living with fire

Volcanic mythologies in Vanuatu



ISFNR ~ International Society For Folk Narrative Research
Nature(s) in Narrative
Reykjavík 2026

The theft of primordial Fire

The Fire woman who became volcano

Two boys, defying their grandfather's warning, meet an old woman by the sea who magically cooks their fish, using her own body. They chase her in the forest to steal her fire, and capture it in a coconut husk – now a stone. The woman, who is **Fire** itself, flees to Mt **Ghrât**, where she ignites the mountain, becoming its eternal volcano. To this day, smoke rises from **Ghrât**. The boys bring fire to their family, but the old woman's spirit lives on, as the volcano's flame.

volcano: Ghrât
language: Dorig
date: Aug 2003
place: South Gaua
storyteller: John Collection
researcher: A. François

A commodity to exchange

Sometimes, the volcano is a simple commodity that can be exchanged and moved from one place to another. In this story from Ambae, people decided to exchange their dangerous volcano with sprouting coconuts instead, a symbol of life.

How Ambrym bartered Ambae's volcano

Long ago, there was a **volcano on Ambae**, but not Ambrym. Every evening, the people of Ambrym would watch its red glow from the beach and grew to covet it. One day, they sailed to Ambae and offered to barter Ambae's volcano for an abundance of coconuts, particularly sprouting ones for planting. From then on, the active volcano belonged to Ambrym. As for Ambae, it retained only the trace of its former volcano – the acid lake **Manaro** – said to be the place of the Dead.

volcano: Ambrym
language: Mwotlap
date: May 1998
place: Motalava
storyteller: Kenneth Woleg
researcher: A. François

Today's volcano on Ambrym was once **brought from Ambae island**, and placed near one of the gardens. It shook and caused a landslide. The volcano was taken and placed at different villages – Likon, Ranverrkon, Konkon, Haworr. But in every place it made noise and shook the ground. It was placed on a nettle tree in Haworr before it finally stopped in the middle of the island. This is one of our island's two volcanoes.

volcano: Ambrym
language: Bislama
date: Jun 2011
place: Wou, Ambrym
storyteller: Albert Tobyu
researcher: M. Franjeh

A source of life and commensality

Volcanoes are also perceived as a positive and familiar energy that brings Life. The soil, enriched by ash, has a great water retention capacity and is exceptionally fertile. Also, food is traditionally cooked on the black volcanic stones that form the oven of every kitchen.

Yasur and the six ovens

Yasur, son of the Polynesian god Mwatiktiki, marries two women and has four sons. One day, angry because his children failed to bring fish in time for a family meal, Mwatiktiki transformed his son Yasur into a pig. The animal curled up on the **warm oven stones** to shelter from the cold rain. Yasur's children did not recognize their father, and killed him. He burst into flames, dragging his entire family underground – which **gave rise to the Yasur volcano**. Its crater is the oven hole – its two openings his wives – its smaller vents his four sons.

volcano: Yasur
language: Nafe
date: Aug 2025
place: Yakutapuna, Tanna
storyteller: Charlie Yakapas
researcher: S. Bessis

In the Pacific, food is baked slowly in the heat of the "stone oven" (a.k.a. *umu*, *hangi*). The **volcanic stones** used in this oven come from the volcano itself. They were formed by the same heat, the same underground fire. In the oven, people recreate in miniature what the volcano does naturally: a burning fire, hot stones, an intense heat that transforms everything placed upon them.



An entrance to the Underworld

On every island, the entrance to the world of the dead is remote and hard to reach, set apart from the village. Volcanoes can be an entrance to the Underworld, at the boundary between the visible and the invisible. They form a taboo place, accessible only to special men – land owners and local wizards.

Wrisris, the Guardian of the Dead

Wrisris was a mysterious person on Gaua – the **guardian of the Underworld**. When someone died, he would guide their relatives to the entrance of the Ghrât volcano, to uncover the cause of their loved one's death – sickness or sorcery. If sorcery was revealed, vengeance would follow, wiping out the culprit's lineage. Wrisris, a shapeshifter, appeared as man or woman; his soul could travel to remote lands. Though recently deceased, his legacy endures, tied to the volcano – a **sacred site of justice and of the afterlife**.

volcano: Ghrât
language: Dorig
date: Aug 2003
place: South Gaua
storyteller: Charles Maklen
researcher: A. François

The sisters who jumped in the volcano

Two sisters suffered from their neglectful mother. One day they escaped, pulling cliffs behind them to block their mother's pursuit. Exhausted, they reached the top of the Ghrât volcano. The older girl then solemnly sacrificed her baby sister – and then herself – to the **volcano's spirit**, by leaping into its crater. Their mother arrived too late, her grief transforming her into a wild fowl. The volcano, now tied to their fate, became a sacred site of **sacrifice** and escape.

volcano: Ghrât
language: Dorig
date: Aug 2003
place: South Gaua
storyteller: Charles Maklen
researcher: A. François

"The island of Tongoa is good, because there is fire beneath it."

(in Michelsen 1934: 235)



The Manaro volcano and its acid lake, on Ambae. (photo T. Boyer)

An instrument of epic vengeance

Natural disasters in Vanuatu are perceived as social events, not natural ones: they are attributed to human causes and managed through magical means. The most notable of these is the eruption of the Kerua volcano in 1452, which caused the destruction of the mythical island of Kuwae. In the local oral tradition, this eruption resulted from the breaking of the highest taboo: the hero Tombu had unwillingly committed incest with his own mother. Furious, he decided to destroy his own island by creating a massive eruption. Tombu's name itself may be linked to the Proto-Oceanic root *ta^mbu, meaning 'forbidden, sacred, taboo' – recalling the magnitude of the moral fault.

How Tombu destroyed his own island of Kuwae

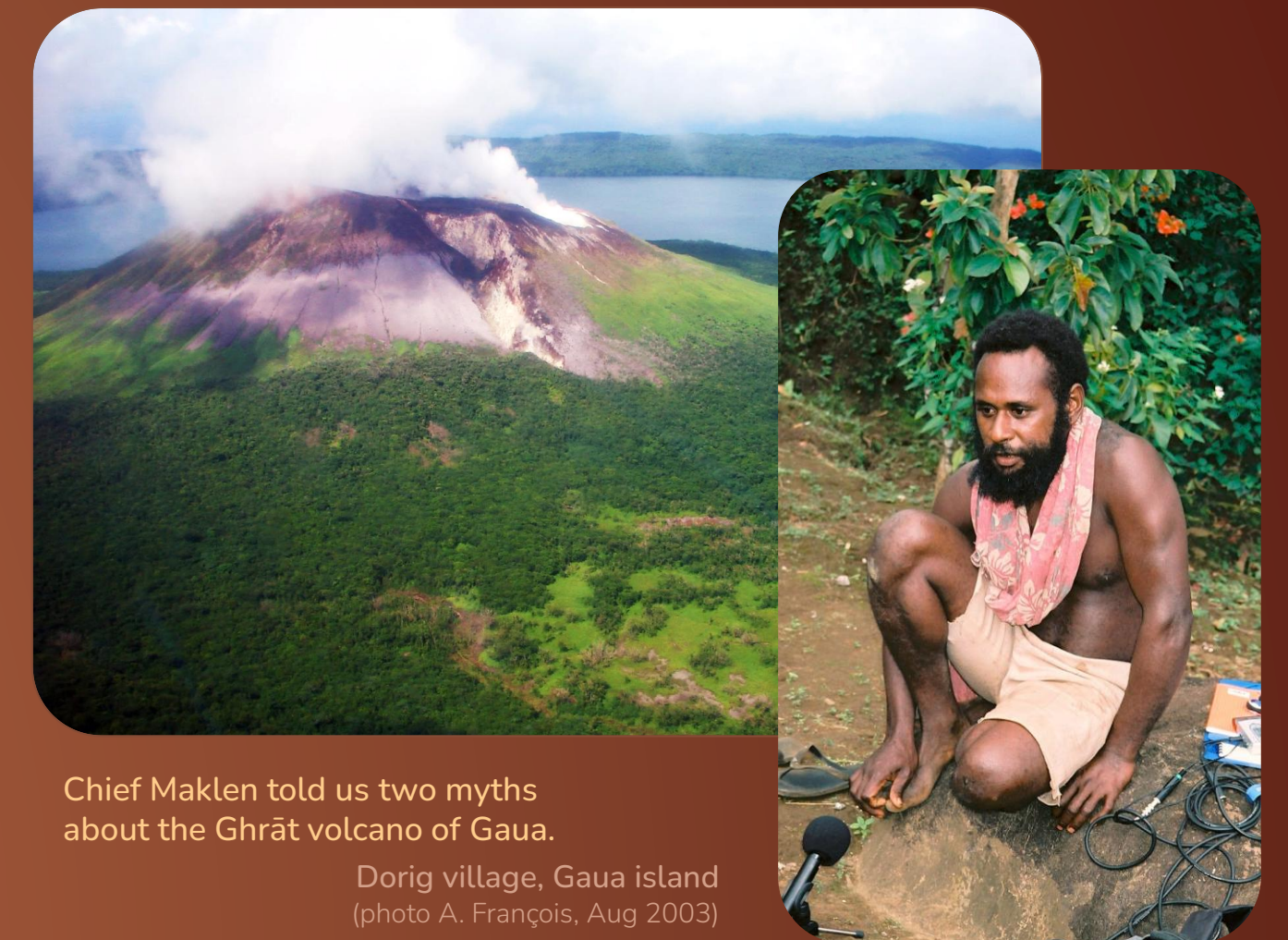
On the island of **Kuwae**, the hero Tombu was tricked by villagers into sleeping with his own mother. Devastated, he travelled to **Lopevi**, where his uncle taught him a powerful volcanic ritual and a charm of destruction. This is how Tombu **triggered a gigantic eruption** that shattered the island of Kuwae into six parts – killing himself in the process.

Two survivors, a man and a woman, were rescued by Chief Tarimas from the island of **Makira**. When the newly formed islands became livable again, the two survivors and their children went back to resettle the place. This was the origin of **new lines and chiefly titles** – still the source of land disputes today.

volcano: Kuwae
language: Namakura
date: Dec 2015
place: Makira
storyteller: Chief Maripalu
researcher: S. Bessis

References

- Bessis, Sandrine. 2022. Field recordings in the Namakura language (Shepherd Is, Vanuatu). *Pangloss Collection*. Paris: CNRS Huma-Num.
- . 2023. Souvenir des ancêtres et histoire orale au Vanuatu. Les récits de chefferies anciennes aux îles Shepherd. PhD thesis, Univ. Sorbonne Nouvelle.
- . 2025a. Field recordings in the Nafe language (Tanna Is, Vanuatu). *Pangloss Collection*. Paris: CNRS Huma-Num.
- . 2025b. Historical charms in Kuwae's geomorphology, Vanuatu. Paper read at the ISFNR Conference on *Charms, Charmers and Charming*. Bucharest, Romania.
- Bessis, Sandrine & Alexandre François. 2025. Myths, tales or history? On two storytelling traditions in Vanuatu. *Te Aho*, 68(3), 185–218.
- Dousset, Laurent. 2016. La sorcellerie en Mélanésie : Élicitation de l'inacceptable. *L'Homme – Revue française d'anthropologie*, 85–115.
- François, Alexandre. 2022. Awesome Forces and Warning Signs: Charting the semantic history of *tabu words in Vanuatu. *Oceanic Linguistics* 61(1), 212–255.
- . 2023. Fonds Alexandre François: Field recordings from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. *Pangloss Collection*. Paris: CNRS Huma-Num.
- François, Alexandre, Sébastien Lacrampe, Michael Franjeh, & Stefan Schnell (eds) 2015. *The Languages of Vanuatu: Unity and Diversity*, 1–21. Canberra: Asia-Pacific Linguistics Open Access.
- Michelsen, Oscar. 1934. Misi. London, Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Ltd.
- Tobyul, Albert (speaker), & George Andrew (transl.). (2011). History of the volcano. Recorded by Michael Franjeh. North Ambrym, Vanuatu. ELAR.



Chief Maklen told us two myths about the Ghrât volcano of Gaua.

Dorig village, Gaua island
(photo A. François, Aug 2003)

The Vanuatu archipelago consists of 83 islands of "ash and coral". It is located on the great Pacific Ring of Fire, riddled with **highly active volcanoes**, and subject to intense seismic activity. The country concentrates a remarkable diversity of volcanic types.

The Republic of Vanuatu is also home to 138 distinct vernacular languages – the world's **highest linguistic density** per capita. Each language is a vessel of rich oral traditions including history, mythology, folk tales and songs.

The **narrative traditions of Vanuatu** question the place of **humans in their environment**. Stories explore the boundary between humans and animals, between the visible and the invisible, between Life and Death.

Volcanoes take a major part in this ambiguous landscape.

On the one hand, they form part of everyday **life** – they are the source of fire itself, and provide the black stones used for cooking. Volcanoes also make the land fertile for horticulture.

On the other hand, volcanoes bring **death** and destruction. Myths tell how they can be used for vengeance and murder, or how they constitute the entrance to the Underworld.



Philip Yakapas is the last born of the family who holds traditional knowledge about Yasur, the volcano of Tanna.

Ash plain, Mt. Yasur, Tanna
(photo Elle Leontief, Sept 2025)

