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# **Vanuatu, an odyssey to the ends of the earth**



**A 52' UHD DOCUMENTARY BY LUC RIOLON  
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## PITCH

Hernin and Marcellin Abong are twin brothers from the Pacific island of Vanuatu, who have led very different lives: One has become a High Chief of his tribe, while the other is an ethno-archaeologist.

To preserve their culture, which seems to be disappearing before their eyes, together they head for the remotest corners of Vanuatu, seeking out the customs and rites of their people. On foot and by dugout canoe, their journey will take them to some magnificent, isolated landscapes where they will discover some spectacular and unique rituals, even participating in some of them.

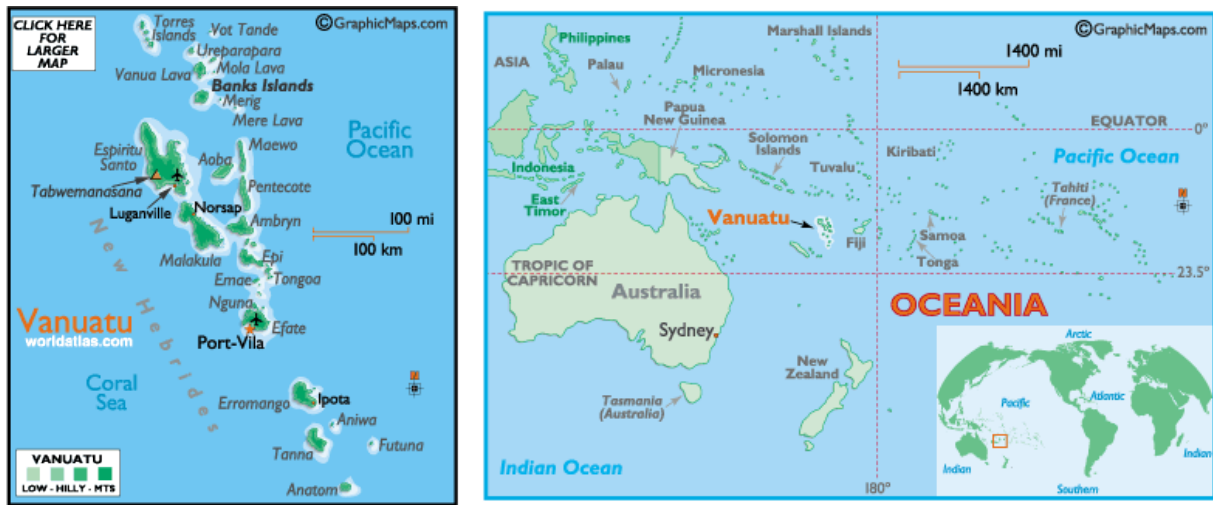


## A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

On Malakula Island in Vanuatu, twins Hernin and Marcellin are important figures for the Small Nambas tribe. Hernin has followed a traditional path while Marcellin is a top-flight academic who studied in France.

Aware that the culture of their people is under threat, their shared goal is to preserve the values that have forged their respective identities and to ensure they are successfully handed on to future generations.

From ceremony to ceremony, from encounter to encounter, they will track down those rituals that are disappearing from their own community but which are still being practiced elsewhere, by other, more isolated tribes.



## THE CONTEXT

Today, some of the indigenous Vanuatu community are tormented by questions over how best to preserve their identity as the world around threatens to swallow them up. How can they hold onto their status as successors to a long and complex history and custodians of a unique culture without closing themselves off and focusing inward on themselves? How can they maintain the hope that keeps them alive?

These questions were already tormenting Augustino Abong when his wife Joséphine gave birth to their twins, Hernin and Marcellin, 47 years ago.

Augustino is a wise and cautious man, who believed fate had given him a very special chance. As a result, he gambled on two scenarios: Hernin, the first-born twin, would, like his father, live a traditional life within his tribe, the Small Nambas, whose land covers the southern part of Malakula Island in the Vanuatu island state. Marcellin, his brother, who came second into the world, would receive a modern education, attending university in France.

## THE TWINS

Today, Hernin is a very important member of the Small Nambas tribe. He is a *Lokvaro* or High Chief, at the top of the Lamap hierarchy where “men are no longer simply men, rather they rub shoulders with the spirits,” according to British-American ethnologist and anthropologist Kirk Huffman, curator at the Vanuatu Cultural Center and the film’s advisor. The Village Chief is responsible for handling administrative business with the authorities, while the *Lokvaro* reigns over the spiritual world that is the very essence of the Melanesian culture of Vanuatu.



Over time, and with his rise through the tribal hierarchy, Hernin has learned about traditional life in his native Lamap region, a place he has never left. Contrary to what one might first think, Hernin is not a man of the past. On the contrary, he is very concerned about the future. He wants to restore the value to a culture and a way of life that settlers and missionaries condemned as primitive and pagan. In life, Hernin takes a practical and pragmatic approach.

Marcellin, Hernin's twin, received an academic education that took him to Paris and the Sorbonne, eventually becoming an ethno-archaeologist. His focus is on French and British scientific documentary archives collated when Vanuatu was still called the New Hebrides and was a Franco-British condominium.

Marcellin specialized in xylology, the study of fossil woods, to be able to explore the few archaeological sites of the archipelago. On the island of Malakula, as elsewhere in Vanuatu and Melanesia, the traditional building material is wood, a material that can only be preserved in special conditions and of which little remains.

During his academic career, Marcellin was able to measure the contribution of modern technologies such as computer science, the internet and social networks. He joined a network of researchers who, like him, are passionate about the future of mixed farming in the Pacific. He shares his research and field experiments with them to preserve these resources which, if they should suddenly disappear, would be forever lost for future generations.

One might assume that such contrasting paths and the resulting life directions would have put a distance between the two brothers. However, the opposite has happened. As the twins have grown older and wiser, the more concerned they have both become about the threat facing their culture.



## A COASTLINE RAVAGED BY COLONIZATION

The western coast of Malakula suffered much less from colonization than did the eastern coast, where Lamap is located. The eastern coast offers many mooring opportunities for passing boats while it is much more difficult to dock on the west. It was on the east coast that settlers and missionaries landed to exploit local agricultural resources and convert the natives to Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant.

While Lamap and the surrounding region suffered the full force of colonial conquest and the resulting material and cultural enslavement, the much more hostile west coast remained relatively untouched and kept its traditional way of life almost intact. Today, it continues to steer clear of modernism. The traditional culture and customs of Vanuatu are extremely prevalent here, as they are in the mountains of central Malakula.

The destruction of local customs in the Lamap region has been going on for so long that the elders have been cast aside and no longer have much to pass on. Their ceremonies, which were once essential, are no longer practiced and local languages have disappeared. Women have been relegated to the position of subordinates without the traditions that gave them role, rituals, and a social function. They are scorned and reduced to domestic tasks, sometimes beaten without anyone in this weakened community intervening to defend them.

Marcellin and Hernin, one an ethnologist and academic, and the other the High Chief of the Small Nambas, are very troubled. They are afraid that the culture that made them into the well-rounded men they are today is about to disappear. For many years, they have shared a nagging feeling of inadequacy and imperfection because their knowledge of traditional customs is lacking. So they decided to consolidate this cultural base during a great voyage of discovery.

## THE ODYSSEY

The two brothers are setting out to identify those villages that still practice traditional rituals. Although these might not be absolutely identical to those once practiced in Lamap – because traditional practices vary from one region to another – the brothers will nonetheless be able to draw inspiration from them.

In general, Hernin will focus on understanding the meaning of the ceremonies he discovers so that he can adapt them at home. Marcellin will take notes and think about how to appeal to young people and urban dwellers by drawing on the power of modern technologies such as the Internet and social networks.

Roads are rare on Malakula Island and in some places, are non-existent. One can only walk or travel by sea.

The twins do not know most of the villages they will be visiting. Some are on the coast and others are tucked away in isolated valleys. Each of these places is a world in itself, with its own particular

language and customs. Impressive ritual ceremonies are performed, most of which are little-known and some of which have never been filmed before. The two brothers are embarking on a genuine odyssey on home ground.



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