

A 'customary reunion' of tribes from Ambae and Maewo



Chiefs from Ambae performing a customary exchange to the Maewo Chiefs

High Chiefs from Maewo and Ambae on Thursday 14 November performed a series of custom ceremonies in Kerebei, north Maewo to reunite tribes from Ambae and Maewo as the governments approved second home for Ambae evacuees of the Lombenben volcano.

The Council of Ministers (CoM) Decision 149/2018 articulated for access to land for second homes to be determined on a case-by-case, family and community basis through integration into Maewo tribes. The Thursday ceremony is essentially a blueprint for the 'customary reunion' process, previously called 'customary adoption' but reworded at the request of Maewo Chiefs to reflect the nature of the shared tribal system.

Ambae and Maewo Chiefs have established the agreed relationships between Ambae and Maewo tribes and clans, with this as the cornerstone of customary reunion. Using this structure, Ambae households will now be able to trace and link their clans with Maewo clans. All land ownership on Maewo follows clan relationships.

A part of the reunification ceremonies also involved identifying and reuniting tribes from Ambae and Maewo; there are two head tribes on Maewo - Asu and Liu. These tribes exist way down centuries following the history of the three islands, Maewo, Pentecost and Ambae. In Ambae the same tribe is called Merambuto and Tagaro and in Pentecost Tabi and Bule.

In front of hundreds at Kerebei Centre, Chairman of the Maewo Customary Land Management team, Ezekiel Boelum provided a clear explanation on how the tribes link. Boelum pointed out that in Maewo there are twelve sub-tribes under the two head tribes. The twelve sub-tribes correspond to twelve similar sub-tribes on Ambae, with similarities in tribe characteristics and features. He also demonstrated how the tribes are linked by grouping up people from the same tribes from the two islands together, allowing one tribe to identify the corresponding tribe from the other island.

“This tribal path has been engraved in our culture, tradition and blood, so it is very true that this will be a binding component to be considered on how we can absorb ourselves and mingle with our own tribes and also to sort out our selves when things get complicated in the future,” says Chief Boelum.

“It is vital that you know what tribe you belong to. It is very important also to know your tribe members from other islands in Penama province. When you clearly understand who you are and where you came from, this definitely will enable you to know where you are headed to,” he added.

All Ambae and Maewo Chiefs now know and agree which clans they belong to, the next step is for households to determine which clan they belong to. This process is to continue into the future.

The current State of Emergency (SoE) over Ambae lapses on Monday 26 November 2018, at which time the government’s recovery programme on Maewo is expected to take course. Building materials for phase 1 of second homes has been offloaded on the island early in the week, with the government’s immediate priority to commence construction of houses on the second home sites.

End.