

Progress made on Maewo second home for Ambae people

Ambae people displaced by volcano offered land on Maewo

Two landmark ceremonies orchestrated by the Chiefs of Maewo on 2 and 3 October 2018 will now ensure that the people of Ambae could begin using the land for both food production and construction of shelters in two relocation sites – Sanasum and Naruru.

A few trucks traversed the road towards the south of Maewo with the delegation, one also with two pigs tied in the back tray - one adult male and one piglet. Upon arrival a welcome ceremony by Chief Jonah Toakanase was held near the boundary to one second home site option, at the farmers' cooperative in Tanpiluk.

Chief Jonah Toakanase explained the tribes and the traditional adoption process: Maewo has two tribes; the Asu; and Liu and are wishing to adopt the two tribes from Ambae; the Tagaro and the Ngwerambutu. Maewo is wishing to welcome the tribes from Ambae the Tagaro and Ngwerambutu. Tagaro is the same tribe as Liu, and Ngwerambutu is the same tribe as Asu. The first welcome went to Rasa Ure followed by other members of the delegation. 'Rasa' refers to the highest chiefly title on Maewo. Chief Jonah Toakanase delivered a welcome speech which recalled events from history with movement of people from Maewo to Ambae which were based on Tagaro (The original leader who established the tribes). Chief Jonah Toakanase explained this current movement was more simply a repeated event of what has happened in history. This makes it easier for the Maewo people to accept the Ambae people onto their customary land.

The Tanpiluk community then sang an original custom song and a religious song of welcome. Official speeches began with Chief Jonah Toakanase as the leading Chief representing the Sanasum land tribes and was followed by Philip Meto of the National Disaster Management Office (NDMO) on behalf of the Vanuatu Government. Chief Jonah Toakanase focussed on welcoming Ambae communities to the new site emphasising the spirit of unity. Philip Meto responded by applauding this momentous occasion, thanking the land owners and Chiefs for allowing this to occur. He also congratulated the Maewo community highlighting the importance of this occasion which serves to make richer the culture of Vanuatu and increases resilience to future events. This was followed by a mat ceremony from Chief Jonah Toakanase to the delegation.

The entire delegation then departed for the hike to Sanasum carrying two pigs. The rich fertile soil and heavy vegetation was obvious along the way which also crossed several fresh water streams to an area named Saramarea. The area of Saramarea was originally inhabited by those tribes which moved to Ambae many years ago named Narugu. The tribal ceremony on Saramarea began with tribes forming two lines representing the Asu and Liu. With Rasa Hanmas leading the Liu tribe and Rasa Ure leading the Asu tribe they invited the Ambae people to join with them according to which tribe they belong, Tagaro or Ngwerambutu. Asu belongs to Ngwerambutu and Liu belongs to Tagaro. This formalised the union and symbolised the ease of the adoption process going forward. The pig killing club (nalnal) was passed to each individual person from all tribes then the last person killed the pig making the declaration. The customary declaration stated that Ambae people are now free to use

the land from now on as Maewo people would. The declaration also highlighted the need for Ambae customs, traditions and language to be encouraged to remain strong within the new sites. The pig was killed, and the blood flowed to the land to seal the customary ceremony. Following this another ceremony presented a smaller live pig to the ancestors of Saramarea particularly Chief Tarop. The ears were cut on this pig before release to identify it and people were asked not to kill this pig. Philip Meto then responded on behalf of the government and partners by presenting woven mats which were explained to represent the different tribes and how interwoven the history and culture of each tribe is. The mats also represented the rich culture and signified respect peace and harmony for the future. The two chiefs planted two Namele plants signifying the two tribes which are to remain as a symbol of this land sharing.

A closing feast was celebrated at Nasowa village hosted by Chief Hendry Toa, Chief Andrew Boeri and Chief Isaiah. All participants ate pig and vegetables. The closing speech was given by Chief Hendry acknowledging what has been done. Kava was shared to seal the events of the day.

This ceremony was repeated on a second site the next day. This site lays adjacent to the original site 2 (Naruru) near the Maewo airport. The original site has been cleared and planted with food crops to create a food bowl which already shows encouraging growth. A third ceremony is planned for early this week on a third site.

The Paramount Chiefs have stated that following the ceremonies Ambae people are free to begin using the land for both food production and construction of shelters.

The Maewo Chiefs have suggested people begin moving to the sites as soon as possible and Ambae people are keen to move from temporary shelter. The sites are close to host communities where Ambae evacuees currently reside which does allow them to maintain connections they have established over time.

It is envisaged a community safe house in the style of Nakamal construction will be built on each site soon after the ceremonies. The Ambae and Maewo people have worked together to construct existing temporary shelters and display great skill and expertise. Community leaders are confident that once basic services are provided some people will choose to move to the sites. Community leaders are also confident that the people and Chiefs are extremely capable of organising village layout and structure which would follow community safe house construction.

The Government decision not to acquire the land is being adhered to, however the State Law Office have been requested to draft an agreement between Maewo Chiefs and Government. This agreement has taken recommendations from the Chiefs and is in progress currently. It is envisaged the formalized agreement being written by the State Law Office will build confidence and improve long term sustainability of the project.

Ambae people are free to return to Ambae following the state of emergency. The second home site is not a compulsory move. It is rather a genuine attempt by Government to provide a safe location for people affected by the volcanic activity on Ambae. People who

choose to take up the generous offer from the Maewo people will have access to the land to develop a second home. Some people have indicated a desire to stay on the second home sites and only return to Ambae for special occasions. Other people will choose to return to Ambae and only use the second home site during future events and to maintain a garden and connection. In this way Ambae people will have a safe location to move to during an event which offers a sense of community and support. In this way ongoing response costs and community upheaval should be greatly reduced.



Figure 1 - Chiefs from Maewo performing a kastom ritual signifying land sharing with the people of Ambae



Figure 2 Kava seals the events of the day