

Vanuwa – Beach

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The English translation of *vanuwa* – beach – does not capture all that *vanuwa* is, accommodates, makes, facilitates, connects. *Vanuwa* revolves around a pillar of Ta-u culture: flying fish. But it is also a community centre, where teaching, learning, meeting, observing, conversing, and ceremonial thanksgiving and sharing take place. *Vanuwa*, on this island in the Pacific Ocean, is very different from what we commonly understand as a beach.

The geographical space of the beach in front of each Ta-u village has multiple, substantial symbolic and cultural meanings. *Vanuwa* means theater of action. Its original practical meaning refers to the multiple cultural aspects of the traditional wooden boats central to Flying Fish Mythology and the Ritual of Summoning Flying Fish. The ceremonial festival to welcome the arrival of flying fish is held on the *vanuwa* during late winter and early spring. The Jimasik village (commonly known as Small Ba-Dai Bay) is often the first, with other villages in close succession.

At the time when the people of Jimasik village migrated to Imourud village, a man called Si Gayong built a settlement in gratitude to the gods who had cared for him and extended his life. Another man called Si Zivu built a house and performed a Purification Ceremony by wringing out the juice of sugarcane before moving in. Together, they also created the ceremony of Ancestor Worship Day, held on the *vanuwa* in autumn.

To put it simply, the original cultural significance of the *vanuwa* is a sacred space of religious activities at the seashore. But it also serves as the spatial concept of facing the sea with one's back to the mountain. To care for the beach is to hold *mivanuwa*.

This means to tidy up the beach environment and make it clean for the sake of visual pleasure. It also expresses wishes to the *kakavag* (fishing groups, a key social unit for the Ta-u) for safe fishing, and for safe departure from and return to the sacred scene of the *vanuwa*, especially during the initial phase of flying fish activities. It is a cyclical annual ritual, welcoming a new year.

Thus we can understand the special spatial meaning of *vanuwa*. It is the place where the ceremony of Summoning Flying Fish is held. The doctrine of oceanography taught by the elders, based on Flying Fish Mythology, determines the cyclical ecology of catching marine fish. The season to catch flying fish runs roughly from February until June, during which time there is a ban on hunting fish among the coral reefs. Subsequently, from July until November, Ta-u can catch fish among the coral reefs, during which there is a taboo against hunting flying fish and ghost-headed swordfish.

With this kind of ancient knowledge of the original Indigenous people, elders meet

at the *vanuwa* to discuss not only fishing, but also farming, as well as the construction, maintenance, and renovation of the common ditches for irrigation and drainage. So were the matters of this original and simple society established, and *vanuwa* became, in reality as well as in name, the venue for ritual ceremonies and the core of the spatial field.

At the same time, the wider meaning of *vanuwa* lies in exploring changes in the cosmos and in the layers of clouds across ever-shifting seasons, as well as the names of the sixteen winds. The names of these winds (meteorology) are mainly based on the relationship between *ilawud* (northeast wind), *avalat* (southwest wind), *pangalitan* (east wind), *kanmunwan* (west wind), and other winds. The relations between the south and north winds, and the left and right winds (not east and west) directly determine changes on the ocean surface, in currents and waves. Together, this comprises the traditional oceanographic and meteorological knowledge of the islanders concerning the ocean and the skies.

Vanuwa connects to the water world of the ocean in yet another sense: the fishing and hunting relationships that extend from the beach to the horizon of the sea, and the labour relationships that connect the Indigenous people with the hill ecology, which is the source of the boats. Also, for the Indigenous children, who become intimate with the sea from early childhood, *vanuwa* is the source of knowledge, such as the names of fish and the relationships between the moon and the tides. Moreover, in each of the six villages – Imourud, Iratay, Yayo, Iraraley, Iranmeylek, Ivalino – the amount of flotsam and jetsam observed on the *vanuwa* during the flying fish season is considered evidence to estimate the amount of flying fish.

While we continue to understand the beaches as sacred places for the religious ceremonies of the oceanic people of the island, their spatial essence and symbolic significance have been weakened with the invasion of modern foreign civilizations. The shared understanding of terms such as *ilawud* (distant ocean), *irala* (nearshore), and the names of the winds is already vanished knowledge. After all, the accuracy of modern meteorological reports from the Weather Bureau, and the offshore fishery map of Taiwan available on everyone's cell phone, have definitely weakened the transmission of the original knowledge of the island's oceanic people. We currently stand in the unequivocal position of being the only oceanic people in Taiwan. I feel an obligation to preserve and disseminate this original knowledge, currently in the process of being forgotten.

Fig. 1 (below): Summoning flying fish on Iranmeylek beach. (Photo by Syaman Lamuran, 2022)

Fig. 2 (inset): Village sign for Imourud. (Photo by Huei-Min Tsai, 2023)

