

**Travel Tales**  
**Obama, Me, and**  
**The End of the World**  
**Part 2**

by

Llewellyn Toulmin

Last month we met Chief Isaac Las Won in his village of Lamakara in southeast Tanna, an island in southern Vanuatu. The Chief is the leader of the famous John Brum (or Prum or Frum) tribe, which believes that American aid and their prophet Brum will someday end the world.

I asked the Chief about his unusual name. He answered, “I am called ‘Las Won’ because I am the Last One who will rule over our tribe and fight for *kastom* ceremonies and traditional ways.”

I asked the Chief why his tribe doesn’t have their Sabbath on Sunday, like most Christians. He said, “When my grandfather and my father got out of prison, a local Christian pastor told them that they were ‘an evil abomination in God’s sight, and should not worship on Sunday.’ Then the spirit of John Brum told my father and grandfather that Friday, not Sunday, was the real holy day. And our entire community, 600 people in 26 villages, including all our youth, have been worshipping on Friday ever since.”

Many chiefs claim to have magical powers, so I asked Chief Las Won about that. “Yes,” he said, “Our sorcerers can make it rain and steer away cyclones. We receive our messages direct from John Brum through visions and from spirits that talk to us.”

The Chief then presented me with a five page typewritten petition, directed to President Obama at the White House. The petition described the history of the tribe, and asked for some very specific items, including a budget of 12 Billion Vatu (about \$13 million USD), to be spent across Tanna on roads, (there is not a single meter of paved road on this entire island), a water system for all communities, a wharf (there is no functioning wharf on the island, which is three times larger than the District of Columbia), hospitals and some *kastom* doctors.


Also 100 shirts and trousers and 100 pair of shoes and socks.

1 a **Budget of 12 billion vatu.**  
 John Prum Movement Head Quarter is more centralized within the province and all Kastom nakamals with other kastom service providers within close reach and extend to outer islands. This budget is to be shared evenly among the project listed and enough for our head quarter to implement and upgrade some other Projects:

- A. Roads
- B. Water system for all communities
- C. Warf
- D. Hospitals and kastom doctors
- E. Encourage spiritual services for all communities

**100 pairs of Uniforms** (shirts/long Trousers)

- A. 100 long Pants            Sizes: 20 to 40
- B. 100 shirts                Sizes: 20 to 40
- C. 100 socks
- D. 100 shoes;                Sizes: 40, 41,42, 43, 44



*The John Brum/Prum/Frum tribe requests \$13 million from President Obama – and some shoes and socks*

Apparently the clothes are for the John Brum “army,” which carries sticks instead of rifles, and parades every year on February 15 to celebrate their religion.

When I got back to the capital, Port Vila, I learned that the region’s US Ambassador, based in Papua New Guinea, was going to be in town. I quickly tracked down his aide and lured them to a dinner meeting, with the promise of Miss Vanuatu in attendance.

At the dinner I described my visit to the John Brum tribe, and presented their White House petition to the Ambassador. He clearly was not pleased. He said, “This is a group which raises the American and US Marine Corps flag over the territory of a sovereign nation – Vanuatu. Sounds like a diplomatic incident to me. I don’t want to give such a group any recognition.” I said, “Come on, this is just a tribe that likes Americans. There aren’t that many folks around the world who like us any more. Can’t we be nice to our friends, especially in a country where the Chinese have already built the Parliament building, are now building a huge, free conference center, and are planning to donate and erect a new building for the Prime Minister’s Office?”

The Ambassador replied that, “Serious donors don’t work like that. Any anyway, Vanuatu is ‘graduating’ up from the lowest per capita income class, and hence will not qualify for US help.” I thought, but did not say, that US policy was pretty idiotic – not wanting to help a friendly country where 70 percent of the people live in rural areas as poor subsistence farmers, eating coconuts and yams.



*A typical house on the island of Tanna – a grass hut with a dirt floor and no screens, running water, toilet, electricity or kitchen.*

I decided to help my new John Brum friends by approaching the White House directly. I tried to send an email, but Barak Obama doesn't have an email, only a window on the White House website, where you write in your request. I wrote, "I have what is perhaps one of the most unusual requests you have ever had. I am writing on behalf of a very poor tribe on Tanna island that loves Americans and wants \$13 million in US aid. Even if you can't provide that, perhaps you can give a little something...." I supplied the White House with the email address and name of a school teacher in the provincial capital who is the tribe's only link to the outside world.



*Soon John Brum will emerge from sacred Mt. Yasur, to sweep the world clean and end Creation. Thanks, Lew!*

Somehow I forgot to mention the fact that the Chief had said that if American aid is received, then the end of the world would be not far behind. Funny how you always forget the little things.

Anyway, for many weeks I heard nothing. Then I got an email from the school teacher. The White House had gotten in touch via email! He was assigned an actual "case number." He was ecstatic. (The White House never sent me an email. I thought that was a bit rude.)

Months passed. No American aid ever showed up, not that I expected any. But then I heard that a large Chinese and Asian Development Bank project was going to build roads and a wharf on Tanna. Cool!

Just now, on a whim, I looked up the history and finances of the Asian Development Bank. I never knew that ADB is 15 percent owned by the United States, and that since the Bank was founded in 1966, the US has given it about \$30 billion.

Oh, dear. American money is coming to Tanna to build roads and a wharf. Soon after the American aid arrives, John Brum will leave the spirit world and come down to Earth. He will sweep the world clean. Then Jesus will end Creation.

Time to repent.

Lew Toulmin now lives in Port Vila, Vanuatu and is planning to return in 2015 to Silver Spring. If it still exists.

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