

‘Local Mountain God’ Worshippers Praying for the Second Coming of Philip

The retirement of Britain’s Prince Philip from public life led world headlines on Thursday, but his most devout and remote followers have only just heard the news.

A tribe in Vanuatu was shocked and dismayed to discover on Saturday that the man they pray to as the son of an ancestral local mountain god will likely never return to their Pacific Island home.

The British royal, who said he would no longer take part in public engagements, alone or alongside his wife, Queen Elizabeth II, is part of the fabric of life in the village of Younanen on Tanna Island.

Villagers pray to the 95-year-old prince daily, asking for his blessing on the banana and yam crops that make their primitive and extremely poor community self-sufficient.

“If he comes one day the people will not be poor, there will be no sickness, no debt and the garden will be growing very well,” village chief Jack Malia told Reuters through an interpreter at the village’s Nakamal, a traditional meeting place where the men gather at night to drink highly intoxicating kava.

Villagers have several photos of the prince, including one dated 1980 of him in a suit, holding a club they made for him and sent to London.

“Prince Philip has said one day he will come and visit us,” said Malia, who was born in 1964 but did not know his birthday. “We still believe that he will come but if he

doesn't come, the pictures that I am holding ... it means nothing."

According to local legend, the pale-skinned son of the mountain god had ventured across the seas to look for a rich and powerful woman to marry.

Anthropologists believe Philip, who fitted the bill by marrying a powerful woman, became linked to the legend in the 1960s when Vanuatu was an Anglo-French colony known as the New Hebrides. Villagers at the time were likely to have seen portraits of Philip and the Queen at government offices and police stations run by colonial officials.

The belief that Philip, also known as the Duke of Edinburgh, was indeed the traveling son was reinforced in 1974 when he and the Queen made an official visit to the New Hebrides.

Now villagers hope for a second coming.

"Prince Philip is important to us because our ancestors told us that part of our custom is in England," said Malia, who took over from his father as village chief in 2003.

Younanen is not marked on maps. Finding it requires a local guide and a three-hour drive through dirt trails from Lenakel, the capital of Tanna, itself little more than a shed and a shop.

Children play naked, some of the women wear traditional grass skirts with bare chests while the men, clothed in old t-shirts, carry machetes.

Asked whether Philip's blessings would help with the tropical storms that often batter Vanuatu, like the Category 4 Cyclone Donna currently passing over the archipelago's north, Malia said they weren't in his remit as they generally flowed up from the south.

Malia added that Philip had told villagers not to ever take

money from people who visited, but that they should accept food, like rice, to share among themselves.

There is some irony in Philip, who has been by the queen's side throughout her 65 years on the throne, being considered a god by a primitive community thousands of miles away from London's civilization.

His reputation for making politically incorrect gaffes has been partly earned by comments about foreigners. He once advised British students not to stay too long in China for fear of becoming "slitty-eyed."

And on a trip to Australia, he asked a group of shocked Aborigines if they still threw spears at each other. {eoa}

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