Sydney’s Mitchell Library holds about a million photographs. One of them, ‘Tom Tanna’ of White Beach District, circulated on the southern Vanuatu island of Tanna following its publication in the April 1897 issue of a local mission journal. A century later the photograph was back in circulation, when I included it in the catalogue of a photographic exhibition I curated for the National Museum of Vanuatu. Young Moses Kahi, newly-appointed custom song-writer for the east Tanna village of Yenemaha, was inspired by the catalogue image of Tom Tanna, who became the subject of his very first composition as village song-writer. In the process he produced a powerful narrative of desire, regret and resistance, in which a fractured postcolonial sense of self is juxtaposed against more ancient cultural models from which the young man attempted to derive meaning and purpose. For very sad reasons outlined in this paper, Moses’s song will never be performed.

Ron Adams
Europe-Australia Institute, Victoria University
P.O.Box 14428
Melbourne City M.C. VIC 8001
Australia
ron.adams@vu.edu.au