

63. Kwamera

Contributor:

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1. Introduction

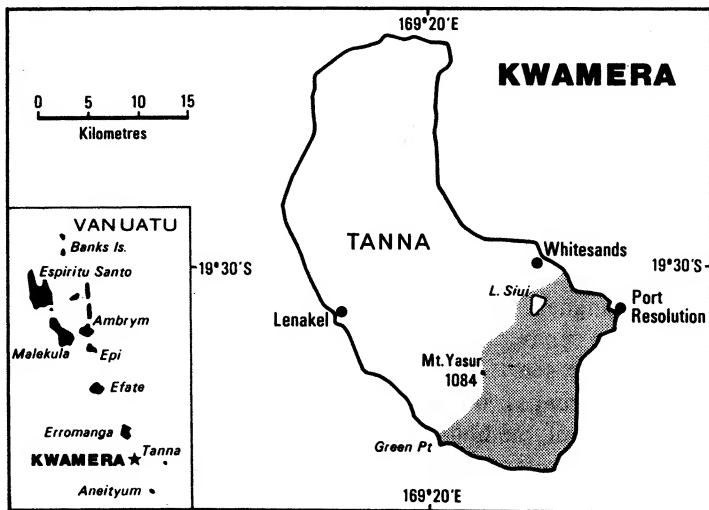
Kwamera is the language of approximately 2,000 people who live on the south-east and south coasts of the island of Tanna, Vanuatu. Nineteenth century missionaries named this language after the site of an early mission station. Speakers of the language today ordinarily call it Nife [Nəfe] or Nininife [Nəninəfe] (nominalising prefix + say + what), that is, 'say what'.

The language area extends from Mount Yasur on the central east coast down and around the southern tip of the island to Karimasaga Point, immediately to the north of Green Point (see map). In an area characterised by dialect chains and communalects, it is often misleading to map linguistic boundaries. The Tannese themselves, however, concerned with the value and distinctiveness of their languages, recognise geographic bounds that separate Kwamera from Whitesands language to the north, and from South-west Tanna language to the west. Tradition situates Kwamera's northern boundary in the centre of Ipikil village on Sulphur Bay. Two stones lie side-by-side near the sea: the northerly named Narhak (the local name for Whitesands language); the southerly named Nife [Nəfe] (see Lindstrom 1983). From Ipikil, the boundary runs west around Lake Siui and up to the central mountain crest. It follows a ravine called Karkaua – the instrumental form of the verb *-arkaua*, which means 'mispronounce'. Karimasaga Point on Tanna's southern coast marks the locally recognised linguistic boundary between Kwamera and South-west Tanna. Kwamera is the most different of the five or so related Tanna languages. Kwamera and Whitesands have a cognate ratio of 50%, and Kwamera and South-west Tanna one of 62% (Tryon 1976: 158-160).

Pioneer missionary linguists produced a small body of religious and educational material in Kwamera (A. Watt 1890; W. Watt 1880, 1890, 1919). Their early wordlists and grammatical sketches are reported in Codrington (1885), MacDonald (1891), and Ray (1926). More recent work includes a Kwamera dictionary (Lindstrom 1986; see also 1985) and also dictionaries and grammars of neighbouring Tanna languages (Lynch 1975,

1977, 1978, 1982). Some wordlist items presented below are borrowings from Bislama, Vanuatu's Pidgin English. Readers may consult Tryon (1987) for additional information on this *lingua franca*.

I recorded linguistic data over a period of 26 months between 1978 and 1983, in conjunction with anthropological research on Tanna. Most of my informants were my neighbours in Samaria village, and items presented here are from that village's communalect. Other Kwamera communalects are centred around Port Resolution in the east, in hill villages west of Samaria, and in Imaki and Kwamera villages in the south. In the main, however, communalectical differences are minor, and consist mostly of lexical variants. I would like to thank Vani, Nakutan, Iau, Rapi, Joel, Saki, Iapwatu, Kamti, Nariu and Kieri, and acknowledge their co-authorship of this Kwamera lexicon.



Map 63. Kwamera language area