

What is the point of the Commonwealth today?

Emerging from Empire

Nick Squires: A story so unlikely that it sounded barely credible. It was one I had wanted to investigate for years.

Legend had it that there was a clutch of villages on the island of Tanna in Vanuatu which - as bizarre as it may seem - worshipped Prince Philip as a god.

For centuries, perhaps millennia, villagers had believed in an ancient story about the son of a mountain spirit venturing across the seas to look for a powerful woman to marry.

They believed that unlike them, this spirit had pale skin. Somehow the legend gradually became associated with Prince Philip, who had indeed married a rich and powerful lady.

Their beliefs were bolstered in 1974, when the Queen and Prince Philip made an official visit to the New Hebrides. Here was their ancestral spirit, resplendent in a white naval officer's uniform, come back to show off his bride.

"He's a god, not a man," the chief told me emphatically, pointing at the portraits.

The villagers of Tanna may live a life far removed from the splendour of Buckingham Palace and Balmoral in faraway Britain. But they are as firm in their beliefs as Prince Philip is in his.

I suspect that if they were ever to meet, they would get along rather well.

(Audio: From Our Own Correspondents, Radio 4, 2007)
(Footage: Most Honorable Chiefly Woman: The Queen in the Pacific, 1972)
(Footage: BBC News, 1980)