USE OF THESES

This copy is supplied for purposes of private study and research only. Passages from the thesis may not be copied or closely paraphrased without the written consent of the author.
TALKING ABOUT PLACE

Identities, histories and powers among the Na’hai speakers of Malakula (Vanuatu)

Tim Curtis

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University

October 2002
Except as cited, this work in both film and text, is the result of research carried out by the author.

Tim Curtis
Department of Anthropology
Division of Society and Environment
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
The Australian National University
This thesis is an ethnography of the Na’hai speakers of South Malakula in Vanuatu. It explores how people use the concept of *pies*, or place, to position themselves as social agents. It demonstrates how Malakulans understand place to be a key component of a person’s identity and the repository of communal knowledge and power. It highlights the important political, economic and social ramifications of this concept, and explores why it continues today to be relevant in all aspects of peoples’ lives, despite the radical social transformations that have occurred on Malakula during the last century.

The first part of the thesis, Mosaics of being, argues that the vast linguistic and ritual diversity of Malakula (there are more or less 34 languages spoken on Malakula for a population of some 18,000 people) needs to be understood in terms of what I call ‘deliberate differentiation’. Deliberate differentiation is itself a kind of political and discursive process that is predicated on an understanding of people as products of place.

Part two, the placing of knowledge, explores the various discourses, not only spoken, but also embodied in people and places, which position people as ‘products of place’. I discuss perduring narratives (‘myths’) that attach people to place, and demonstrate how Na’hai speakers have both appropriated and transformed ‘western’ knowledges by placing them in novel contexts (books and museums). At the same time, these introduced knowledges have transformed Malakulan epistemologies which make people from place. What emerges is that discourses of *kastom*, or ‘ancestral ways’, are not just looking back at an objectified past, nor solely about a politicised present, but in crucial ways, they also project a future. *Kastom* in Malakula, is very much about tomorrow, and that tomorrow, like past and present, is grounded in place, or *pies* in Bislama.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are more people who have helped or otherwise contributed to the completion of this thesis than I will be able to acknowledge here. Writing acknowledgments at the last minute is a treacherous endeavour and so I begin by asking those whom I may have forgotten for their forgiveness.

The thesis was made possible thanks to an Australian Postgraduate Research Award and the financial assistance of the Department of Anthropology in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies of The Australian National University. Apart from funding for fieldwork, the department also provided numerous seminars, corridor discussions, Friday drinks and mid-week lunches that have all played an important part in the development of ideas that went into the thesis.

Professor Margaret Jolly has been a source of both inspiration and motivation. Her vast breadth of knowledge and her amazing ability to get to the core of ideas, to see links across theories and across disciplines, has provided continual stimulation and challenge. Her editing talents in the final stages bedazzled me. However above and beyond her role of supervisor, Margaret has maintained friendship and faith in me even when I myself doubted, and I thank her first and foremost for that.

Doctor Lissant Bolton has also been a key person for this thesis. In May 2000 I went to Paris to attend a wedding, and then found a job and stayed. Lissant had recently moved to London and without her ongoing assistance, and insistence that I ‘had it in me’, it would have been a much longer and more difficult task. Lissant’s thoroughness of thought, her expedient reading and commenting, as well as her deep engagement with Vanuatu provided a Melanesian ‘centring’ in that outpost that le métropole can be. Throughout the months of writing, our cross-channel phone calls, and occasional meetings, were my key signposts as to the progression of the thesis.
Part of this thesis is in film, and I wish here to acknowledge an unacknowledged supervisor: Gary Kildea took my edits and spun his finishing magic on them. He too shared the last throws of sleeplessness and long hours, and more than just do a job, he ‘got into it’.

Dr Darrel Tryon’s long experience in Vanuatu has been a source of great practical help, particularly when I first went to Vanuatu, when he helped me learn Bislama and gave much advice on ‘how things worked there’. Several other more senior anthropologists at the ANU have provided guidance, friendship and help. James Weiner read an earlier draft and gave comments. A sign of class is someone who helps when you’re down, and smiles when you’re up, so I thank Jimmy for that even more than the stimulating debates he so often initiates. Michael Young has given me many hints and directions, as well as laughter, friendship and general inspiration. Don Gardner’s brilliant undergraduate lecturing first led me to Melanesia, and he has continued to take interest in my work thereafter, being both mentor and friend.

I would also like to thank Professor Greg Dening for organizing the workshop ‘Challenges to Perform: using the creative imagination in academic writing’ (run by the Centre for Cross Cultural Research, ANU, 1999). There was a certain magic to those two weeks that all us participants felt, it was a true learning experience.

In the last weeks of production, I benefited from the long experience of Ria Van de Zandt in seeing these things through. I also thank her for sharing her long experience in all the practical strategies for ‘tying it up’.

At the ANU I would like to mention colleagues Kalissa Alexeyoff, Mathew Allen, Olwyn Beazley, Stuart Bedford, Chenwei, Sophie Creighton, Richard Davis, Sina Emde, Derek Elias, Nicole Haley, Andrew Hardy, Catriona Hyslop, Phil Iacono, Suzanne Keuhling, Peter Kirkup, Alex
Leonard, Nick Purdie, Alec Soucy, Jack Taylor, Philippe Taylor, Phillip Winn. Harriott Beazley has been an ongoing friend, providing support and encouragement, over several years and in many places.

Greg Rawlings and Samantha Sherkin were in Vanuatu doing research at the same time as I, and their friendship and collegiality both in the field and afterwards have been invaluable. Greg also helped with tedious last minute things, like scanning and cross checking references before submitting. Peter Kirkup helped with last minute checking of bibliography and, with Alex Leonard, sorting out prints while I rushed to write this acknowledgement.

Matthew Spriggs brought the spirit of Vanuatu to Canberra by holding a fortnightly *Nakamal* and I’d like to thank both him and Ruth Spriggs, as well as the ‘kava crew’: Augus, Benny, William, Atty, and Glenn et al.

In France, Annie Walter was tremendous help in the early stages of research and Fabienne Tzerkientz, Lorenzo Bruttì and Eric Wittersheim have all been both colleagues and friends.

Patrick and Lilianne Larmoyer provided yet another ‘family’, this one in Paris, including shelter and companionship when I first arrived. The same applies to Pomme, Aurelie, Nathalie, Jean and Sophie.

In Paris, Noriko Aikawa gave me the opportunity to work on some fascinating projects in the Intangible Heritage Section at UNESCO. She also encouraged me to finish this thesis, and provided the crucial flexibility in terms of employment that allowed it to happen. I thank her as well.

Outside of ‘PhD land’, Andrea Fisher has been a friend through thick and thin. Thanks Randy. Others who have put up with my rantings and ravings associated with this project, and provided friendship and fun include, Virginie Branchut (and Joel and Sylvie), Sara Cattaneo, Robby Rossi,
Ricardo and Paloma Tajeda, Josephine Tomlinson, Jorden Van Cann, Samantha Wauchope (and no doubt others whom I’ve forgotten in the rush).

Of course without the encouragement and support of my family it is hard to see how this would have been accomplished. My father Peter, and mother Chantal, have helped me in so many ways that to discuss them would be another thesis in itself. My siblings Christopher, Nicholas, Nathalie, Anthony and Ben have all been encouraging and supportive, contributing to my well being in their various ways. Nick has also provided crucial financial support during lean times. And of course Ouane, who has done so much for me.

Tim Allman, another of my ‘adopted kin’ has been a great friend and taught me much about the delights and difficulties of writing.

Finally I turn to Vanuatu where I received more help and friendship than I could have possibly expected. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre was of tremendous help for my research, as will become apparent in this thesis. I’d like to thank all the staff and friends I made there, and in particular Jacob Sam who shared his interest in film and in kastom.

Ralph Regenvanu has been a close friend and colleague for many years now and in many different contexts. He is doing a superb job of directing the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and has always kept the doors to his house open to me when in Vila. Jenny, Clyde and Nikita have also extended their warm hospitality and friendship.

Kirk Huffman has been source of much knowledge and encouragement, as well as plenty of amusement. I owe him a gigantic shell of kava for all of his kindness.
In Port Vila, David Luders has also been generous with his knowledge of the central islands and encouraged me in my work.

In South West Bay I made many friends. George Thompson has always been a wonderful host and even visited me in Australia. Ayar, Alben, Mathias, Kaising, and of course my ‘Aunty’ blo ples, Beverly, all made my passages through Wintua a treat.

And so finally I come to the people of Tomman and other Na’hai speakers who made all of this possible. My family, Longlel, To’oleo, Suitlé and Litia, cared for me and looked after me in so many facets of day to day life in their ples. I do believe that we now have a bond that transcends difference of ples. The same for my ‘siblings’ Joswin, Eldison, Melin, Marselin, Mapera, Ritaky, Jenery, Lucy, ‘captain’ Tomsin, Beperly, Leiwin, Marysoi and Winsior. I won’t say more lest I say not enough.

Others on Tomman who became friends and companions were Sungrang, Maasingtana, Willy, Okis and Lelran, Alick Maasing, Tami, Benny, Okis and Lelran, Willy, and others whom I’m sure to remember tomorrow. I ask for forgiveness if their name is not here.

Finally I come to Longdal Nobel Masingyao. As will become apparent in the pages that follow, this thesis owes as much to him as to anyone. No doubt this work is not quite the ‘kastom buk’ he has long hoped for, but I do hope it can help him in some small way in his projects of ‘holding tight kastom’. I also look forward to more projects and collaborations with Longdal, who has always impressed me with his intelligence and sensitivity. I feel blessed by his friendship, and enhanced by his acquaintance. I hope that this thesis is just one step on the road that we have created, and that it continues to unfold into all kinds of places.
CONTENTS

Abstract iii
Acknowledgements iv
Index of plates xii
Index of figures, maps and films xiii

Prologue
EATING THE SEA 1
In and out of place 6
Chapters and things 11

Part one:  MOSAICS OF BEING

Chapter one
AN ISLAND OFF AN ISLAND 15
Houses and gardens and places 20
People of ples 25
Choosing the field 28
Shores of the mind: making the Na'hai community 36
Island illusions: cultures and communities 43

Chapter two
ETHNOGRAPHIC OTHERS AND OTHER ETHNOGRAPHERS 55
Others and others and others... 57
Anthropologies of Malakula 60
John Layard 62
Arthur Bernard Deacon 65
Tom Harrisson 69
The fifties and seventies 70
Changing ethnographies of change 73
Post-colonial anthropology? Ethnographic others and other ethnographers 77
The catch-22: ethnographic expectations 84

Chapter three
HOUSES OF BEING 87
Being in houses 90
Ame/and arms 93
Men in their houses: secrecy, society, success 95
Steps of Nimingi 99
Masks of Niluan 106
New kinds of houses 117
Chapter four
CONVERSATIONS OF CONVERSIONS
The light and the dark
Sea cucumbers and guns: other exchanges of the nineteenth century
Momentary lapses of sociality
New Christianity, new kastom
Tom's tambu house
Film 1
Spacing, status, sacredness
Innovating power, creating place
Places transposed and places between

Part two: THE PLACING OF KNOWLEDGE

Chapter five
RELATIONS OF CREATIONS
Cross cultural dialogue: an ethnographic reflection
Amidst mediations
Stories of time, spirits of place
The Ambat: brothers as fingers
Naa'vinveo
Atbwengman
Ancestors today
Heads and roots of existence
Engendering origin
Places that matter

Chapter six
ON GODS AND GROUND
Trouble in Vanhah
Stories, spirits, sex: at the heart of the trouble
Aisoh, November 30, 1997
Ambucas, December 6, 1997
Links between origins: ramifying disputes
The placing of histories
Divergent stories, different ples

Chapter Seven
STONE MEN AND THE POLITICS OF PAPER
Stones and men of Malakula
Writings and things
Books in the bush: genealogies and genesis
Buk blo grom: problems with textual ancestors
Circles and triangles: anthropology's feedback effect
From time to time, and place to place
Writing culture, encoding history, being ples
Chapter Eight
**KASTOM AS DEVELOPMENT**

- Opening the *Na’hai Kaljaral Senta*  
  *Film 2*  
  223
- Working for *kastom*  
  *Film 3*  
  227
- Spaces today  
  228
- Culture and development, Malakula style  
  231
- Global deliberation, local differentiation?  
  233
- Roads between places: *Kastom* as development  
  236

**Epilogue**

**STONING THE FUTURE**  
240

**Appendices**  
244

- Appendix I  
  Mewun Kin classification  
  244
- Appendix II  
  *Na’hai* kinship terms  
  247
- Appendix III  
  Contributions for the *Na’hai Kaljaral Senta*  
  248
- Appendix IV  
  Transcripts of Film Subtitles  
  *Film 1*  
  *Toms tambu house*  
  257
  *Film 2*  
  Opening the *Na’hai Kaljaral Senta*  
  265
  *Film 3*  
  Placing the stones  
  266

**Bibliography**  
270
**PLATES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>A view from Tomman</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>An island off an island</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Approaching South Malakula from the sea</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Drawing a connection between land and sea</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>View of Ur (Tomman)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>A small garden on Ur</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Longdal Nobel Masingyao</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Longdal and Rembi</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Lucy and I</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>My adopted family on our way back from gardens</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>Longlel dancing in traditional dress</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>Ayar and Amvon</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>'Small Nambas' and 'Big Nambas' men marching</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>Women wearing the 'fringe skirt'</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Amboyo</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Picasso’s <em>Vin 'bum 'bau</em></td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>John Layard on Vao</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Deacon’s gravestone at South West Bay</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Littia, women’s <em>filwoka</em> for the Na’hai speakers</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Houses of Ur</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>A <em>Yum</em></td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td><em>Amel</em> under construction</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Suitié, dressed in ceremonial style</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td><em>Neleng-pas</em> ‘hat’</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Dancing <em>Neleng-pas</em></td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td><em>Namangki</em> at Venambus</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Talking about <em>Niluan</em></td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plate-series: Masks of <em>Niluan</em></td>
<td>109-114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>Church under construction</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Estel and Okis Aileh Ran</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>The Nagriamel flagpole at Caroline Bay</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>A stone representing Woron <em>amel</em></td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>People from place</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Aisoh and Jake Amboranbuas</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Ambuas with a Vanhah stone</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Ian, with book and stone</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Abtwengman: ancestor spirit</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>High ranking stone</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td><em>Temes savsap</em>, part one</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td><em>Temes savsap</em>, part two</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td><em>Navatpor</em>-the broken stone</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>Mathias and genealogy</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td><em>Kaljaral</em> Sentia <em>tam tam</em></td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Stones that are <em>amel</em></td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# FIGURES, MAPS and FILMS

## FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Statements of self</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Worles village, indicating <em>amel</em></td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Worles village, indicating church</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Diagram of the <em>amel</em> and village</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Longdal's map – Umaas as place</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Longdal's map – Umaas as 'family'</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Nagriamel 1976 declaration of independence</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Political and historical environments</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Paddling by legs</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Diagram of Tom's <em>stesen</em></td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Diagram of disputes</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## MAPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Map</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Highlighting the Na’hai speaking villages</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Language areas of southern Malakula</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Topographic map of Ur (Tomman)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Deacon’s map of Malakula, by skirt type</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Regions of the south west</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## FILMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(12:00 mins): Toms <em>tambu</em> house</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>(04:25 mins): Opening the <em>Na’hai Kaljaral Senta</em></td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>(06:38 mins): Placing the stones</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prologue

EATING THE SEA

Plate A: A view from Tomman Island.

Tomman Island is not a well-known place. It is an offshore island at the southwest tip of Malakula, the second largest island in the Republic of Vanuatu. Vanuatu is an archipelago of some eighty islands that was known to the rest of the world as the Anglo-Franco Condominium of the New Hebrides until its inhabitants gained political independence in 1980. If you look at a map, you can see Tomman: a small island off a larger island in a small country in the southwest Pacific.
Map 1: Vanuatu

Map 2: Malakula, highlighting the South West

Map 3: Na’hai speaking region

Map A: Highlighting Tomman Island (Ur) and the other Na’hai speaking villages of South Malakula (Courtesy of Cartography Unit, RSPAS, ANU).
The local name for Tomman Island is Ur, literally island (or small island), in Na'hai, the language spoken there. Na'hai is an Austronesian language which is also spoken in the adjacent mainland villages of Milip and Bwad-Bang, and with a notably different accent in Malfakhal and Mbonvor along the south coast of Malakula — the mainland from the perspective of the people of Ur, the ‘small islanders’.

The people of Ur maintain gardens on the mainland, which at the shortest distance lies just over 800 meters away. Every morning some canoes in the village leave for the ‘big island’, and nearly everybody makes the journey several times a week. When the sea is calm, the journey on the outrigger canoe is a chance to chat and joke and the mood is pleasant. But when the sea rears up and thrashes out instead, the journey turns into a challenging struggle. When that happens those of the mainland do not venture out in their canoes, but the people of Ur, dependent on the daily to and fro between the big and the small island, pull their canoes into the waves, and the salt water into their mouths. At such times there is no small talk or soft singing, but rather cries of ‘yahoo’ and moments of anxiety. For this they have been dubbed and call themselves na'antes: ‘those who eat the sea’. Literally na'antes refers to a seagull, but in this context it was translated to me as 'man blo kakai solwata' in Bislama (‘people who eat the sea’).¹

The social experimentations and innovations that Tomman islanders, and others living in the region, have undertaken in the last century mimic this daily to and fro between small and big island. They have not only been swallowing the salt of the sea, but the all too bitter and tumultuous

¹ Bislama is the Neo-Melanesian, or 'pidgin' spoken in Vanuatu. It is the unrivalled lingua franca of the archipelago and one of the three official languages of Vanuatu (the other two being English and French). Unlike the other Melanesian states, Bislama is the language used in the National Parliament, the language of national political debate and campaigning, and the usual language both in print media and national conversation. Throughout this thesis I use a slightly different form of italics to indicate words in the Na’hai language, so as to distinguish them from Bislama words I use. The difference is as follows: Na’hai (font: Comic Sans MS) and Bislama (font: Times New Roman).
experience of colonialism and post-colonial disenchantment. In Vanuatu these experiences have entailed the far-reaching influence of Christianity, the development of an international labour trade and cash economy, the political struggle for independence in 1980, and the legacies of a colonial-cum-nation state power structure that has endured since. In all of these politico-historical contexts, the people of Ur have been coming and going between various positions and perspectives, enacting a kind of to and fro between commitment to local practices and the appeals of a new broader type of sociality. They have been coming and going between the grounded concerns of a small island community and the demands and seductions of a large island-world.

I lived on Tomman Island for a total of just over 16 months between 1995 and 1997. I was adopted into a family and lived in a bamboo and thatch house that people had built for me. I grappled with the Na’hai language and lived mainly in the pidgin: Bislama. Each time I have gone back, I have been made to feel welcome. At different times, in different places, Tomman Island has been many places to me. It has been the subject of a Ph.D. – a group of people – a place of friends– a place of spirits – a tropical ‘paradise’ – a place of malaria – a place of conflict and tension – a place of feasting and abundance – a place of abstinence – both the edge and the centre of the world – a slow and monotonous place – a place of fascinating events and encounters.

To those who live there, these descriptions would be meaningless. For the people who have lived their entire life there it is first and foremost their place. It is not just that they are of the place, nor only that they make the place, but that in many respects they are the place and the place is them.

This thesis is an exploration of some of the places that Tomman ‘is’. It is about the people that make those spaces ‘place’, and about the changing ways they do this: the changing and conflicting human relationships that
create and sustain \textit{place}. It is essentially about 'man-place', or \textit{manples}, the all-important Bislama term for a person of the place.

\textbf{...}

\textbf{...}
In and out of place

An ethnography won't end anything any more than a history will. An ethnography is a sentence in a conversation we are having about something else. Sometimes there will be a response to that sentence. Sometimes there won’t. Perhaps the happiest thing that could happen to it as a sentence is that someone will think: that is just what I was about to say (Dening 1998: 52)

In October 1990, when I returned to Australia after having spent all my teenage years in Europe, in Paris and Brussels, I heard about the Republic of Vanuatu for the first time. A friend of my sister had just come back from holidays, and he spoke of a tropical paradise where, in his words, ‘people were poor but happy’. Although I clearly remember that first time I heard about Vanuatu, I had no idea then how central the country would become to my life in the years that would follow. A few months later, in February 1991, tired (literally as well as figuratively) of being a bartender, I came to The Australian National University to complete a Bachelor of Arts I had begun and abandoned a couple of years earlier in Brussels. Brussels has great bars.

When I sat to read about the various courses proposed at the ANU I was attracted by what was on offer in the department of anthropology, a discipline about which I knew only slightly more than I did about Vanuatu. Since then I have come to learn a little more about both anthropology and Vanuatu. Aside and apart from the formal and ritual requirements of being a graduate scholar, this thesis is the culmination of a decade of listening, learning, and talking about anthropology and about Vanuatu.

Reflexivity, relativity, multiplicity are the orders of the day for ethnography and so if I begin by asking you to indulge my use of this introduction to introduce myself, I also promise not to linger; we will get to the more interesting stuff about Malakula soon. Nevertheless, a few words about myself, and how I came to do this thesis, could help you to better place the
words that follow.

As a child of a diplomat, I had been raised across the globe: Vientiane, Beirut, Delhi, Paris, Brussels and Canberra were the places that formed the world that I knew at the age of twenty-one. When I started attending anthropology classes and learning about the vast diversity by which peoples of different places understand and act in the world, it came as a sort of relief. As a young man without place, here was a group of people who understood and engaged with cultural dislocation. Here in anthropology-land my disjunct childhood in fact served me well, there was a sense of belonging in the senses of dislocation that practitioners often alluded to. At first it was a kind of 'chicken soup anthropology', a way to soothe the soul.

Today with the hindsight of some more experience and a better understanding of the discipline, I would hardly call anthropology a soul-soothing endeavour. And yet despite both disease and debt, my fieldwork in Malakula also brought me another understanding of the world, and myself, that went beyond an intellectual compartmentalization of issues such as 'self', 'culture' and 'place'. Research is always a journey of personal revelation as well as external discovery, and I was no exception to this rule. Perhaps ironically, perhaps predictably, this thesis about place was written by a person who has never felt life-long attachment to place. People in Vanuatu made this aspect of my life explicit to me in ways that it had not been before.

In March 1996, while still in the field I became ill with both Plasmodium Falciparum and Vivax Malaria. After some of the villagers had prayed over me, my adopted father Longlel told me that in order to 'come strong' again, I had to first go back to my place, to eat and drink from my place. The problem I had, and which assumed crystal clarity in the lucidity one gains through the fear of imminent death, was that I didn't know where that was. It was then that I properly learnt that I had no place, and that I came to
better understand the embodied nature of place.

If anthropology had helped me to reflect on and understand this dislocation, Malakula helped me to feel it, to live it. For Malakulans place is not just in the mind, a 'culture', it is also in the body. I never have become comfortable with the fabrications I concoct when ni-Vanuatu ask me the very simple and all-important question: 'where is your place'? I am still unable to answer them honestly.

When I first started thinking seriously of pursuing anthropology beyond the undergraduate level I imagined I would be doing research somewhere in Asia. I was thinking most seriously of Laos, where I was born, or India, where I had lived from the age of five to ten years old. But the Australian National University was also rich with Melanesianists, and as I read my way through the courses I took, my imagination turned itself to Melanesia. The ethnography seemed exotic, the theories challenging, and the environment exciting. Clearly what attracted me then was the difference of Melanesia.

Having lived in, read about, and followed things Melanesian since, I am much less convinced of a radical Melanesian difference. One cannot live with people for an extended period of time and continue to see them as radically 'other'. At least I couldn't. Nevertheless so called 'traditional' Melanesian values, visions, societies continue to challenge the dominant orthodoxies that are engulfing the world today. Melanesians do not play the game of exchange the way classic economists would have us believe is 'natural'. Nor do they practise Christianity in the ways those who brought it there imagined it should be done. Melanesians don't buy or sell land. Melanesians have 'place'.1 Melanesian values persist in the some of the

---

1 For more detailed discussion of the ongoing relevance of Melanesian studies in the so called 'era of globalization' see Foster (1999), Friedman and Carrier (1996), Lederman (1998).
laws and constitutions of the modern nation states of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, The Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. No doubt should the Melanesians of New Caledonia or West Papua gain their long awaited independence, they too would create a nation state that grounds itself in Melanesian values.

It is not the case however that I went to Malakula, or studied anthropology, so as to ‘find place’. In fact, I’m not so sure that I really want ‘a place’, if by that is meant one home, or even a secure origin. Unlike my Malakulan friends, I live in a world where not having place can actually bring all sorts of benefits. To be ‘translocal’, and transposable, is valued. It can help to get jobs, becoming a resource in itself. It has a similar effect that ‘being of the place’ does in Vanuatu.

I hope that this thesis demonstrates the relevance and importance of ‘place’, or *pies*, for people on Malakula, and that my focus on place is not just a reflection of an author’s biography. Place emerged as the ‘core’ of the thesis in some senses despite my intentions. As is nearly always the case, ethnographies emerge with distance from the immediacy of the field, ‘after the fact’ as Geertz has coined it.¹ It was only after I had left Malakula, and was well into the process of ‘writing up’, that I eventually accepted that the thesis would be about place. It crystallised in dialogue, as research always does, one day in 1999. Margaret Jolly, my doctoral supervisor, and I were coming out of a film, Wim Wender’s *Buena Vista Social Club*, soon after she had read a muddled and confused half-thesis draft. She said a few words that helped me to accept the place of ‘place’ in the thesis, and to ‘take it and run’:

‘It’s about place Tim, place and power’.

¹ Geertz (1995).
When it comes to issues of gender, this thesis cannot claim to give a balanced view. In Malakula I interacted mainly with men. Although in daily life I often chatted and joked with my ‘mothers’, Suitlé and Litia, or ‘sisters’, Mélin, Mapera, Beverly and others, when it came to my ‘work’ my interlocutors were nearly all male.

There is not much, short of changing gender, I could have done about this. The patterns of gender segregation on Malakula are pervasive. People understood me to be there for kastom, to be ‘writing kastom’. Kastom is a broad and important concept that reverberates far beyond its English counterpart ‘custom’. In Malakula, as well as throughout Melanesia, men and women’s kastom are considered separate, and sometimes even seen as dangerous to each other. This segregation has been reinscribed on a national level in the context of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre’s annual fieldworker workshops, when designated fieldworkers, of filwoka, learn anthropological, linguistic and archaeological techniques and methodologies to study and revive their kastom. Women and men hold their workshops separately.

The patterns of gender segregation on Malakula permeate everyday life as well. When, in the early days of fieldwork, I tried to join a group of women who were sitting around chatting, I completely killed the conversation they were having, and received glances that indicated that I was clearly ‘out of place’.

I didn’t seek to repeat that mistake.

I did however come to learn that women are in fact highly important to all of this ‘exclusively male’ kastom.

And as is so often the case with things defined as ‘male’, even in Malakula, this thesis emerged from the crucial guidance and backing of women, of
two women. I owe an enormous debt to Margaret Jolly and Lissant Bolton, who provided the intellectual and motivational ‘scaffolding’ on which I constructed my arguments, my understandings. I hope that I have allowed their judicious insights to moderate the ‘maleness’ of my field experience.

**Chapters and things**

This thesis also uses films. I do not, however, enter into discussions about ethnographic film and its relationship to the production of anthropological knowledge. Those debates are important,¹ but this work is about Malakula, and about place. Having said that, using film in a thesis constitutes in itself a discussion about the practice of ethnography. The films in this thesis are integrated with the text, and best viewed when the text indicates to do so. Both films were initially cut simultaneously with writing papers, and were edited with that purpose in mind.

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part one, mosaics of being, is a description of the Na’hai speakers and an exploration of the multiple ways by which they construct their identities. In Malakula there are at least 34 indigenous languages spoken for a population of about 18000 people. In chapter one I give a brief outline of the Na’hai speaking region and discuss why and how I chose this area to do fieldwork. In doing so I then turn to the problems of delineating a ‘community’, and the multiplicity of ways, both new and old, that people in the region ‘create’ community. The next chapter explores the ethnographies that have been written about Malakula and also situates my own research amidst the literature. It discusses how my fieldwork was shaped in part by the contemporary concerns of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and the Na’hai speakers themselves, following the moratorium that was placed on anthropological research in the archipelago after independence. Chapter three looks at houses, and through them at Malakulan socialities. In chapter four I turn to the arrival of Christianity

and provide a brief local history of conversion and churches on the island before discussing, in text and in film, the various forms of Christianity that are practiced on Tomman.

Part two, the placing of knowledge, explores the various 'discourses', not only spoken, but also embodied in people and spaces, which position people as 'products of place'. Chapters five and six explore the importance of origin stories and their ples on relationships both within and beyond the village. In chapter five I outline some of these stories and discuss their implications for identities, how they tie people to place. Chapter six focuses more specifically on a particular dispute about place that was occurring in the village when I was there. Both of these chapters delve into the consequences and effects of the ongoing importance of ples, or place, in relation to a contemporary politics of identity. Chapter seven then looks at how writing has entered local practice so as to transform some of the ways in which knowledge is negotiated amongst people in the community. Chapter eight, which also includes two short films, brings these various elements together by exploring a 'development project' in which I became involved. That project was the construction of a local Na'hai cultural centre. This raised questions about both 'development' and kastom (or 'tradition') and the dialectics between them. Here I suggest that the discourse of kastom is as much about the future as it is about the past.

The thesis argues that in all the complexities and 'differentiations' of being that are to be found in Malakula, the processes of deliberate differentiation, and 'individual' negotiation of imagined communities and power dynamics, are played out in the constant base of place, or ples. In Malakula, this is a crucial ingredient for power, particularly male power.

Within a local political discourse in which the notions of kastom and ples are particularly prominent, innovation, often in the form of 'deliberate differentiation' is crucial to achieving political power. Such 'deliberate
differentiation’ constructs a cultural landscape of great complexity and diversity. However, it is important not to equate localism with isolationism, or insularity. *Kastom* is tied to *ples*, but *kastom* is also about *rod*, roads, about making links between *ples*, about human relations. In Malakula *kastom* is as much about anticipating the future as it is about remembering the past, and in that respect it is all about the present. This is crucial in trying to understand the ways people on Tomman have used the concept to engage with the kinds of challenges they encountered during the latter half of the twentieth century, the transforming historical processes of colonialism, the postcolonial state, and Christianity. These challenges stemmed not only from their relations with non-Melanesian people, or concepts, but even more so with Melanesian ‘others’ in the contexts of shared colonial subjugation and then nation building.
Part One

Mosaics of Being
Chapter one

AN ISLAND OFF AN ISLAND

Plate 1.1: An island off an island: Caroline Bay and Ur (Tomman Island), at the southwestern tip of Malakula.

There are several options open to those who wish to travel to Malakula, each of them offering a different perspective on the physical landscape of this mountainous rainforest island. The most common ways to arrive are by getting a ride on one of the trade ships, which usually transport copra or kava around the archipelago, or by boarding a twin-engine airplane in Port Vila on Vanuatu's domestic air carrier, Vanair. The flight takes you to Wintua, South West Bay, from where an outboard motor boat can get you to Tomman Island in about an hour, if the sea is calm. Occasionally, foreigners arrive by yacht or even by helicopter or seaplane. Very rarely do
people use traditional canoes for any long distance travel these days. But canoes themselves are an integral part of daily life on Tomman, and nearly every coastal village in Vanuatu has dug out canoes lined along the beach, which are used for fishing and short distance travel.

In approaching southern Malakula by air, the foreign eye usually first notices the lush tropical vegetation covering the mountainous landscape and then the smoke rising from a number of villages that are scattered along the reef-lined coast. There is little to indicate that this region comprises one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse areas of the world. The villages all look somewhat similar: clusters of thatch and iron roofs along canoe-lined beachfronts. And when one gets out of the plane and walks into Wintua village in Southwest Bay, no one would guess that the village is made up of people from several different language areas in the region, some of whom were strongly antagonistic in the past.¹

Today, there are no longer all those contrasts of dress that used to mark social identity, or one’s ‘place’: in daily life all the men usually wear shorts and shirts, while women dress in the Mother Hubbard style introduced by missions throughout the Pacific. People live in houses of roughly equal shape and size, with a few larger, and in local terms more ostentatious, corrugated iron houses. Yet this appearance of homogeneity is quite misleading, as an exceptional diversity of language, religious denomination, belief, and kastom (or ‘tradition’ although that translation is inadequate) is evident throughout the island of Malakula. With an estimated population of (18000) people, and at least 34 identified distinct languages (Tryon 1996: 171), Malakula presents a mosaic of both linguistic and cultural variation. Jean Michel Charpentier, a French linguist, identified 24 distinct languages in the southern region alone (Charpentier 1982b, 1982a). None of these

¹ The main groups in Wintua are the Ninde speakers of Mewun and their ‘traditional foes’, the Nahava speakers of Sinesip/Seniang. The village is also home to some families from the Na’ati speakers of Wiemp and the Mbatgat speakers from the inland of Malakula.
languages can be seen, of course, from a plane.

Map 1.1: Language areas of southern Malakula at the beginning of the twentieth century. Diagram taken from Charpentier (1982). Na’hai is language number 8.

By the end of the twentieth century, the interior of south Malakula had become virtually uninhabited: the previous one hundred years having seen a continued migration from the mountains to the coast, due to the combined attractions and pressures of Christianity, cash and the colonial and post-colonial state. In the 1990s, roads built into the interior of the northern part of Malakula have made it easier for people to remain on their ancestral land and some who had previously moved to the coast, returned to the interior when these roads opened.

The sea offers yet other perspectives to those arriving on Malakula, the kind that most Malakulans experience in their travels to and from their homes. The first time I arrived by the sea, on a trading vessel en route from Port Vila to Luganville on Santo, the island of Malakula appeared much larger
than it had done so previously, when I had arrived by air. The mountains appeared far taller and more rugged than the flatter ‘hill like’ aspect they took from the air. The boat stopped at many villages on the way, provoking all the human commotion that trade ships do in island communities. But I also noticed on that journey how much more skilled and comfortable my companions were at seeing the sea. They could see things in and on the sea that would take endless embarrassing minutes of my squinting and their pointing before I could catch on to what was out there: fish, dolphins, canoes, currents and so on.

Plate 1.2: Approaching South Malakula from the sea. This ship was transporting copra.

Moreover, as we approached Malakula from the southeast, at the Maskeylene islands, Sungrang Apu, an elder from Tomman with whom I was travelling, started telling me the history of the places in the sea that we were traversing. As on land, these places had their stories, their spirits, with certain rules as to who could or could not be there, and if so, how they should behave: the usual panoply of kastom ‘taboos’ and stories which accompany sacred sites on land.
And so on our way westwards along the south coast of Malakula we passed an underwater island, which had been submerged into the sea after its sorcerers had became embroiled in a battle with those of Tomman. Then we passed by Atmapreo, a reef near Akamb island, which is a hybrid spirit-being in the form of a giant eel with pigs’ tusks. When we finally arrived at Tomman, Sungrang pointed out namal nantili, the reef where Ambat, a central ‘culture hero’ in the region and the creator of the small island (Ur), was killed. Rather than representing a rupture with the land, the sea could be seen as a fluid extension of the ground that people and spirits inhabit.

Plate 1.3: Drawing a connection between land and sea: A man drawing natamana’ai on the ground. This figure represents the large ‘base’ slit-drum in the nasara (dancing ground). When played at the Dineir nasara on Ur, the natamana’ai slit-drum is said to cause the fish in the nearby reef to flip around in the water, to dance to its beat.

This continuation between land and sea continues to be expressed in new forms of burials, which began when people in the region converted to

---

1 A fuller version of the story, given to me a year later by Maasing Limbus of Vanhah ameli, tells how the Tomman islanders sent a powerful narombaremp (an effigy of a dead person, complete with modelled over skull of the person) to ‘surf’ a giant wave that then sank the island.

2 Throughout the thesis I alternate between using Ur, the Na’hai word, and Tomman as it is called in other languages. I do this as local people also alternate, using Tomman when speaking Bislama and Ur when speaking Na’hai.
Christianity. Whereas previously the skulls of important men were modelled over and placed on the effigies called *narambaramp*, which were then kept in the *amel*, or men's house, today the dead, both male and female, are placed in their canoes and then buried in the ground. The canoe not only serves practically as a ready-made coffin, but is also a kind of intimate and personal symbol of the voyage of life, a daily means of getting to and from the gardens that lie across the sea.

Finally there is another crucial difference I noticed when travelling with my friends from Tomman. This is a difference you would probably not be aware upon arriving in the area, but could well notice when leaving, if you had stayed a while. People's behaviour changed subtly as we travelled north along the coast from Tomman island to Wintua village in South West Bay, where the planes land. The mood of my companions changed as they went from village to village, travelling from one language area to another. In the villages of Sinesip, from Caroline Bay to Lembinwin, they could communicate and often exchanged food and objects with affinal kin who lived there. But by the time we arrived in Wintua, Mewun land, my companions changed their behaviour. A totally incomprehensible language, Ninde, is spoken there, and in the past Mewun was often a dangerous enemy territory for the people of the south coast. What to me was a relatively short distance, for them spanned different places and unfamiliar peoples. A journey to the other side of Malakula, with its thirty-four languages, was like the linguistic and cultural equivalent of crossing contemporary Europe.

**Houses and gardens and places**

It is often said that village life is quite a repetitive affair, and for myself Tomman presented no great exception to this urbanite *cliché*. After the initial excitement of arriving in a new and different place, routine does soon loom large as the core of village life. The flow of days into weeks seemed
to unfold as a series of comings and goings from village to bush to garden, each day punctuated by the meals that motivated this movement and the conversations that embellished the meals.

A typical day on Tomman starts just before sunrise, somewhere between four and five o’clock, as people are keen to go to the gardens and do the hard work before the midday heat makes such physical labour a much more demanding enterprise. The morning meal is usually a question of drinking a glass of heavily sweetened tea and eating the reheated dinner of the night before. Then it’s off to the gardens, or else to go fishing or to go and work for money, usually by making copra or cacao. Some people might stay at home to work on making things: houses, mats, fences, baskets, masks… Small children, almost as soon as they can walk, follow their parents in their daily work, learning and helping as best they can. The old continue to work productively in their gardens until they are no longer physically able to do so, often until they actually die. Although women do a larger proportion of the physical labour, a man who relies too heavily on his wife’s toil without contributing himself soon develops a bad reputation. At least these are some of the ideals of ‘everyday life’ in Malakula, although reality, of course, demands that no two days be the same.

The villages that exist on Ur today are not the same villages that people lived in roughly half a century ago. Before the inhabitants of Tomman converted to Christianity in the late 1940s and early 1950s, people lived in villages located inland instead of along the beachfronts. These villages were at, or near, the ancestral ‘ples’,¹ the places where the stories locate the beginning of each ‘clan’² or kin group. The Na’hai word for their ‘kin

¹ Ples is the Bislama word for ‘place’ although it carries connotations not associated with its English language counterpart. In Na’hai the word for ples, is nu’ut. Throughout the thesis I maintain the Bislama ples, for its proximity to English, whilst emphasising a difference to ‘place’.

² ‘Clan’, though a translation which dates back to Layard and Deacon is only partially apt as a term for amel, since it means a men’s house in Na’hai, as well as a set of kin linked to a common ancestor and place.
groups’ which correspond somewhat to the anthropological notion of a ‘clan’, is *amel*. *Amel* is also the word for the men’s house which was a pivotal structure for all pre-Christian villages. In chapter three I show that this is no coincidence. When you ask someone from Ur who they are, the most likely response you will get is the word for one of these name-places. The name-place designates many things: their land and their house, their mythology and their ancestry, their history and their kin. In these ways origin-place, or *ples*, can be a more important aspect and idiom of an individual’s identity than the actual village the person lives in. And yet, when people left the old villages at the ancestral *ples* to go and live in the new Christian villages on the coast, the move was not only a shift of locale, but represented a new way, and a novel vision, of life.

Today, the people of Ur live in four ‘sub-villages’, called Worles, Lembinmalan, Vunai’amp and Vatbuang.¹ Each sub-village is situated next to another in a line along the shore facing east, towards the mainland of Malakula. There is however only one single ‘meeting house’ in the small island, where decisions are made for all the inhabitants, as for a single ‘village’ on the mainland. In that respect, with a population of 236 in 1996 when I did a census,² Ur has the demographic and political status of an average mainland village. Within each ‘sub-village’ are several family hamlets consisting of at least one house for cooking and one for sleeping, although usually there are two or more of these pairs. Each pair of houses is built when a son gets married.

The island is about 2.5 km long and 1.5 km wide, with a hill in the middle that rises sharply and then slopes gradually to the south. The villages occupy a small strip of land along the coast and the rest of the island consists of gardens, small coconut plantations, and some secondary bush.

¹ Sub-village is an admittedly inelegant term, however I use it as they are larger than hamlets.
² The census was carried out from 13–16 April 1996.
Plate 1.4: View of Ur (Tomman), the perspective from the beachfront of Milip village, on the mainland of Malakula.

Map 1. 2: Topographic map of Ur (Tomman). The village of Lembinmalan is missing from this map. It lies between Worles and Vatbuang (spelt Vatmbüang here). Courtesy of Cartography Unit, RSPAS, ANU.
The common arrangement for a family on Ur, is to cultivate their primary gardens on the mainland opposite, as well as a couple on the small island itself. The gardens on the small island serve as ‘emergency’ sources of food when the weather is too bad to make the journey across to the mainland. As Malakula is primarily volcanic soil, the land is highly fertile, and productive for the slash-and-burn horticulture that people have traditionally practised there. Except when cyclones devastate the gardens, people in southern Malakula rarely lack food.

Plate 1.5: A small garden on Ur that has just been cleared by burning. Slash and burn horticulture is the main source of subsistence in Malakula

The most important food symbolically, and one of the main staples nutritionally, are yams. Yams played a central symbolic role in much pre-Christian ritual. Years were counted in terms of yam-harvests, and the rituals of the yam harvest were the most important ceremonial events of the year.¹ The yam harvest rituals linked villages in exchange relations throughout the many languages of the south coast through to Lamap and the Maskelynes at the south east of Malakula (Huffman 1996). The other

¹ See also Bonnemaison (1987), Jolly (1994).
staples are taro, plantain banana, and manioc. Whilst all these are produced by people in their gardens, yet another staple is becoming prominent, and a sign of greater immersion in the cash economy: rice, which comes in plastic bags from Australia and costs money. Today one would have to consider rice as a staple throughout Vanuatu, despite the assertion by locals that it is 'kakai blo waet man', ‘white man’s food’.1

People of ples

Tomman Islanders marry, trade, work and communicate (and argue) with people of other language groups on a regular basis. In many respects they have stronger links with some of the nearby Nahava-speaking villages than with the more distant Na’hai ones. Moreover virtually everyone is at least bilingual (with Bislama) and many are multilingual. Women, more and more of whom have married into the Na’hai area from other language groups, are seen to lead the way in language proficiency. I was often told, by both men and women, that ‘women are better at learning languages’.

Today, the population of Malakula is almost entirely Christian, although the experiences of conversion and denominational affiliation vary greatly both between and within linguistic groups and villages. On Tomman island the three denominations present are the Presbyterian Church, the Seventh Day Adventists (S.D.A), and a Charismatic Pentecostal church called The Holiness Fellowship. Each denomination has its own church house on Tomman, usually made with plaited bamboo walls on a concrete floor. There were also a few members of another denomination which had its church in another Na’hai speaking village.2

The London Missionary Society established the first mission in southwest Malakula in 1895 at Wintua village, South West Bay. This Presbyterian

1 The irony being that this quintessentially Asian food is seen as ‘white man’s’ or European food.
2 Neil Thomas Ministries.
mission was set up on a kind of no-man's land between the Nahava speaking area of Sinesip and the Ninde speaking region of Mewun. The area was uninhabited, and was sold to the Reverend Boyd in 1885, since it was considered 'a place of mud and mosquitoes'. It also served as a buffer zone between the Ninde speakers of Mewun, and the Nahava speakers of Sinesip (Deacon 1934). Up until the mid-1990s there were still several scattered interior communities who had resisted converting to Christianity and were living according to what people label ‘ful kastom’ (full custom). Today only a few individuals have managed to avoid baptism. Evangelisation has been a protracted and negotiated process, revolving as much around intra- and inter-community politics and the appeals and pressures of a monetary economy, as spiritual convictions (although spiritual motivations must not be discounted).

As is often true in the archipelago, those who have been Christian the longest have become the most politically and economically affluent. Today the village of Wintua has become a regional centre with an airstrip, telephone and ‘hospital’ (with nurses but no doctor). In fact, people of the Na'hai area often speak of Wintua as 'like town', saying that when one goes there one ‘only eats good mornings’. This alludes to how people of Wintua generally do not offer food to those passing through the village as is customarily expected, but only a verbal greeting. Because of the services there, many more people converge on Wintua than any of the other villages in the area, and the demands of giving food to all passers by are disproportionately high. Although to my eyes, Wintua was definitely not 'like town', this locally perceived disparity in political and economic status between the Na'hai speakers and the Ninde speakers of Mewun, and particularly Wintua was repeatedly mentioned to me during my time there. Thus it was often expressed as a differential in generosity and customary practice, a different understanding of the obligations of ples.

Recent research in urban and peri-urban settlements show that affiliation to
pies, and 'island identity' are prominent notions for the organization of social life in town as well (Rawlings 1999; Ward 2000). Squatter settlements in Port Vila and Luganville are identified in terms of the islands from which the majority of inhabitants originate. The Port Vila peri-urban villages of Pango, Erakor, Mele, and particularly Ifira all claim privileged rights over certain urban zones, based on their status as manples (Rawlings 1999). At the same time their proximity to the urban environment means that their rights as manples are compromised in ways that do not apply to those of other islands (ibid.).

Just like anywhere else in the world, in Malakula peoples' identities, affiliations and loyalties are contextual, fluid and negotiable. What is characteristic of this region, however, is the way people use the concept of pies (place) as a key metaphor through which their identities and associations are expressed and negotiated. If shared language does not necessarily create political and economic solidarity, pies is not just a locale or a physical situation, but a powerful idiom and a moral value that validates group affiliation, with all the corresponding duties and rights, including those of land, that ensue (Rodman 1992). People in Malakula are always of a pies, although it is not necessarily where they reside. Through this pies, certain norms of social interaction, centring on respect, status, exchange, and rights of land usage, are enacted and upheld. The notion of pies permeates everyday life in ways that are not necessarily consciously apparent to those who live there. On Ur, where a person spends their spare time chatting, where he or she comes ashore on the beach, or where the chickens are fed, are all linked to that person’s pies. Moreover, who that person talks to, and how they talk are also inflected by relations of pies.
I am a coconut  I am man-place  My mother is Dineiir
I am a stone  She is man-place  My house is Vanhah
I am man-Woron  I am man-saltwater  My dancing-ground is here
We are man-island  I am man-Vanuatu  I am man-Na’hai
He is a stranger-man  I am a white-hair  She is woman Malakula
He is a kastom-man  He is a poison-man  I am man-skul (school)
I worship on Saturday  He is a high-man  I am a prophet

Figure 1.1: Statements of ‘self’; statements that I have heard used in Malakula. What they share in common is that they are all about ‘self’. These identities are all relative to other people, through places, practices, and physical aspects of the human body. Any individual could validly identify with several of these at the same time, without causing any kind of confusion in social identification.

Choosing the field

I made the decision to do my research on Ur following a three-week trip I made to Vanuatu in March 1995. After consulting texts and people with research experience in Vanuatu I made a preliminary visit to choose between central Maewo, and the Na’hai area of Southern Malakula. Both were unstudied in the ethnography of the archipelago. For reasons having as much to do with the ‘fortuity’ of initial interpersonal encounters, as with lacunae in the ethnographic literature, I ultimately chose Tomman.

In any event, the choice of a field-site was not one that I could make alone, as once I had chosen the Na’hai speakers as the focus of my research, I then had to convince them to accept me. I was facilitated in this task by my affiliation with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and in particular with the Cultural Centre’s fieldworker, or filwoka1 the word used in Bislama, for the Na’hai speaking area, a man called Longdal Nobel Masingyao.

I first met Longdal in July 1995, after having been back in south Malakula for roughly two weeks. When he introduced himself to me as a ‘local

---

1 For more on the uses of the term filwoka in Vanuatu see also Bolton (1999).
anthropologist' he also seemed to pick up on my slight smile. Yet it was Longdal who ultimately taught me about many of the practicalities of fieldwork: how knowledge has to be ‘extracted’ from people, as Malakulans rarely offer it ‘freely’ of their own accord; how important it is to recognize when people are telling something important, as it is to realize when they are withholding knowledge. Through his life-long involvement in the community, he could alert me to meaningful silences when we interviewed groups of elder men. He became an intellectual companion with whom I could exchange ideas about ‘society’, ‘language’ ‘kastom’ and modernity. He was also interested in other places, and our conversations often led to my answering questions about other parts of the world and the people who lived there. I now see Longdal as a fellow anthropologist, and an excellent field anthropologist. In any event, this thesis also draws significantly on the work that Longdal has done in the area, for much longer than myself, and which he was enthusiastic to share and discuss with me.

Plate 1.6: Longdal Nobel Masingyao, Malakulan anthropologist and Vanuatu Cultural Centre filwoka for the Na’hai speakers.
Longdal was very keen for ethnography of the Na’hai speakers to be written. He was not happy at the fact that his neighbours to the north had been the focus of much ethnographic research,\(^1\) whilst the Na’hai speakers had been ignored, so to speak. He had sent a request to the capital Port Vila in 1988 for the Cultural Centre to find an anthropologist to work there, and when I first turned up he described my arrival as both a dream come true and an act of God. Needless to say I was both embarrassed by what I considered an extravagant hope, as well as intimidated by the expectations it seemed to imply. On the other hand, others in the community did not necessarily share his enthusiasm and several were initially suspicious of my intentions.

Longdal’s interest in *kastom* and subsequently in anthropology, linguistics, and archaeology, developed in the mid-1980s after he returned from two years in the Tolai area of PNG where he went to train as a Presbyterian pastor. Upon his return to Malakula he went to Unua on the east coast of Malakula, doing his work for the Presbytery. At the end of this period he decided that he did not want to be a pastor, and wanted instead to go back to his own place and tend to his gardens. In 1985 he was spotted at the Malakula Arts Festival by the then Curator of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, Kirk Huffman, and offered a position as a fieldworker for his language area. A man with experience of the outside world (in Papua New Guinea, and Australia), he has since then devoted much of his time to the cause of local practice and knowledge, or *kastom*. But Longdal’s enthusiasm for *kastom* has not always been met with approval by all the people living in this region. The doctrines of certain Christian denominations consider traditional local practice to be ‘heathen’ or even Satanic, and in his struggle to promote *kastom*, he has often had to defend himself against such accusations. Despite his position on these issues, Longdal was baptised at birth, and is still a committed and practising Presbyterian.

---

\(^1\) For example: Deacon (1934a), Funabiki (1976), Larcom (1980), Layard (1928).
It was in July 1995 that I returned to stay for my main fieldwork, and it soon became clear the brief visit I had made in March had not adequately set out the groundwork for my longer-term stay. I had not equipped them with the information they needed to decide whether I should stay and do the research on Tomman or not. After a few weeks, Willy, the ‘high chief’, came to ask me exactly how long I intended to stay and what was I doing? After that Longdal and I decided that it would be best to hold meetings in each of the Na’hai villages to explain what I was doing, and to ask whether they agreed. After a tour of relatively poorly attended meetings in all the

---

1 ‘High chief’ is much more of an administrative role than a traditionally recognized title of authority. After Independence in 1980, the old colonial ‘assessors’ were replaced with new forms of ‘chiefs’. Theoretically each Na’hai speaking village has three of these ‘chiefs’, the ‘kastom chief’, the ‘nasara chief’ and the ‘high chief’. Younger men like Willy, who generally speak on behalf of the influential older men, often fill these roles.

2 I later learnt that there had also been disputes about which family I was to stay with, and that this was an important part of the negotiations they held about my presence. Later, Willy and I developed a good friendship over many dinners together.
Na’hai-speaking villages, we decided it might be best if the people of Ur held a meeting without us present. They agreed to this and I went and spent some days with Longdal at Leuravuh Bay. When I returned they told me that it was all right, I would live with the Ranmap family, and do my work. Many months later, I learnt that there had been considerable debate, and that several elder women had successfully argued that my research could help to resolve some of the land-related tensions that had emerged during the last couple of decades.

A question emerged during one of these meetings that only really made sense to me at a later stage. A man asked me if I was writing a book about kastom so that Man Ostrelia (Man Australia) could come back and steal their land again (an idiom I often heard used to refer to the colonial era: taem ol i stilim graon ‘when they stole the land’). The connection he made, which was still less clear to me, was not just between knowledge of origin stories and land tenure, but the effects and implications of ‘writing them down’. The question was in fact quite valid on two levels. It had validity both in local conceptualisations of land tenure and in relation to potential external colonial, or rather neo-colonial projects, such as the codification of kastom/law. On a local level, detailed knowledge of particular myths can be a proof of being mamples and hence of rights to land. In terms of foreign interests, documenting local people and practices was a prime concern of colonial governments, and it continues to be an issue of interest to various multi-national enterprises such as mining or logging companies. He had posed an important question that reverberated far beyond the intentions or understandings I held about my work at that stage.
Plate 1.8: Myself with my adopted sister, Lucy.

Plate 1.9: My adopted family on our way back from gardens on the mainland. My sisters Mapera, Marseline and Reitaki, my mother Suitlé sitting on the canoe, and my father Longlel at the front. In the background are my paternal uncle or ‘small father’ To’leo (with cap), and younger ‘siblings’ Jenery, Lucy and Jostona.
At a later stage my research was affected by health problems. My original plan of eighteen months fieldwork was interrupted by both the plasmodium falciparum and vivax forms of malaria. After 11 months in Vanuatu, (July 1995 - May 1996) I returned to Australia in fairly bad shape. I took six months ‘recovery’ and 9 months after that I returned to Vanuatu for three months (October-December 1997). During the period in between I also consulted the Residence de France archives in the Archives-d’Outre-Mer in Aix-en Provence (July-August 1997). In October 1998 I returned to Malakula for four weeks for the opening of the Na’hai Cultural Centre. Since then I have maintained contact through letters and the occasional telephone call when Longdal has been in Port Vila. In October 2000, I had the luck to meet my adoptive family in Noumea, where they were part of the Vanuatu delegation for the Eighth Festival of Pacific Arts. On that occasion, I was finally able to play the role of ‘cultural host’, guiding them around an urban environment with which they were totally unfamiliar.

With hindsight, I sense that my illness and temporary withdrawal from Malakula had some positive consequences for my research. Although it broke momentum, it allowed for a reflective distance from the immediacy of the ‘field’, and made for a more productive period in 1997. More importantly, on this return trip, people were pleased that I had come back, and several came of their own accord to speak to me during my second fieldwork. The three months in 1997 were by far the most productive for my research. Of course, this would not have happened had I not developed ongoing personal relationships with people by then. The usual frustrations of early months of fieldwork, the months spent feeling that no ‘work’ is getting done, paid off in the end.

When I proposed Tomman island as my field-site to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre it was inferred in my research agreement that this included the whole Na’hai speaking community of south Malakula: the villages of Milip, Bwad Bangk, Malfakhal, and Mbonvor on the mainland. As time went by it
became more and more evident to me that such a neat linguistic delineation was misleading in terms of human relations. In certain contexts, particularly church, school, and national politics, people on Tomman seemed to have forged stronger links with the people of Caroline Bay (Nahava speakers) than with those of Malfakhal (Na’hai speakers). A significant segment of the Tomman population actually originated from the Wilemp area, they are the descendants of the Nahati speakers who used to live on the mainland.¹ At the same time there were a number of Tomman islanders residing in Milip and Malfakhal, having moved for reasons beyond the most obvious one of marriage (land disputes, political affiliation, and adultery were often cited). Furthermore, on Tomman alone, there are three Christian denominations. One of the first questions I was asked was what church I belonged to, and which one would I attend. Perhaps even more confusing in terms of the usual binaries that have been drawn in Vanuatu ethnography and history, is that they were Francophone Protestants (although the other Na’hai villages are Anglophone-educated).²

Although I had been warned by pre-fieldwork readings about the dangers of reifying social groups into homogenous and bounded entities, or communities (Merlan & Rumsey 1991; Wagner 1974), I was still not really prepared for these intricate processes of differentiation I found on Tomman. Probably a residual functionalist or organic image of ‘community’ had shaped my choice of a small island in the Pacific: classically the exemplary anthropological ‘laboratory’. What I found quickly negated any covert expectations of a harmonic or even ‘complete’ social entity. Rather, in the early stages of fieldwork I felt confronted by what I perceived as fractures and contradictions.

¹ I have spelled Nahati here, but there are two groups Nahati and Na’ati. For Na’ati (spelt Nāti) see Crowley (1998).
Shores of the mind: making the Na’hai community

In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.

Benedict Anderson (Anderson 1991: 6)

On the 16th January 1996, I left Tomman to go and attend a meeting in Milip, directly across the water on the mainland. It was the annual meeting for the ‘Na’hai Council’, a body which had been formed in 1991 with the express interest of promoting a sense of Na’hai community, based on shared language, and partly in response to a sensed politico-economic subjugation to the Mewun and Seniang areas of South-West Bay. Londgal Nobel had been instrumental in establishing the council and was president of the council at the time of the meeting.

The meeting started with a kind of collective identity crisis. The people of Malfakhal and the Na’hai speakers of Mbonvor did not turn up for the meeting. The absence of nearly half of the ‘Na’hai community’ precipitated a vote as to whether this body should continue to exist. After an overwhelming vote in favour of continuation (obviously by the half that was present), the meeting then went on to other issues. The absence of an entire village bespoke the fragility of formalising what was quite clearly a historically created, or ‘imagined’, community. It was not concluded that Malfakhal no longer belonged to the Na’hai community, but their commitment and interest was questioned, alongside the value of the council itself.

Language was being used as a basis of social and political cohesion for an area that used to be beset with warfare between amel. The Na’hai speakers are often still divided by kin-based factionalism today, and kastom remains both a solution to, as well as a source of, many disputes about land. Land disputes occur both between and within the different amel.
Throughout Malakula, and most of the archipelago, the Bislama terms *nakamal* (men’s house) or *nasara* (dancing ground), are used as idioms of kinship and identity. An *amel*, the Na’hai word for *nakamal*, is both a physical structure, a house, as well as a term used to refer to a person’s lineage and/or ‘clan’.\(^1\) Everybody belongs to an *amel*, even if a person and their family have no longer lived in, or near, their specific men’s house, for several generations. An *amel* is somewhat like the classic anthropological notion of a ‘clan’, in that it is an exogamous social unit (or kin group) claiming a common ancestral founder. But it is perhaps more important to stress the spatial dimension of the term. Each *amel* is linked to a *ples*, where the founding ancestral spirit resides.

The different *amel* did not always align their social and political relations along the lines of common language. In terms of lived experience and human entanglements, it seemed to me that the fellow Na’hai speakers of Malfakhal were more distant, from a Tomman perspective, than the nearby Nahava speakers of Caroline Bay. This may or may not have always been the case. On the one hand, Caroline Bay, and White Sands, are relatively new villages, made up mainly of people from Beneaur, further up the coast, who moved there in the early 1970s. These people were members of the pro- and then anti-independence movement, Nagriamel. The French Administration in Vila, concerned by the move to independence, subsequently established a Francophone school on the same location as the South West Malakula Nagriamel headquarters in 1975. While Nagriamel no longer exists as such in the area, the links forged in that era remain strong,\(^2\) and the children of Tomman continue to be educated in French, in contrast to those of Milip, Bwad Bang and Malfakhal (Anglophone, Vanuaaku Pati

---

\(^1\) In that a clan is larger than a lineage, since members of a clan might not be able to trace their common ancestor, this is a defining element in the conventional anthropological distinction of clan and ‘lineage’ Keesing (1975). In any event both are somewhat awkward when translating *amel*, as they miss the spatial dimension.

\(^2\) It seems that these links were in fact founded earlier in plantation work. A large number of the Nagriamel supporters of the region had previously worked for a French *colon* on Santo called Gabbay.
supporters at independence).

But this may not be the only basis for the strong links between the Na’hai speakers of Ur, and some of the Nahava speakers of Sinesip. The canoe trip to Malfakhal involves an often dangerous sea passage at the very south west tip of Malakula. Considering that it seems that coastal peoples preferred travelling by sea than by land (for security), the preferential link between southern Nahava speakers and Tomman islanders (rather than distant Na’hai groups) might have been going on for centuries. Certainly there are ritual connections between the areas and many cultural and linguistic affinities. In general, Nahava and Na’hai speakers can understand each other’s language, if not speak it as well.

Other factors have also promoted new forms of grouping since the colonial era. Divisions based on Independence politics in the 1970s had drawn certain prominent men of Ur to move to the adjoining mainland village of Milip. Furthermore after independence in 1980, land disputes ‘mushroomed’ throughout the islands of the archipelago, especially around land that had been alienated during the colonial era and which was returned to traditional owners according to the new constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu (Larcom 1982; Lini 1980; MacClancy 1983; Vanuatu 1980). Since long-term land alienation also entailed a loss of knowledge about *ples*, I was often told that this was the source of many current land disputes. Since independence, church membership has flourished in the region as a basis for alliances and factions. Modern education and the cash economy supply alternate, and sometimes conflicting, avenues to social prestige and political influence.

Church membership is perhaps one of the most important contemporary bases of ‘group’ or ‘community’ formation in Vanuatu. Vanuatu is undeniably a fervently Christian country (98%), and yet in becoming ‘fervently Christian’, the people of Vanuatu seem to have reproduced much
of the vast cultural diversity and fluidity of their ancestral heritage. Everywhere there are different churches and denominations. One of the first questions ni-Vanuatu ask of strangers, after their place (yu blo we? or yu man we? or wem ples blo yu?), is which church they belong to (for both foreign or ni-Vanuatu strangers).

In villages across the archipelago the difference between denominations is enacted and discussed in many different contexts, and the stress is on difference despite the often heard reconciliatory expression ‘plante skul, be wan god nomo’ (lots of churches, but only one god). On Ur, the Seventh Day Adventists distinguish themselves by observing the old testament Hebraic Sabbath (Saturday), not eating pigs and crustaceans and so on. The Pentecostals emphasise the tambu speret (holy spirit), and often pray publicly (and loudly) in church for healing or other interventions on behalf of that holy spirit. Presbyterians often talked of themselves as sticking to the stamba jioj (root/original church) claiming authenticity through heredity (or ancestry). As I suggest later, some people attempt to create new churches.¹ Still, kinship and place endure as key ingredients of individual and group identity.²

¹ See chapter four.
² See chapter three.
Figure 1.2: Worles village, where I lived. Each coloured block represents a house used for sleeping, and the colours indicate which amel the residents belong to. Grey blocks represent cooking houses, and some storing houses. The small blocks in black are washing huts or toilets. The map is roughly to scale (based on my footsteps).
Figure 1.3: This diagram is the same village as figure 3 (Worles), however here the colours indicate which church denomination the residents belong to.
Figures 1.2 and 1.3 compare the amel and church affiliations for the residents of the ‘sub village’ I lived in called Worles. Worles is the largest of the villages on Ur, with a population of 89 people when I counted them in April 1996. The coloured shapes represent houses that were used for sleeping, and the grey squares represent other houses that were used for daily living: the houses for cooking, for washing, for storing.

The diagrams show that to a large degree, denominational affiliations roughly correspond to amel groups on the village. In comparing the colours one can see that there is a general convergence despite some small dissonance. Worles is a largely Presbyterian (yellow) village with a few Seventh Day Adventists and one household of Pentecostal Christians. The Vanhah amel (in red) is split between Presbyterians and Seventh Day Adventists. Later in this thesis I show how other disputes over who are the real man-Vanhah, the true people of Vanhah, also play into such alliances. The split in Vanhah also mirrors an ongoing land dispute in this amel.¹

Throughout Vanuatu, knowledge and rights over origin stories play a pivotal role in determining the status of customary land tenure and as such are highly politicised. My genealogical investigations inevitably ended up with the collection of origin myths, and variations of these myths were found within rival factions, even of the same amel. People were aware of my ‘writing down’ kastom, and saw the work as a potential way of straightening out tensions about origins and land tenure.

Some people on Ur were considered to be ‘migrants’ by others. This could refer to a remembered human migration from another village in the region, but it could also be based on an understanding, or a dispute, about a person’s ancestral relation to ples, to the place where their founding ancestor spirit created their amel. In those cases the argument went that their amel was somewhere else, usually on the mainland of Malakula.

¹ See chapter six.
Island illusions: languages, cultures, communities.

Linguistic and cultural diversity is one of the defining aspects of Melanesia as a 'culture area', and Malakula is perhaps, along with the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea, one of its most extreme examples of linguistic and cultural diversity. The theories that have sought to explain this cultural complexity have, of course, followed the politics and idioms of their times. One supposed self-evident reality used to explain this remarkable diversity was harsh terrain separating 'technologically primitive' peoples. Hogbin and Wedgwood’s 1953 cornerstone article on local grouping in Melanesia (Hogbin & Wedgewood 1953), begins: ‘[t]he terrain throughout Melanesia is such that communication is always difficult and large concentrations of populations impracticable...' (ibid. p.241). The self-evident consequence of this is expressed in the beginning of the next paragraph which continues: ‘[i]t follows that Melanesian societies are minute in scale...”(ibid. p.242).

Indeed, the most important debates in the 1950s and 1960s highlighted the complexity of the area and the inadequacy of using anthropological models borrowed from the ethnography of African societies to explain Melanesian sociality, and particularly kinship (Barnes 1962). Hogbin and Wedgwood had already claimed kinship models as a more coherent tool of group delineation in Melanesia than common language. These concerns continue today outside of academic inquiries, as the importance of defining groups is at its most critical in the context of compensation payments for mineral exploration or deforestation. And in all of these contemporary entanglements, place and belonging are not something that all actors see in the same way (Rumsey & Weiner 2001; Rumsey & Weiner 2002).

However few, if any, anthropologists would continue to argue that the

---

1 See Lutkehaus, Kaufmann, et al. (1990).
2 They state “the same culture and language are often shared by thousands, but the widest social unit possessing a coherent system for the maintenance of internal order consists of the seventy to three hundred persons resident within the boundaries of a clearly defined area seldom more than a few square miles in extent” (1953: 242).
extreme diversity of Melanesia could be explained as due to isolation and lack of communication. It might work in explaining the linguistic differences between the Papuan speakers of the Papua New Guinea Highlands as opposed to the ‘Austronesian seaboard’, but ignores the important interpenetrations of Austronesian and Papuan languages, and it cannot explain why, for example, nearly forty languages were spoken on the island of Malakula alone.

Roy Wagner pushed the debate a step further and questioned the whole notion of ‘groups’ in Melanesia (Wagner 1974). Wagner made the important point that ‘(s)ociality is a ‘becoming’, not a ‘become’, thing ‘...’ (Wagner 1974: 112). Wagner questioned the utility of ‘group based’ analysis of Melanesian sociality. Whereas previous anthropologists had highlighted the complexities of Melanesian sociality and the problematics of the group models that had been used (Barnes 1962; Hogbin & Wedgewood 1953), Wagner saw the issue in terms of a reified notion of group itself. Although, as Wagner (Wagner 1974) points out, ‘groupiness’ has been reified through the abstractions (and simultaneously the creations) of anthropological/sociological representation, it is also crucial to stress that it is not only sociological observers who see groups. Malakulans are engaged in an ongoing project of imagining ‘groups’, and seem to have been doing so long before notions of ‘community’ or of ‘the state’ entered local discourse. These imaginings, which often follow a logic that I call ‘deliberate differentiation’, can help us to comprehend the complexity of the area. In this light, the rather extreme cultural and linguistic diversity of Vanuatu has much more to do with local politics and entangled histories than with any kind of geographic isolation.

Hence it is in fact more fruitful, if more complex, to use Anderson’s concept of an ‘imagined community’ which sets the borders of a community in the ideals and practices of human agents, rather than along the borders of an island (Anderson 1991). This perspective also helps to
recognize the historical processes which have shaped the kinds of human relations that are currently enacted on Malakula. These are contextual, and although indigenous categories (like those describing attachment to an origin place) persist, the complexity of economic, political and church affiliations are also important in shaping alliances in peoples' daily lives and interactions. This applies as much to local groups, or ‘kin-groups’, such as *amel/*as to larger groups based on territory or citizenship.

But Wagner was primarily concerned with the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, a part of Melanesia that has mountains, rather than coastal shorelines. Although both can serve as a geographical contour, mountains do not reflect the same kinds of spaces as island shores and surrounding ocean. Wagner’s paper underplays the geography of the region, and thus he does not situate his argument in terms of a specific sense of spatiality. In contrast to mountain valleys, islands are often seen as inherently insular and the sea as an obstacle to human entanglements: a ‘natural’ border for that ‘non-natural’ phenomenon we call ‘culture’.

The view of the Pacific as a region of scattered islands, of social isolates, has been strongly criticised by Epeli Hau’ofa (Hau'ofa 1993). Hau’ofa suggests that rather than seeing the region as a collection of separated islands, the Pacific should be understood as an ‘ocean of connectedness’. Thus he prefers the name ‘Oceania’ to the ‘Pacific islands’. His argument opposes the dominant perspective of insularity and remoteness, arguing that:

> There is a gulf of difference between viewing the Pacific as ‘islands in a far sea’ and as ‘a sea of islands’. The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power. When you focus this way you stress the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships (Hau'ofa 1993: 7).

Hau’ofa’s argument for a ‘sea of islands’ invokes the legendary, and real,
navigational exploits of the early settlers of Oceania, as well as the contemporary Polynesian diasporas in the cities of the region (Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland, Honolulu). Whilst his argument centres mostly around Polynesian and Micronesian voyagers, he also refers to Melanesia, stating: 'Melanesia is supposedly the most fragmented world of all: tiny communities isolated by terrain and at least one thousand languages' (ibid: 9). He sees this perspective as serving colonial and neo-colonial interests. He points to the pre-contact integration of Melanesia through complex trading and cultural exchange, as well as to the prevalence of multilingualism amongst Melanesians to argue against this view of 'primitive isolates'.

Yet Hau'ofa's statement can be taken one step further. Pointing to 'complex trading and cultural exchange' does not in itself explain the linguistic and cultural diversity of Melanesia, but merely indicates an aspect of this cultural matrix. There is no doubt that Melanesian, like any other, societies were never 'social-isolates'. The vast complexity of ritual copyrights, artefacts, and exchanges, as well as contemporary Christian denominations and political parties in South Malakula, reflects the intensity of communication between people who expend much energy in codifying an elaborate mosaic of networks, in weaving threads through a multitude of fragmented human relations. This is at the heart of the processes I call 'deliberate differentiation'.

A typical example of this complexity is my 'father', Longlel Aileh Ranmap. He would identify as being simultaneously, Presbyterian, kastom, a U.M.P supporter (Union des Partis Modérés – the French speaking political party, and the main opposition to the Anglaphone Vanuaaku Pati which took power in 1980 at Independence). He sends his children to a French primary

---

1 He also recognises the limitations and permeability of such cultural/geographic boundaries implied in the colonial tri-partition of the Pacific into Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia.
school in Caroline Bay. He is also man Woron, or Meleut to be even more specific, a reference to his origin place. In his various social relations he can, and does, position himself contextually. With some he discusses issues of church, with others politics, and with others kastom. His father, Aileh Ranmap, was one of the last recalcitrant ‘heathens’ and an influential community leader, who opposed conversion to Christianity ardently at first, and then became resigned to others taking up the new religion, but never converted himself.

Plate 1.10: My adopted father Longlel dancing in traditional dress in front of a crowd. He is wearing a headdress that belongs to the men’s secret and sacred Niluan society. The dance he is performing is called Neleng Va’al, ‘the wind of war’.

My adopted father, Longlel, and his brother, To’leo, only went to church after their father had died in the late 1960s. Longlel then became involved in the Santo-based Nagriamel movement. Nagriamel had encouraged kastom as a common ideology for political independence. After
independence when the leaders of Nagriamel were imprisoned, Longlel became one of the main leaders in a charismatic, and strongly anti-kastom, Christian church. This church flourished on Tomman until 1988 when Londgal Nobel convinced him and others to hold a ‘Na’hai arts festival’ on Tomman. The festival, with its traditional dancing and so on, also marked the end of that style of Christianity.

All of these changing political contexts had a strong effect, of course, on their relations within their own communal lives. Yet, it is important to note that change and innovation are not just conditions imposed by encounters with exotic and dominant socialites (such as colonialism) but also something that people actively seek out and engage (Wagner 1975). Thus people in Malakula often embrace an idea of ‘holding tight kastom’, of being manoples (man-place), while fervently engaging with contemporary local and national issues. They do this, rather than erecting that reified dichotomy between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ of much development discourse (as well as some anthropology).

Some people move willingly, between attending church services, dressed in ‘Sunday best’, and performing pre-Christian rituals, wearing nambas. However, many in South Malakula are strictly Christian, and would never wear a nambas or perform such rituals. Yet others have moved several times between being man blo kastom (a custom person) and man blo skul (a church person). Soon after I first arrived for my main fieldwork in 1995, the village of Wintua in South-West Bay held the centennial celebration of celebration of mission presence in the area, as Wintua was the site of the first mission in Southwest Malakula.¹ People came from several surrounding villages, bringing gifts of pigs, yams, mats, and rice, and the festivities lasted for a week. During that time, a man called Amvon from the interior Mbatgat-speakers who had always refused to convert to

¹ See chapter four.
Christianity, decided to leave the spectacular feasting rather than change his clothes. He did not want replace his *nambas*, the word for the penis sheath men traditionally wore, with a pair of shorts; a gesture his Christian kin were demanding of him for the occasion.¹

Plate 1.11: Ayer Rantes and Amvon in front of the newly built church house in Wintua. During the centennial celebrations, Amvon preferred to return to the hills rather than replace his *nambas*. Ayar Rantes is the second born son of Aman Rantes, the main informant of anthropologist A.B Deacon, who worked in Wintua in 1927 (Deacon 1934a).

*Nambas* is the Bislama word for the penis-sheaths traditionally worn by the men of the island, variations of which are found throughout Vanuatu’s islands. In Na’hai a *nambas* is called *na’ap'ap*. During the nineteenth century, the difference in *nambas* style became the basis for dividing many of the language groups in Malakula into two supposed ‘tribes’: ‘the Big *Nambas*’ and ‘the Small *Nambas*’. On Malakula the difference between big and small *nambas* is thus a reference to the kind of *nambas* the men wore,

¹ Interestingly, in 1998 on a return trip I noticed that Amvon was wearing shorts. When I enquired about this with someone else, I was told that he was doing so on the advice of the medical nurse, but that he continued to wear the traditional bark belt and *nambas* underneath his new attire.
or sometimes still wear. In the south, this consists of a leaf wrapped around the penis and folded into a bark (or leaf) belt, the small nambas. In the northwest, the penis-sheath is made of a bundle of purple dyed pandanus leafs which have been dried and cut into thin strips. The ensemble is attached to a bark belt. Big Nambas women cover their hair and heads with longer ‘wigs’ made of the same material. Today people who are Christians and would never, or only rarely on ceremonial occasions, put on a nambas, might still refer to themselves as Small- or Big- Nambas.

Plate 1.12: ‘Small Nambas’ and ‘Big Nambas’ men marching for the opening of the new museum in Port Vila in 1995. The ‘Small Nambas’ men to the left are actually Ninde speakers from the village of Lawa, South West Bay.

I mention this mainly as a graphic illustration of the mutual creation of meaning and identity in colonial interaction. After all, the nambas is a patently arbitrary means of classification with obvious exotic resonances, rather than a reliable index of socio-cultural regrouping and difference. That men who do not wear nambas, and women who cannot, refer to themselves as big or small nambas (when talking Bislama, or perhaps to outsiders generally), is evidence of their appropriation of an exotic foreign
system of classification. The fact that it has become a local construct of identity, suggests an appropriation of European constructs within Malakulan discourse. Mats might have been a more appropriate classificatory symbol as they have strong connections with exchange and identity throughout northern Vanuatu (Bolton 2003; Walter 1991). It is interesting to note that Deacon chose to partition the island according to the female counter-part of the nambas, the mat (which is used as a dress). His map divides the island into ‘red-stained mat skirt’, and ‘fringe skirt of banana fibre’ regions, which of course give a very different configuration to the big and small nambas partition.

Map 1.3: Deacon’s map of Malakula, dividing the inhabitants along the lines of skirt type, rather than the size of men’s penis sheaths (Deacon 1934: 11). I was told by women on Tomman that the difference between red and white mats had to do with rank in the women’s grade-taking ceremonies Neleng-pas. Nevertheless this does not undermine the map in that it is also based on different kinds of skirts; moreover, the grade-taking systems are not the same across Malakula.
Plate 1.13: Tomman women wearing the ‘fringe skirt’ for a ceremony.

If I may indulge my imagination here, I propose to compare nambas and fringe skirt to islands in so far as they have all been used as tools of social and cultural classification. Whilst it is easy to see the artificiality of classifying populations according to how their male members cover their penes, the same cannot be said for the use of islands or languages as containers of ‘cultures’. The case of Malakula shatters this myth by its sheer linguistic and cultural complexity. Nor is language necessarily a more ‘natural’ tool for creating ‘community’ in Malakula.¹ During my fieldwork the importance of history, and the caricature of bounded Melanesian cultures became more than just a question of academic debate. With a ‘classical’ field site of a small remote Pacific island, I was confronted not only with methodological but ethical issues. Genealogies had become

¹ For a similar argument for the Sepik region of PNG see Filer (1990).
highly politically charged, elders born and raised in kastom had joined radical Christian denominations that took a severe view of all things 'traditional' as 'satanic'. Longdal Nobel, my VCC colleague, main informant and close friend, had returned in the mid-1980s from two years training in Papua New Guinea to be a pastor, only to refuse that role and actively encourage projects of cultural revival and kastom. All sorts of conceptual boundaries had blurred, and the heterogeneity of cultural, linguistic origins and contemporary alliances took many months to decipher.

The Na'hai speakers live with such 'tensions' much more comfortably than one might expect. This diversity and flexibility of identity, both as it is expressed in religious and ceremonial practice and in everyday life, is also a very pragmatic approach to the kinds of challenges people in the region are facing today. Such enthusiastic mobility stems from the ways in which people in the region are negotiating their lives, even if their behaviour can be difficult to reconcile in terms of 'ready-made' essentialisms about tradition and modernity, or classic anthropological oppositions of Western versus Melanesian persons. Despite the value based on place and a consequent disposition towards a certain kind of 'parochialism', the scale of lived local relationships and alliances varies dramatically. The small island was not, after all, so small. Nor was it so insular.
Chapter two

ETHNOGRAPHIC OTHERS AND OTHER ETHNOGRAPHERS

Others and others and others... ¹

One of the things the people of Tomman are renowned for is the practice of skull binding. Parents used to bind the heads of their newly born babies, so as to elongate their skulls. Today several of the men over the age of about fifty-five, and some of the women, have elongated heads. In fact this was practised in many places throughout southern Malakula, and indeed in other parts of the world as well.² Until recently an old man whose head was particularly long, and particularly stunning, resided on Tomman. His name was Amboyo. When I knew him he was old and completely blind. He was famous for his beautiful head.

Every now and then a yacht would turn up on the island, and people in the village knew that the people on the yachts were very interested in seeing elongated heads. So after a brief chat they usually took these people to see Amboyo. Amboyo would take his time. He used his walking stick and his granddaughter to exit his hut, and then he usually sat down in front of the passing visitors. Sometimes they gave him money and took a photo of his head. Sometimes they would just say things like ‘amazing’ or ‘how fascinating’.

Then they left and Amboyo returned to his hut.

... 

This scene left a strong impression in my memories of fieldwork, although I

¹ This chapter and chapter five both start with short narratives I wrote about fieldwork situations. I have italicised them to set them apart from quotes or interviews. They were originally written for a workshop called Challenges to Perform I attended in 1997. The workshop on writing organised by Professor Greg Dening, and hosted by the Centre for Cross Cultural Research (ANU).

² For example, skull elongation was also practised in parts of France up until the end of the nineteenth century (Calvet, von Kindler, et al. 1964).
witnessed it on only a handful of occasions during the time I spent on Ur. These kinds of encounters generated all sorts of questions. What are the ideas that motivate such meetings, and what are the ideas that result from them? Is it important that Amboyo never really spoke much to those who took his photo, or that the visitors usually felt awkward with the situation themselves? Does it even matter that these people met and yet remained worlds apart?

In and of itself, each of these encounters seemed quite innocent. Certainly the visitors had no apparent malicious intent, and if they didn’t speak to Amboyo, they were usually keen to engage with some of the more gregarious people in the community. I think what mattered most to Amboyo was that it could help get some money for his family, for school fees, clothes and medicine. And the visitors got what they were seeking, an encounter with the exotic. All in all, a relatively fair exchange, at least not as directly exploitative as most other exchanges the islanders had experienced with Europeans. Perhaps what engaged me most was how the scene was such a caricature of anthropology, a mock of that now infamous

Plate 2.1: Amboyo. Elongated heads are a sign of beauty and wisdom. Newborn babies had their heads rubbed with a special paste made from the extracted ‘juice’ of the chestnut. Their skulls were then bound with a specially woven ‘basket’. This practice was stopped by missionaries in the 1950s.
'anthropological gaze'.

Something more sinister about these kinds of encounters are the fantasies of exotica that often motivate them. These fantasies are grounded, usually unconsciously, in long held histories of political subjugation and their associated ideologies of racial and cultural superiority. It is this history of 'othering', of exotic fantasy, that provides the ground from which such encounters grow their many motivations and meanings. For the visitors, it is a desire to meet an 'other', another 'other'; and for islanders, it is the desire to obtain some wealth, to exchange. They both walk away relatively content. It's a question of habitus, to use Bourdieu's term.

It is not that the people I met were walking around with the same kind of attitude as those who had been in past centuries, nor that I was somehow outside of this whole 'look and be looked at' scenario. The motivations, if not the methods, of our being there were grounded in a shared sense of curiosity. A curiosity that was itself grounded in a shared habitus. The visitors usually seemed genuinely moved by their experiences in the islands, and in order to get there they had travelled autonomously and far in their boats. After all, unlike travellers who had come in earlier times the visitors I met had many other easier options, they could have gone on an all-expenses-covered package tour to Benidorm, Bali or the Bahamas.

This chapter is a discussion of other ethnographers who have been to Malakula and the work they produced. It is also about how my own work, which draws on prior ethnography as well as fieldwork, became closely tied with Longdal Nobel, the Vanuatu Cultural Centre fieldworker for the

---

1 See Pratt (1992).
2 In an over-simplified way, for Bourdieu habitus is the historical and cultural conjunctures that shape practice, perception and taste as well as being the outcome of those practices, tastes, and perceptions. He writes: "The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification (principium divisionis) of these practices" (Bourdieu 1984). See also Bourdieu (1977, 1991).
Na’hai speakers. When I went to Malakula, I had entered into an agreement
with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre to work with Longdal, although at that
time I did not know him yet. In this chapter I tell how Longdal, a supposed
‘ethnographic other’, became instead another ethnographer.

Is the writing on the wall?

Ever since Cooks’ visit in 1774, Malakula has fuelled numerous and some
preposterous, western imaginations of the primitive and exotic.¹ During the
nineteenth century, Malakula was considered by Europeans to be one the
most ‘cannibalistic’ islands of ‘darkness’ in the Pacific (Inglis 1887; Paton
1964). The island has appeared throughout the world in film, popular
literature and its artefacts in museums and private collections, including
those of the most influential artists of the 20th century. At the entrance to
the Picasso museum in Paris, visitors are greeted with a figurine of ni-
vii’vu-bau - a kind of spirit ogress prominent in many myths, who is
intimately linked to the secret men’s ‘grade-taking’ society called Nihuan on
Tomman.² Next to the ni-vii’vu-bau is a note explaining that it was a gift to
Pablo Picasso from his contemporary, Henri Matisse.³

It is probably the earliest of the several films that have been made on
Malakula, the footage shot by Martin Johnson in 1917, that has been the
most widely screened. Martin Johnson used images of Tomman islanders
and of the ‘Big Nambas’ people of the northwest in his film Cannibals of
the South Seas, a box-office success that was shown throughout cinemas in
the United States in the 1920s. He too filmed long heads, and added
commentary explaining that the practice did not affect the islanders’
intelligence since, as he confidently claimed, they did not have any to begin
with! Johnson’s films were an extraordinary mixture of documentary,

¹ See Jolly (1992b).
² See chapter three.
³ For more on this see Peltier (1996).
adventure, ethnology, and ‘popular entertainment’. The next film to be made was in 1928, when French cinematographers A.P Antoine and R. Lugeon went to Malakula to shoot *Chez les Mangeurs d’Hommes*, which was released in 1930. Cannibalism has been Malakula’s unrivalled and major attraction for popular film.
To a lesser extent, ritual homosexuality has also titillated western curiosities in both popular and academic writings about Malakula (Harrisson, 1937, Layard 1942, Allen, 1993). Harrisson skipped over the issue without going into any detail, Allen treated the topic seriously, and for Layard it was an important issue (MacClancy 1986). For the missionaries who started settling on/in the late nineteenth century, it must have been just more evidence of what they understood to be Satan’s reign over the islands.

Gender relations have long been a prominent trope for representations of difference between Europeans and Melanesians. Malakula is also notorious in early discovery and colonial literature for the men’s abominable treatment of women. These earlier racist representations used highly ethnocentric models of femininity and masculinity, and associated gender roles, to endorse their supremacist perspective, and colonial politics (Jolly 1992b). What seemed to particularly disturb early male European visitors to Malakula (and Tanna), apart from polygamy (polygyny), the use of pigs as bride-price and the exclusion of women from the men’s houses, was the amount of work women did (Thomas 1997). Of course, what the Presbyterian missionaries eventually imposed as ‘proper women’s work’ consisted mainly of domestic chores, in many ways ‘de-valuing’ the work of women (Jolly 1991; Jolly & Macintyre 1989). Mat weaving was compatible with Protestant notions of femininity, and thus women retained one important realm for the production of valuables. But other traditional forums for women to accumulate social prestige and power were forbidden or marginalised by the mission: pig-rearing, let alone pig-killing and grade taking rituals (*neleng pas*), were definitely not considered appropriate for women.

The early missionaries in Malakula did not seem interested in writing down observations, ethnographic or other. Their interest in local culture was usually based on how best to eradicate all signs of it. This was not the case with all missionaries, and it is unfortunate that none of their curious
colleagues in other islands spent much time on Malakula. An outstanding example of that kind of nineteenth century missionary was the Anglican Priest R.H Codrington, who spent about fifteen years in the archipelago. He then produced a classic ethnography of the Bank Islands called *The Melanesians. Studies in their Anthropology and Folklore* (Codrington 1972). Had a missionary with Codrington’s interest and talent for ethnography been on Malakula, or a French Marist like Suas or Tattevin,¹ we would have had a much more rich and detailed understanding of what life was like in Malakula during the latter nineteenth century.

Nor did these early missionaries on Malakula write extensive diaries or church histories. In *Book Six* of his seven volume series called *Live: A history of church planting in the Republic of Vanuatu*, J. Graham Miller wrote of Malakula:

> None of the fourteen men who served the Mission from 1887-1948 has written his area history, as Inglis did for Aneityum, Gunn for Futuna, Robertson for Erromanga, Frater for Paama and Michelsen for Tongoa (Miller 1989: 191).

Whatever malediction had inflicted these early missionaries to ignore their writing, it also affected others who subsequently came to the island.

**Anthropologies of Malakula**

The yield of the agonising process of ethnography is always incomplete; we skim off the top and come away, if we have done our jobs properly, with a sense of loss and unfulfillment (Murphy 1972: 11).

Anthropologists, professional and amateur, have been visiting Malakula ever since 1910 when the Swiss naturalist Felix Speiser embarked on a scientific expedition to the then New Hebrides. And yet the island has not

¹ For example see Tattevin (1929, 1930, 1931) or Suas (1912, 1914).
yielded nearly as much ethnography as it has attracted ethnographers. In fact unpublished research has been noted as an enduring feature of the anthropology of the Vanuatu in general (Valjavec 1986) and this applies to Malakula as much as elsewhere.

Felix Speiser, the first person to undertake a serious ethnographic expedition to the archipelago, was a Swiss naturalist with an interest and talent for ethnology. He embarked on a scientific expedition of the then New Hebrides from 1910 until early 1912 and provided the first ethnography of material culture of the group (Speiser 1991).¹

Despite his main interest in physical anthropology and population analysis, Speiser proved himself an accomplished collector of material culture. He carefully selected objects, and noted any meanings or names he could associate with them, as well as where he obtained them (Kaufmann 1996). His 1923 monograph, which was translated into English in 1991, was a systemic survey of the material culture of the archipelago, with a particular emphasis on the arts of the Banks Islands, Ambrym and Malakula. As Jolly has noted, it was Malakula, and especially South Malakula, which he found the most alluring (Jolly 1996a). The first professional ethnographies of the archipelago were based on fieldwork undertaken in Malakula (Layard, 1942, Deacon, 1934).

There were two early, and important, ethnographies of Malakula. One was Layard’s *Stone Men of Malekula: the small island of Vao* (Layard 1942),² and the other was Arthur Bernard Deacon’s *Malekula; A vanishing People in the New-Hebrides*, by (Deacon 1934). Both of these books deserve some recognition in any history of anthropology, not only for their remarkable contributions towards Melanesian ethnography, but also because of the

---

¹ He also published a popular account of his travels called *Two Years with the Natives in the Western Pacific* Speiser (1913).

² Prior to independence the official spelling of Malakula was ‘Malekula’.
intriguing histories behind their making. Both of these ethnographies made important contributions to anthropological theories of the time, and yet the work of both of these men was compromised by personal tragedies. John Layard was ostracized, for both professional and personal reasons, upon his return to Cambridge in 1915. He remained professionally ‘sidelined’ throughout most his life, and never completed his major work on Atchin. He intended Stone Men of Malekula to be the first in a series, and thus it focuses on the neighbouring island of Vao where he only stayed for three weeks.

Arthur Bernard Deacon never did return from Malakula: he died a tragic and premature death only a week before he was due to leave South West Bay. The ethnography Malekula, A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides was written by Camilla Wedgwood, based on his field-notes, and published a decade after Deacon’s death in 1924. Unlike living-Layard, dead-Deacon became something of an anthropological hero among Haddon’s Cambridge apostles of the 1930s and 1940s.

John Layard

When John Layard did his field research in 1914 on Atchin, a small island at the north east of Malakula, it was one of the first long term ‘village’ field studies of the Pacific. This occurred nearly a year before Malinowski was in the Trobriand Islands, giving birth to modern ethnography, and initiating its celebrated descent from the mission veranda. Michael Young, who has published extensively on Malinowski’s work and life, has suggested that Layard could well have been ‘the father of ethnography’ had he been productive upon his return (personal communication).¹

John Layard had arrived in the archipelago with W.H Rivers, and after consulting with the British Resident Commissioner, they decided to do

¹ For Young’s biographical work on Malinowski see Young (1979, 1987, 1998).
fieldwork on Atchin. Ten days after arriving on Atchin, Rivers decided to relocate his fieldwork and left. Layard spent the next year expecting him to return although Rivers never did. Layard felt abandoned and distressed, a feeling that seemed to continue throughout his fieldwork (MacClancy 1986). And yet despite these difficult conditions, John Layard seems to have enjoyed his fieldwork on Atchin. Jeremy MacClancy writes:

> Reading his biography, it is patent that he delighted in the life that he led: transcribing their songs, participating in the male initiation ceremonies as an honorary novice, pleasuring in the complex rhythms beaten out by slit-drum orchestras in which he once joined, painted black with charcoal and clad only in a penis wrapper. Here is none of the ambivalence of Malinowski’s diary, none of the aggression, none of the yearning for white womanhood (MacClancy 1986: 52).

If Layard enjoyed Malakula, and did not suffer from all of Malinowski’s Trobriand fieldwork torments, unlike Malinowski he did suffer when he returned to Cambridge. John Layard was ostracized by those who held power at Cambridge, and particularly by A.D Haddon. This was mainly due to his affiliation with Elliott Perry Smith (and his ‘extreme diffusionism’), Haddon’s theoretical nemesis (Langham 1981). Ian Langham’s historical research demonstrates that despite suggestions that Layard would have been the perfect candidate for the compilation of Deacon’s field-notes into a monograph, he was deliberately sidelined by Haddon in favour of Camilla Wedgwood. Layard’s general ‘outcast’ status may well have also been related to his acknowledged bisexuality, and his professed ‘love’ for Rivers. All of this was the topic of homophobic gossip in the ‘Oxbridge’ anthropology circles of the time (ibid.).

For Layard, physical isolation and personal abandonment during his fieldwork in Malakula, combined with the continued professional ostracization he experienced in Cambridge after his return, led to long periods of physical and psychological illness.¹ This prevented him from

¹ Layard was one of Carl Jung’s patients, and probably had a profound effect on Jung’s
publishing his major work for decades (MacClancy 1986). His *Stone Men of Malekula* was initially intended to be part one of a four-volume project. Kirk Huffman, another anthropologist who has worked extensively in Malakula, consulted Layard regularly from late 1971 until Layard’s death in 1974. According to Huffman, Layard ‘wanted to get the easy stuff out of the way first and then get on to Atchin. He was still working on his Atchin book when he died...’ (personal communication).¹

Layard’s writing on Atchin would have no doubt been even more detailed and enthusiastic than the volume he wrote about Vao. Nevertheless his long stay on Atchin gave him an insight into Vao that went well beyond that of the earlier, more ‘survey’ ethnographies, such as Speiser’s. Despite the difficulties Layard encountered in Oxford and Cambridge, his *Stone Men of Malekula* is an invaluable contribution to our knowledge of the archipelago, understanding of ‘primitive cultures’. Jeremy MacClancy has written that ‘although Jung agreed to accept Layard as a patient, he was interested more in learning about anthropology than in the state of Layard’s psyche’ MacClancy (1986).

¹ By e-mail: on 5 April 2002.
and is one of the pioneering ethnographies of Melanesia.

Arthur Bernard Deacon

A.B Deacon died in South West Bay of blackwater fever at the age of 24. By then Deacon, and his research, had gained a sort of ‘mythic status’, not only because of his death in the field, but also because of an important ‘discovery’ that he made in North Ambrym, the six-section Ambrym kinship system (Deacon 1927). Deacon had been promised a lectureship at Sydney University upon his expected return (Gardiner 1984).

James Clifford has described Deacon as ‘anthropology’s martyr’, the ‘brilliant young anthropologist who in 1926, ...undertook difficult fieldwork on the island of Malekula...’ (Clifford 1997). Certainly the amount of biographical references to him in relatively recent anthropological writings, when compared to his extremely short career, testifies to the interest he has conjured up for later generations of anthropologists (Clifford 1997; Gardiner 1984; Langham 1981; Larcom 1983). However, as Ian Langham has argued, his mythic status may be due less to his actual achievements than to his unfulfilled potential (Langham 1981).

His death also remains the subject of some lore in southwest Malakula, where many see it as a direct result of his breaching taboos by going to Melpmes, a sacred Mewun site, unaccompanied by a local person, by manples. According to Larcom, and consistent with stories I myself heard, Deacon visited the site alone, despite having been refused permission, only a few days before his death (Larcom 1983). Today, a visitor to Wintua can cross the airstrip and walk to the original mission site to find a cement tombstone with the words ‘A.B Deacon, Anthropologist, 1903-1927’

1 Langham questions whether he was really the first to come across the existence of such a system (Langham, 1981). Of course, for the Ambrymese who lived with this system, ‘discovery’ seems a completely inappropriate term.
inscribed on it.

Plate 2.4: Deacon's gravestone at South West Bay

Joan Larcom studied Deacon's ethnography extensively, since she worked in the 1970s in the same village as he did, and described feeling the presence of his 'ghost' both in Malakula and afterwards, when writing up (Larcom, 1983). On the ethnography itself she has commented:

Edited by a hand unfamiliar with the facts recorded, the ethnographic detail in Deacon's book had often been exoticised to the point of incomprehensibility. Since the readily familiar aspects of Malakulan life were exactly what Deacon did not record, Wedgwood did not have this crucial interpretive road into the data; her compilation could not reflect the ethnographer's creative interplay between the familiar and the strange (Larcom 1983: 192).
No doubt, had Deacon survived, the subsequent ethnography would have been quite different. However, Larcom's accusation of unnecessary 'exoticism' may be somewhat harsh towards Wedgwood. The ethnography that emerged from his fieldwork, and Camilla Wedgwood's painstaking reconstruction of his field-notes, is a very impressive display of editorial and analytic skill. She did an excellent job in making sense of Deacon's observations and jottings. Moreover, it is clear from letters published in the book produced by Deacon's close friend, Margaret Gardiner (1984), that Deacon often found the familiar and ordinary day to day life in South West Bay depressing (Gardiner, 1984).1 Everywhere around him he saw what he called 'cultural disintegration'. One wonders how he would have reconciled this pessimistic view of everyday life with his fascination for the rich ritual and material culture he found persisting there.

Larcom's comments are not unfounded, as there are ethnographic errors littered throughout the text and the ethnography is indeed frustrating in its overall lack of clarity and continuity. Layard also critiqued the ethnography on these grounds, and had an 'errata' slip inserted in the 1934 print of the book (Langham 1981). Given the circumstances, Wedgwood can hardly be held responsible for either of these problems. Despite its drawback of having been 'edited by a hand unfamiliar with the facts recorded' (Larcom 1983) Malekula: A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides is still one of the most ethnographically rich works to have been produced about South West Malakula.

One of the errors in the text had a significant effect on my fieldwork. It was not only an error that attracted me to Tomman in the first place, it also played a role in their accepting me to come and work there. On page 375, the ethnography reads:

1 Which Larcom acknowledges as well, by starting her thesis with the following quote from Deacon: 'I am really feeling very depressed about the state of affairs here: there is simply no life left in the people...' (Deacon quoted in Larcom, 1980: 1).
Unfortunately nothing could be learned of the nimangki in Tomman Island. All the people of this place are now extinct with the exception of one man who was residing in Seniang at the time of Deacon's visit (Deacon 1934: 375).

In chapter 6 I explore how this error has the potential of having far more serious ramifications for Malakulans since independence, than it ever did for anthropological understandings of Melanesia. Here the point is that this confusion most probably stems both from the fact that Deacon rarely dated his field-notes (as Wedgwood noted), and that people may well have been preventing him from visiting Ur. When I was there and discussed this with them, two elderly men on Tomman claimed to remember Deacon's attempted visit to Tomman. They claimed he turned up at Milip and asked to come to Tomman, but he was refused access because of the tambu (taboo) nature of Yum Oran. It is possible that early on in his fieldwork people from South West Bay tried to deter him from going south, and to Tomman, by saying that no one lived there any more, and that he noted that. But he might very well have subsequently dismissed this information, at least mentally, after he encountered the Tomman people on the mainland. According to my informants, he sent a message to the village and people canoed over to have a meeting with him on the beach on the mainland. If he did not write about this encounter in his field-notes, or if it was lost, Wedgwood would not have been able to contextualize the earlier note. Moreover, one reads that 'Deacon was unable to go to Tomman Island and study the site of Jumoran [sic] owing to the exorbitant price (to be paid in whisky and champagne) demanded by those who would take him there' (Deacon 1934: 640). All of this supports the theory that people may have been trying to block him from going there.

Deacon's research centred mainly on kinship and the rituals and structures of various men's societies. These included nimangki, nalawan, nevinbur, neleng and nimbe'ei. The nimangki and the nalawan are part of what is generally known as the 'graded society' in northern Vanuatu. In Na’hai
they are called *Nikuan* and *Nimingi*. They consist of a series of 'grades' (and their titles), through which individuals pass, usually through the payment of pigs (or pigs' tusks) thus gaining more prominent status. Women also take grades in many (or most) places. Deacon suggests that:

> The principal public ceremonial of the *nimangki* is that which takes place when a man makes a rise in rank. Entrance to a grade necessitates payments, often on a large scale, by the aspirant to those who are already members of it' (Deacon 1934: 272).

However the particularities of the different graded societies varies dramatically from one language group to another, as well between the type of grade taking within groups (*nimangki* and *nalawan*). The southern region of Malakula itself has numerous title systems. In the next chapter I briefly discuss the rituals of *Nimingi* and *Nikuan*, and highlight some aspects missed in earlier ethnographies.

In all fairness to Deacon, and his predictions of cultural disintegration and physical extinction, the late 19th century was an epoch of severe depopulation (Jolly 1998). While he was in the field, a number of pandemics, Spanish flu in particular, were still claiming lives in the area (Gardiner 1984). But, the 'vanishing people' of his title, also refers to his perception of cultural disintegration and the deliberate destruction of 'native customs' by the mission. Fortunately Deacon’s gloomy prediction of extinction turned out to be false. The people of Mewun and Sinesip (which he called Seniang, as in Ninde the language of Mewun), with whom he did much of his research are still prominent in the region today.

**Tom Harrisson**

After the official end of the expedition in early 1934, I stayed on, until I had spent my fare home; so I 'went native' and lived mostly among people who were still eating each other. Then, curiously, I became a civil servant, finally a film star; all within the New Hebrides (Harrisson 1937: 7).
Tom Harrisson was one of those colourful anthropologist *cum* eccentric administrator *cum* filmmaker figures who has appeared in anthropological ‘lore’ in many different contexts. He is famous for joining in the tribal wars of the Big Nambas in North West Malakula; for his intimidation of Derek Freeman in Borneo;¹ and as a prime instigator of the ‘Mass-Observation’ (M-O) project in Britain during the Second World War (MacClancy 1995; Stanton 1997).

Tom Harrisson initially came to the Malakula in July 1933 as a biologist with the Oxford University Expedition to the New Hebrides. However his interest in biology soon gave way to his passion for ethnography, and he went on to produce *Savage Civilization*, which is still the only ethnographic monograph on the so-called Big Nambas people of North West Malakula (Harrisson 1937).

Harrisson’s book about Malakula is ultimately a mixture of serious ethnographic observations based on extended periods of field experience, a parody and criticism of popular rhetoric about islanders (cannibalism), an historical account of colonial entanglements, as well as an early example of political advocacy for indigenous people. Gareth Stanton has described *Savage Civilisation* as ‘the bridge between the two disciplines...’ of anthropology and cultural studies (Stanton 1997:12).²

Harrisson was simultaneously a man very much of his time, or even of the previous century, and decades ahead in some of his thinking on anthropology and society. An adept of Nietszche, he undoubtedly saw himself as an ‘explorer-adventurer’ in the nineteenth century tradition.³ Yet

¹ Australian playwright David Williamson produced a play called *The Heretic* about Derek Freeman, where Harrisson appears as menacing figure who completely dismisses and psychologically destroys Freeman during his fieldwork among the Iban.


³ He quotes Nietszche, among others, in his frontispiece to *Savage Civilisation*: “You must have chaos inside to give rise to a shining star” (Harrisson, 1937: 7).
he also wrote a personalistic ethnography, incorporating his own relationships to people into his ethnographic accounts and giving the reader a broad historical and political context within which to position his observations. His continued commitment to applying anthropological theories and methods not only to foreign and exotic lands but also to his home ‘Britannia’ (in the Mass-Observation Movement), also set him ahead of his more professionally recognised colleagues of the time. Judith Heimann has published a book on his life, and the title itself reflects the kind of ‘public image’ status he cultivated: *The Most Offending Soul Alive: Tom Harrisson and His Remarkable Life* (Heimann 1998).

The fifties and seventies.

In the 1950s, the French anthropologist Jean Guiart made several short trips to North Malakula and published a number of articles about that research (Guiart 1952b, 1952a; Guiart 1953; Guiart 1956b, 1956-57). Guiart did his most comprehensive and important work in the French colony of New Caledonia, but also published several ethnographies of Vanuatu (Guiart 1956a; Guiart 1973). He apparently attempted to redress the ethnographic lacuna for the ‘Big Nambas’ people in the northwest of Malakula. Unfortunately his approach, covering vast areas in short periods of time, makes his ethnographic forays into Malakula, as opposed to his abundant and important work in other parts of Melanesia, rather thin and sometimes unreliable. His publications about the Big Nambas are few and short.

In the 1970s there was another wave of anthropologists doing fieldwork on Malakula (and throughout the archipelago). A number started fieldwork on Malakula, but abandoned for various reasons. Some, such as Ron Brunton and Jeremy MacClancy, went on to publish ethnographies and histories of other islands (Brunton 1981; Brunton 1989; MacClancy 1980, 1981, 1983).

Joan Larcom and Takeo Funabiki both produced theses which focused on
the south-western part of the island (Funabiki 1976; Larcom 1980). Funabiki looked at grade taking rituals among the Mbotgote (Mbatgat) speakers of the southern interior, and Larcom explored the connections between place and marriage in Wintua. I refer to Larcom’s work in other parts of this thesis, and wish only to introduce her here. Both have published subsequent articles about south Malakula, although none published full-length monographs from their doctoral research. (Funabiki 1981, 1987; Larcom 1982, 1983, 1990).

In 1973 Kirk Huffman went to South Malakula to do postgraduate research on ‘art and material culture’ for Cambridge. Although he worked in several locations, his main area of focus was in South Central Malakula, among the Mbatgat and Nabwol people of the interior. Huffman never completed his postgraduate degree, but returned to work as Curator for the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. He was very influential in the establishment and development of the fieldworker network from 1977 until 1989. He was the person who ‘spotted’ Longdal Nobel Masingyao in 1985 and invited him to be a fieldworker for the Na’hai speakers. Although Huffman has not published a monograph about his extensive research in Malakula, he has published a number of articles on Malakulan and Vanuatu cultures generally (Huffman 1976; Kirk Huffman 1996; Huffman 1997, 1999). However, Huffman has not yet published his major work about Mbatgat and Nabwol speakers of Malakula with whom he did fieldwork in 1973-74 and in 1976. Like his predecessor Layard, this is clearly not due to insufficient data or knowledge. My own research has undoubtedly benefited from many discussions with Kirk, who was generous in sharing some of his abundant and deep knowledge of Malakula with me.¹

¹ Huffman gave me the following reasons for not yet getting around to writing the book about Malakula, which he so clearly carries within him:

“... basically it was a decision based upon anthropological ethics in not wanting to write down stuff that might be considered (by Malakulans) to be of a sacred/copyright nature plus a personal impression that the discipline of anthropology itself was much too much ‘publication-oriented’ and ‘self-centred’
It is hardly surprising that an island with such intense linguistic and cultural diversity and rich material culture has attracted so much, and such diverse, foreign interest. Yet considering the extremely high number of language-groups in relation to the population, there are still many ethnographic lacunae. Despite all the research done on Malakula what we have are snippets of description, and perhaps a mosaic of interpretations mirroring the mosaic of cultural patterns.

Changing ethnographies of change

To form my accounts of change, in my towns, in my profession, my world, myself, calls thus not for plotted narrative, measurement, reminiscence, or structural progression, and certainly not for graphs; although these have their uses (as do models and theorizings) in setting frames and defining issues. It calls for showing how particular events and unique occasions, an encounter here, a development there, can be woven together with a variety of facts and a battery of interpretations to produce a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go (Geertz 1995: 3).

Ever since anthropologists have been visiting Malakula, they have been concerned with issues of social and cultural transformations, with questions about change. Speiser was clearly on a kind of salvage mission, and indeed his work has proven invaluable to that end as ni-Vanuatu have used his book for projects of cultural revitalization. Deacon’s preoccupation with social transformation can be seen in the words from a letter he wrote to his friend Margaret Gardiner in which he states:

The Christian converts, a small band, correspond in function to the (idealistic) social revolutionaries of the Bakunin type in Europe – they are out for the destruction of society (Gardiner 1984: 40)

and basically largely ignored the concerns of ‘those studied’ ... Working at the Cultural Centre and helping to build it up (along with the Fieldworkers) was the kind of practical application of a form of anthropology that I saw as a lot more useful and ethically correct than just following the normal ‘white man’s graded system’ up the academic ladder” (Huffman, personal communication: e-mail of 14/10/2002).

¹ For example see Bolton (1994).
Deacon obviously felt some tension between his personal opinion and what he understood to be his professional obligation. In the same letter he went on to write

... Personally my sympathies go more to the Christians ... I expect Haddon, as a staunch conservatist, would condemn such an attitude (Gardiner, 1984: 41).

It is most likely no coincidence then, that another anthropologist who did research in Wintua in the 1970s, Joan Larcom, also became preoccupied with issues of change. Whist Deacon was particularly struck by the fervour with which Malakulans were embracing change Larcom, half a century later, describes becoming gradually aware of what she called ‘structural continuities within change’ (Larcom 1980). Thus her thesis deals primarily with the ways marriages are negotiated in relation to ples, as an ‘unchanging structure in changing behaviour’ (ibid.).

What is meant by change and continuity, in what contexts, and by whom? The ethnographies of Malakula have almost all dealt with issues of social change and transformation: Deacon, Harrisson, Layard and Speiser, through their concern with salvage from imminent disappearance (Deacon 1934; Harrisson 1937; Layard 1942; Speiser 1991); Guiart with his interest in economic endeavours, and particularly in his writing about a Malakulan co-operative which he saw as ‘a borderline type of cargo cult’ (Guiart 1951, 1952b, 1956c, 1962); and Joan Larcom through her study of enduring ideologies of place despite changing behaviour (Larcom 1980).

In the last couple of decades, much of the anthropology of Melanesia has focused on debates about kastom, ever since the pioneering special edition of the journal Mankind, ‘Reinventing traditional culture: the politics of kastom in island Melanesia’ (Keesing & Tonkinson 1982). Much of this debate has had to do with the political rhetoric on kastom, and the differing
national and local contexts in which the term is employed. ¹

On a prima facie level, discourses of *kastom*, and ‘keeping to the ways of the ancestors’ can be seen as based in a value of continuity, whereas development, or conversion to Christianity, often relies on a value of change. Both values are in a constant dialogue with each other. Within similar groups, and even individuals, there is an oscillation between these values according to specific social, political and cultural contexts. What I seek to underline in this thesis is that the future is as crucial a dimension to understanding Melanesian discourses of *kastom* as the past.

In other words, change and continuity are semantically multivalent: they refer on one level to actual spatial or temporal shifts (people moved from one place to another, or people converted to Christianity), but they are also values in and of themselves. This means that ideas about what has changed and what persists are not only construed in relation to the past but also are grounded in contemporary concerns, and they are usually created with an eye to the future.

That notions of change and continuity are central in Melanesian cultures, as elsewhere, is not surprising. The earlier anthropological focus on that which remains, rather than that which changes, can be seen as a process of ‘exoticisation’ and externalisation for which anthropology has come under much critique. As Jolly states in her critique of Babadzan (Babadzan 1988):

> If they (the ‘natives’) are no longer doing ‘it’ they are no longer themselves, whereas if colonisers are no longer doing what they were doing two decades ago, this is a comforting instance of Western progress. Diversity and change in one case connote inauthenticity, in the other the hallmarks of true Western civilisation (Jolly 1992a: 57)

This is a crucial point for contemporary ethnography with reverberations

for questions of both ethics and methodology, and the way they relate to each other. It is important to reiterate that while behaviour may have changed within structural continuities (such as marriage systems, and attachment to land and *pies*), relations of power lie at the core of the changes that are always occurring. These kinds of relations between change and continuity are constantly re-negotiated in talk, and in Malakula, in talking about place. And as Geertz intimates in the quote which opens this section, a search for continuing conceptual structures, of entrenched ways of being, can eclipse crucial aspects of the innovative ways local relations of power are played out.

While change as a value, such as conversion to Christianity, can easily be recognised as a process of construction, or reconstruction, it is perhaps less obvious for that deemed ‘continuous’, such as discourse of ‘tradition’ or *kastom*. Yet what has emerged from the entire debate about *kastom* in Pacific anthropology, is the idea that tradition is also in a state of constant reconstruction. The ‘configured continuity’ which is associated with *kastom* (as well as the configured ‘ruptures’) is intimately connected not only to representations of past and present, but also in imaginings of the future.

In this regards, the word ‘*kastom*’, which has no equivalent in Na’hai¹ but which has become extremely important in Vanuatu, is a valuable heuristic device for exploring Malakulan understandings of socio-historical transformations and of identities entrenched in place. In Vanuatu, *kastom* is also understood as being intimately linked to *pies* ‘place’. Throughout the archipelago, the practice, knowledge and rights of *kastom* are associated with place (Bolton 1999a; Bonnemaison 1987; Huffman 1996; Jolly 1994; Larcom 1980; Lindstrom 1990; Rodman 1992).

Geertz sees change as ‘the way things are’, an ethnographic ‘condition’.

¹ Or, to the best of my knowledge, in any other vernacular language in Vanuatu.
and this is true in Bali, Morocco or Malakula. The quotation refers to ways of talking about change, about the ways ethnographers talk about, or should talk about, change. An important part of what I seek to show in this thesis is that Malakulans talk about change by talking about place. In doing so they are staking out their own agency. They are negotiating their entanglements with a changing world by grounding themselves in the discourse about the practice of place. It is a discourse that is sometimes encapsulated by the word *ples*, or *manples*, and sometimes by the word *kastom*. One, *ples*, tends to emphasize space, the other, *kastom*, time. Yet both concepts also *condense* space and time.

**Post-colonial anthropology? Ethnographic others and other ethnographers**

Generally speaking, what an ethnographer aims to do is go to a *place* and access knowledge from what he or she identifies as a *culture*, in order to render it accessible to his or her own. Although this seems a reasonably ‘honourable’ enterprise to many westerners, or at least to anthropologists, it is precisely what caused concern to the ni-Vanuatu political establishment when they placed a moratorium in 1985 on all foreigners wanting to do humanities and social science research in the archipelago.

There were a few exceptions to the moratorium. Kirk Huffman who had arrived in the islands in 1974 to do postgraduate research for Cambridge on the material culture of Malakula, stayed in Vanuatu during the moratorium as Curator of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. Darrell Tryon, an Australian National University linguist, was allowed to continue his work, as he was running the Cultural Centre fieldworker workshops every year. In 1986 Michael Young, another ANU anthropologist, was given a research permit after the people of Epi specifically requested an anthropologist to come and ‘write their culture’.¹ Lissant Bolton was allowed to work on her doctoral

¹ Young too, has not published about his research on Epi nearly as prolifically as he has done for his important work in PNG. For writings about Epi see Young (1992, 1995, 1997,
thesis for Manchester University in Ambae in 1991-92, on condition she implicate herself fully in the creation of a women's fieldworker network for the Cultural Centre (Bolton 1993).

One of the main ideas behind the moratorium, was the notion that *kastom* belonged to future ni-Vanuatu, and should be ‘kept’ for them to write up. In this view knowledge is understood as a non-renewable resource (Bolton 1999b). It is a view that makes better sense if one takes account of the intricate association between knowledge and place in Vanuatu. If each ‘thing to know’ has a place, then it follows perhaps that these ‘things to know’ are not unlimited. Moreover, if knowing the place of the ‘thing to know’ proves one’s right to be in that place, and to use its resources, the stakes then become much higher. The knowledge of place is about being in place, and this is at the heart of *kastom*. *Kastom*, in this context, is an important economic resource, in contrast to the universalist and free ideals imputed, if not enacted, in western approaches to knowledge.

Apart from issues of who ‘owned’ *kastom*, other concerns involved the potential exploitation for money or fame without proper reciprocity towards the concerned community, and even, according to the Port Vila gossip circuit, the personal behaviour of certain anthropologists at the time.

Eventually the moratorium was lifted, and in 1995 new guidelines were drafted for doing research in Vanuatu. They include an obligation to deposit all recordings and other findings with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and require collaboration with a local fieldworker where one is present. The current director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and co-author of the research agreement, has written:

> In its objective of ensuring collaboration between foreign researchers and ni-Vanuatu to their mutual benefit, the policy did not negate the
concerns that had prompted the imposition of the research moratorium a decade earlier. In fact, these concerns – that kastom belongs to ni-Vanuatu and that this must be respected by outsiders – have become significantly more pertinent today (Regenvanu 1999: 98).

The Vanuatu Cultural Centre runs a fieldworker extension program which provides recording facilities for designated fieldworkers to interview people and record various events, stories, and issues generally glossed by the Bislama term kastom (see Bolton 1994). Annual workshops are held in the capital Port Vila, to familiarize fieldworkers with linguistic, archaeological and anthropological methods and ideas as well as to provide them with a forum in which to compare their respective kastom, around a specific theme. Men and women’s workshops are held separately, in accordance with kastom, and an underlying philosophy for the fieldworkers is to encourage the promotion, maintenance and revival, of kastom.

The Vanuatu’s Cultural Centre’s requirements of collaboration with the local fieldworker initially seemed to be of some concern to me. The idea of a ‘professional informant’ seemed dissonant with the newer genres of ethnographic experience as I read during my undergraduate years. These shunned the ‘key informant’ approach to fieldwork that had dominated ever since Malinowski (Clifford & Marcus 1986).

Yet as fieldwork developed it became clear that rather than being a constraint, Longdal’s presence gave me both a legitimate ground in the community and an opportunity to explore certain issues in the production of anthropological knowledge illuminated through our encounter. Nor did my close association with him hinder my acquainting with others and at times with his foes. The fact that I did not live in his village, and his own flexibility in regards to my work, meant that I was able to manoeuvre without him when needed. Longdal and I collaborated throughout my fieldwork, each of us more or less aware of our respective motivations.
which sometimes converged and sometimes not. In these ways my collaboration with Longdal Nobel Masingyao, in his capacity of ‘fieldworker’ for the Na’hai speakers, proved highly beneficial, both in practical and intellectual terms.

During my stay there the Vanuatu Cultural Centre also designated a woman fieldworker for the Na’hai speakers, to attend the annual workshops for women that had started in 1994. The designated woman fieldworker, who started in 1998, turned out to be one of my ‘mothers’ Litia (I was not involved in the decision). Litia is married to my adoptive paternal uncle, To’leo (my ‘small father’ ‘F-younger-B’, which made her my ‘small mother’ ‘F-younger-BW’), and although I interacted with her daily, and indeed we got along very well and laughed often, I did not work as closely with her for my research as I did with Longdal.

Plate 2.5:
Litia, women’s *filwoka* for the Na’hai speakers. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre created the Women’s Fieldworker Network in 1992. Since 1997 Litia has been attending the annual workshops for women *filwokas*. Here she is wearing a hat belonging to *Neleng-pas*, the women’s graded society.
Gender is a crucial dimension of human relations, and above all when it comes to *kastom* in Malakula, so that virtually all of my ‘work’ interlocutors were male. Another important factor for not doing as much ‘work’ with Litia was that she only became a *filwoka* after my main fieldwork in 1995-1996. Lissant Bolton, who runs the annual women fieldworker workshops, informed me recently that since then Litia has been steadily gaining both confidence and skill in her work as a *filwoka*.

It has long been recognized that early ethnography was often intricately linked to colonial policy, if not always explicitly to its politics. European colonial projects provided the context for the emergence of anthropology as a ‘scientific’, often state-funded, discipline (Asad 1973; Stocking 1983, 1989). Research was often determined by the projects of colonial governments, or even directed towards the benefit of the colonisers themselves. Whether or not individual anthropologists personally endorsed the imperial presumptions of their respective countries (some did, some did not), ethnographic research was always reliant on a colonial government’s authority, and presence, in an area. In Vanuatu specific reports written by both Australian and French anthropologists for the British and French administrations during the 1950s and 1960s further contributed to the mistrust of foreign researchers, and the instigation of the moratorium in 1984. Some of these reports were actually critical of colonial policy and the administration(s) (Allen 1969), and in fact by the 1970s most Vanuatu were pro-anthropologists working for independence, and outspoken anti-colonialists at home.

The late colonial period in the Pacific also corresponded with the development of a much more politicised anthropology in academic departments throughout America, Australia and Europe. With the emergence of a strong Marxist critique of the ahistoricity of previous schools of both functionalism and structuralism, came a much closer attention to the relationships people were engaged in with the various
colonial administrations they had been subjugated to. A strong critique emerged of the deliberate eclipsing of any colonial presence in nearly all-previous ethnographic monographs and anthropological analysis (Balandier 1967; Murphy 1972; Wolf 1982).

Today the very presence of a foreign anthropologist can sometimes look like a hangover from the colonial nightmare. At the same time there are postcolonial nightmares being played out as well, which sometimes involve exploitation and violent oppression of one erstwhile colonised group by another. In the south west Pacific alone, the Javanese have done this in East Timor and West Papua, the Papua New Guineans in Bougainville, and the recent violence on Guadalcanal Island in the Solomon Islands may well yet lead to perduring civil violence based on ethnicity. In Vanuatu, a northern secessionist movement at the moment of independence was quelled with the help of the Kamul forces from Papua New Guinea. In the various fields of civil administration as well, many post-colonial states have simply reproduced the very structures of power that they initially struggled against (Keesing 1992). The line between oppressive ‘ruler’ and oppressed ‘ruled’ has become more far more blurred than when, at least in the Pacific, that differentiation seemed primarily to follow racial characteristics.¹

Perhaps anthropologists today should be wary of commenting on or involving themselves in indigenous politics, as the whole point of decolonisation was to remove foreigners from political process in the Pacific. And yet political oppression and exploitation are often simply too central to the issue of ‘culture’, and ‘society’, to be ignored in any

¹ This is not to say that racially demarcated inequalities no longer exist, but that the political and administrative structures no longer follow these lines. Rawlings’ recent work in Pango, a peri-urban village on Efate, demonstrates clearly that neo-colonial relations continue through the tax haven status of Vanuatu, and the pressures on the real estate market in the greater Port Vila region. He concludes “...ethnically demarcated social inequalities between a wealthy minority of expatriates and the ni-Vanuatu majority have not ended with independence in 1980. Inequalities have persisted and have been exacerbated despite nationalist policies that were supposed to redress them” Rawlings (2002).
worthwhile analysis. To claim that anthropology can be totally apolitical is now well recognised as a fiction by most practitioners: the focus of ethnography, the issue of 'culture', is inherently political. This is a central tenet of all the debate on *kastom* in the anthropological literature of the Pacific (Foster 1997; Hanson 1989; Jolly & Thomas 1992; Keesing & Tonkinson 1982).

Whilst it was relatively easy to avoid directly engaging with national and party politics, there were many issues of 'power', in a more local context, which my work necessarily touched on. Insofar as people understood that my work was about *kastom*, I could avoid direct involvement in church and political campaigning or disputing. But when I began collecting genealogies and origin stories, people saw my work as a potential politico-economic tool in the ongoing disputes around the most crucial resource that is land. *Kastom*, in Malakula and throughout Vanuatu, is intimately linked to land in its spiritual, economic, legal and political significance. ¹

So where does this leave the work of the local fieldworkers, trained in basic ethnography, yet doing much more than mere ‘collecting’? Far from pretending to be detached observers, *filwokas* have become recognised ‘institutions’ in many island areas. Their activities usually cover much more than just the recording and promotion of *kastom*. I often witnessed Longdal being called on to negotiate relations with foreigners or the state. He has been asked to play a role in certain land disputes He instigated and was elected to preside over the Na’hai Council, a body he had formed to represent the language group. He has spoken out on environmental issues, and implemented a ban on the exploitation of coconut crabs on his land.

Longdal is neither old nor considered the most knowledgeable about

---

kastom, yet he is for the most part respected as a young to middle-aged man who is active in community life. The ethics of ethnography is something I discussed with Longdal on several occasions. Our interactions on this topic helped to pose problems I had not anticipated, and resolve others I was concerned about.

He once raised his own concern about being ‘exposed’. He realised that I was not just recording kastom (masks, dances, abandoned and revived rituals) but also following peoples’ lives, everyday activities and the history of the community. He expressed his concern that other ni-Vanuatu communities might get access to more knowledge about the Na’hai area than the people of the area wished. He was also concerned that certain things not be made available to other Malakulans, particularly concerning the production of artefacts, dances, songs, and origin stories. He saw his community as possessing traditional knowledge others did not, and hence was worried that in the context of ‘cultural revival’ they might ‘steal kastom’.

His worries seemed to revolve less around foreigners knowing things about the community and kastom than other ni-Vanuatu and particularly Malakulans.1 Longdal was of course, not the only one with that concern, given that the relationship between knowledge, land tenure, and hierarchy is of great importance all over Vanuatu. In the past, knowledge was always exchanged for goods (Huffman 1996).

The catch 22: ethnographic expectations

Epistemological and political concerns are what have perhaps been the driving force for the ‘ethnography as text’ critique of anthropology (Clifford & Marcus 1986). Issues of authorship, context, and inter-

1 Maurice Godelier has written about a similar dilemma when he worked among the Baruya, who made him promise not to reveal their kastom to others in Papua New Guinea (Godelier, 1986).
subjectivity have all been raised to further destabilise the 'scientific-objectivist' foundation to the discipline. In the pioneering edition of Clifford and Marcus, epistemological concerns were explored in their political dimensions, following the critiques of authors such as Edward Said and Talal Asad (Asad 1973; Said 1978). Thus the political contexts of knowledge production were invoked to highlight the connections between anthropological knowledge and colonial practice. Whilst there is no doubt that the discipline of anthropology can be rightly seen as a child of colonialism, the political contexts in which knowledge is produced have not remained the same.

In many places knowledge that used to be transmitted orally, visually or through performance, is now being written down. Clearly the motivations for 'writing culture' are not the same for an academic researcher, a missionary, a post-colonial government, a multi-national mining company, or an indigenous landowner. All of these may or may not incorporate exploitative dimensions to them, and the practices and consequences surrounding both the production and consumption of these texts cannot be uniformly assessed or predicted.

The crisis of representation experienced by anthropologists over the last couple of decades can thus no longer be explained solely along the lines of colonial practice and discursive authority, but also mirrors a crisis faced by many indigenous people themselves, not to mention post-colonial governments. The indigenous project of 'writing culture' is not solely an issue of conflicting relations with foreign political and economic interests, but also an issue of people's relations with each other, even on the most intimate village level. During the time of my main fieldwork in Malakula, there were no large-scale, heavily funded, multi-national projects to explain away the disputes surrounding divergent 'truths' of various land claims and stories (as has been suggested, often cynically, in the Australia media). Yet

---

1 See the debate about the Coronation Hill land claim in Australia: Brunton (1992), Keen
people did not hesitate to use Deacon’s ethnography if it could legitimate their position in a particular dispute. Indeed, Deacon’s ethnography was generally referred to as *buk blo groun*: the ‘book of land’. I will discuss this at greater length in a later chapter, but the point is that many were keen for my project of ‘writing down kastom’ to provide a way of straightening out local tensions revolving around access to land.

This is the ‘catch 22’ of post-modern ethnography. Precisely at a time when ethnographic practice no longer aspires to the kind of totalising cultural presentation that dominated the discipline for so much of its early history, local people often have important political and economic interests in projects of ‘writing down custom’ themselves (Keesing 1992). In those contexts people are not content with partial truths, and they are usually seeking authoritative documents on their ‘traditions’, ‘customs’, or ‘culture’, the way ‘it really is’. There is more at stake than just representation. It is also about land and power, about *ples*.

This is a photo of some houses in Lembinmalan on Ur. Apart from the white sand on the ground, it is a sight typical of many villages throughout Malakula and the other islands of the archipelago. And yet people in Malakula told me that these houses are not ‘of the place’, that they were ‘stael blo sinwa’ as they would say in Bislama. Sinwa is a derivative of the French chinois (Chinese), and is used as a general reference to south east Asians, although usually more specifically to Vietnamese since there has been a Vietnamese community in
Vanuatu ever since the 1920s when the French administration brought people from Vietnam as indentured labour.\textsuperscript{1} This style of housing was inspired by traditional architecture in rural southeast Asia. Moreover, the square shaped houses with longer bamboo walls were a new style of housing, encouraged by the missionaries as a sign of the abandonment of ancestral ways.\textsuperscript{2} One of the first things the various missions, Presbyterian, Anglican or Catholic, sought to do was to rearrange the living spaces islanders inhabited, to change their houses (Rodman 1999).

Before converting to Christianity, Malakulan houses consisted of long roofs on poles that went all the way to the ground. There were walls, and the houses themselves were often surrounded by fences which were used to keep pigs. This was so as to keep the pigs close to their owners, protected against enemies who might steal them. Pig-stealing and garden ravaging were both important in ongoing inter-\textit{ame} warfare.

Plate 3.2: Photo of a ‘regular’ house, a \textit{yum}, in the style that prevailed prior to Christianity. Photo taken from Deacon (1934: Plate II, B).

\textsuperscript{1} The first convoy of Vietnamese ‘contract labourers’ arrived in August 1920, under the French administration. For a good overview of the history of Vietnamese indentured labour in Vanuatu see Meyerhoff (2002).

\textsuperscript{2} See also Rodman (1999).
The most important and sacred of these older style of houses was the men’s house, called an *amel*. In Na’hai, the generic word for house is *yum* whether it is a house that is used for cooking, for sleeping or for storing. *Amel* refers specifically to the sacred and secret men’s house, which women, children and uninitiated men could not enter. They were larger than the other houses and were set apart from the village, with a fenced off dancing ground in at the front. Uninitiated men could enter the dancing ground in front of the *amel*, but not women or children. The *amel* were not only forbidden to children, women and uninitiated men, but were divided internally as well. There was a series of ‘sacred fires’ inside the *amel* which were ranked according to grades, and the spiritual power (*loh*) that was associated with them.

The translation of these men’s houses as places, or villages, and as groups of people, of kin, is indicative of the spatial emphasis in Malakulan social organization. But the translation of *amel* as ‘village’ could also be potentially misleading for a foreign reading. More often than not interior villages no longer have houses, as people moved away from the inland *amel* to the new coastal villages after converting to Christianity. Today, Christian villages tend to assimilate members of different *amel* (as clan) into a shared living space. Some men still build *amel*, even if don’t usually live in them.

Entanglements with foreigners, explorers, planters, colonial officials and missionaries all affected settlement patterns in Vanuatu. People were drawn to the coast to trade, to plantations to work, and both colonial officials and missionaries expressly tried to change patterns of housing. Such transformations in lifestyle, worldviews and people’s social and political relations entailed all sorts of changes of place – changes of place in terms of human movement, as many people left one place to live in another, as well changes of place in terms of the physical transformations of specific localities,
as old villages were left to lie waste and new ones were built. Over the last century Malakulans have abandoned, rebuilt and transformed many kinds of houses.

In this chapter I use houses as a kind of lens with which to better view the transformations that the last sixty years have entailed for the people of Ur. Through houses I explore practices and concepts that precede the arrival of Christianity, practices and concepts that, like houses, have either disappeared, continued or transformed. We cannot gain a better understanding of the ways people in Malakula are engaging with contemporary issues without understanding the basic tenets of their pre-Christian sociality. Houses are a crucial tool for this purpose, as in Malakula they are both the conceptual and material expressions of kinship and place.

**Being in houses**

To say that houses are important literal and symbolic foci of social relations, and particularly relations of power, seems a truism. There are innumerable ways in which this relationship between physical dwelling and sociality is played out, innumerable ways in which the forms and structures actually shape the embodied experience of those who inhabit them (Bourdieu 1973; Bourdieu 1977). Houses, in their symbolic and social implications, have rightly continued to be the focus of much attention in contemporary Melanesian anthropology (Coiffier 1988; Rensel & Rodman 1997; Rodman 1985; Weiner 1991). Throughout the region, and indeed the ‘Austronesian world’ (Fox 1993), houses are often used as symbols of ‘cultures’, be they in national or regional contexts: the longhouses of Borneo, the Haus Tambaran of the Sepik, or the Ma’atai of Samoa. Moreover houses are even more than physical structures, or communal symbols, as they are also created artifacts or even agents which mould individual and collective human experience (Hellwell
In that sense, while people build houses, those houses in turn 'shape' the people who use them.

It is no great surprise therefore that houses have played, and still play, such an important role in Malakulan society, in the very construction of society. Amel, apart from being the main idiom of kin affiliation, were also an imposing physical structure in any pre-Christian village. In that way amel also played an important role in delineating and shaping the entire village, in constructing secret, public, and domestic spaces.

The amel were usually slightly elevated in relation to the village. In front of the amel was a dancing ground, or nasara, on which were planted slit-drums. The slit-drums were said to 'sleep' in the nasara, to be awoken when ritual requires. Entry into the nasara was forbidden to women and children, and entry into the amel to uninitiated men as well. Both the amel and the nasara were separated from the rest of the village by the naai sisive, a fence that was usually made of wood or bamboo or sometimes of stone lined. Another fence or barrier separated the amel from the nasara, this was often lined with stones representing high-ranking men, both living and dead. The fences were normally lined with plants and small trees, which carry specific symbolic connotations related to the important grade-taking rituals called Niluan and Nimingi which were performed in the nasara (Layard 1928; Deacon 1934).

Diagram taken from Deacon (1934a: 24)

Deacon's diagram shows the segregation of spaces in a pre-Christian village in Sinesip. (Deacon called the area of the Nahava speakers Seniang, the term used by people from Mewun, although in both Na'hai and Nahava the area is called Sinesip).
The rituals of *Nimingi* and *Niluan* were important for increasing one's public status and prestige as well as one's spiritual power or sacredness, a concept expressed in Na'hai by the word *loh*. The rituals connected a man's public prestige, his sacredness (*loh*), and secret knowledge, with mundane daily activities, such as cooking and eating. All of this was articulated by the explicit segregation of living spaces that these rituals entailed: the separation of the men's house from the dancing ground, and again from the living spaces of women and children, as well as the compartmentalization of space according to rank which occurred inside the *amel* itself.
Figure 3.1: Diagram of the *amei* (men's house) in relation to the *nasara* (dancing ground) and the rest of the village. The *naai sisive* is a wooden fence that separates the *nasara* (dancing ground) from the rest of the village. Women and children are not allowed to cross this fence. The second *sisive* (fence) separates the *amei* (men's house) from the *nasara* (dancing ground). Only men who belong to the *nimingi* and *niluan* societies of that particular *amei* are allowed to cross this fence (initiates of other *amei* can sometimes enter, if invited by *manplies*, a "man of the place"). The second fence is usually lined with carved stones, symbols of high-ranking men (both alive and dead) of that *amei*.

### *Amel* and arms

There are five main *amei* on Ur: Yum Oran, Vunbangk, Vanhah, Woron, and Dineur. Each contains subsidiary, or peripheral *amei*, or ‘arms’ in local idiom. This pattern is found throughout the southern region of Malakula and in other parts of north Vanuatu (Allen 1964; Jolly 1994a; Patterson 1976; Rubenstein 1978). This is where complications can occur when trying to establish which *amei* a person belongs to, as people sometimes use the name of the main *amei* and sometimes that of the subsidiary one they belong to. Thus my family’s *plies* was Meleut which was an ‘arm’ of the Woron *amei*. Generally my family would call themselves people of Woron, however in more precise terms they

---

1 In fact the exact status of Woron *amei* is disputed, so here I have given the understanding held by my family, but in chapter six I detail some of the counterclaims.
are people of Meleut. That is each *amel*, which is also a village, a place, has subsidiary *amel*, or villages, which I will call branch-*amel*. Both in Na’hai and in Bislama they are called the 'arms' of the *amel*.

Longdal Nobel inadvertently clarified this distinction to me by drawing the following diagrams for Umaas *amel*, his *amel* by patrilineal affiliation. Each of these diagrams were drawn on separate occasions. In the first drawing, each branch-*amel* of Umaas is indicated as a place along the coast, a village so to speak, whereas the second drawing is a representation of a form of social organization. Both of the diagrams show the social units, or *amel*. The first (figure 3.2) expresses *amel* physically as villages along the coast, and the second (figure 3.3) conceptually, as groups of people related to each other, as 'families':

![Diagram](image)

Figure 3.2: *Amel* as place: Umaas as a series of places, and villages, along the coast.
The second diagram shows that Oibaue, a branch-\textit{amel} of Umaas, has two branch-\textit{amel} (Matvolamb and Aviromb) itself. These in turn are also houses, places, and families. Although the second diagram is really a kind of zoom in on the first (the second is a ‘branch’ of the first), the way of showing each diagram could have been inverted, each diagram’s contents could have been presented either way, conceptually or physically, as place or as family. The two styles of representation make the intricate association between social structure, or kinship, and physical locale, or place, graphically obvious.

\textbf{Men in their houses: secrecy, society, success}

The \textit{amel} were houses that served to maintain and preserve the important rituals of \textit{Niluan} and \textit{Nimingi}. The rituals of \textit{Nimingi} and \textit{Niluan} were important for increasing men’s public status and prestige as well as their spiritual power or sacredness, their \textit{loh}.

Whilst grade-taking rituals are not currently performed on Ur, it is quite
possible that individuals may decide to perform them again. Given the history of the island, and notably the several shifts between ‘being kastom’ and ‘being skul’ it would be presumptuous to relegate these rituals to the historical past. Thus, when referring to the structure of the grade-taking ceremonies I use the present tense, and the past tense when referring to their practice. Nevertheless, in shifting between a past tense and the ethnographic present, it is important to acknowledge the historical transformations of meaning that the rituals entail. Grade-taking today (as happens in other south Malakulan communities) does not carry all the political and spiritual implications it did in the pre-Christian context. Furthermore, several people indicated that it was the economic rather than religious constraints that kept them from performing the ceremonies. While the Presbyterian Church initially banned these rituals on grounds of their spiritual ‘heathenness’, I was told by several Malakulan Presbyterians that they no longer performed them, not because they were ‘sinful’ but rather involved too much labour in terms of the pigs required. Without the strong political and spiritual advantages of taking grades that existed in the past, the economic burden becomes disproportionately large.

Although the *Nimingi* and *Nlukan* grades are inter-related, they should be seen as two separate series of ‘grades’. Wedgwood wrote:

To a certain extent, it appears that the natives regard the *Nalawan* [Nlukan] and *Namangki* [Nimingi] as parallel institutions. Thus Amanrantes, when discussing the subject, said that they were “like two pigs side by side”, and illustrated his remark by placing his lower arms with clenched fists parallel to each other (Deacon 1934: 384, my inserts in brackets).

The *Nimingi* grades are different from those called *Nlukan* in several respects. Firstly, they comprise a series of ‘steps’ that generally have to be completed in sequential order. More importantly perhaps, they are also the public side of the men’s societies, and are closely related to obtaining status and prestige within
the community. Both, however, are about accumulating the male spiritual power called *loh*. Yet, *Niluan* rituals are more secretive. They are closely connected with circumcision (especially *Niluan vinbamp*) and life cycle events, and have ramifications for the afterlife and the kind of spirit that the individual will become. Deacon described *Niluan* as ‘intimately connected with funeral ceremonial’ (1934: 385).

Women also took titles in a series of grades called *neleng-pas*. According to Deacon, women accumulated a spiritual power called *igah*. He described the relationship of the female *igah* to the male *loh* as ‘something like the relation of positive and negative electrical potentials’ (Deacon 1934: 478). High ranking women were said to have much *igah*, which could negate the *loh* a man had. *Neleng-pas* did not take place in designated women’s areas, but usually on the outskirts of the village. The fact that the women’s rituals were not partitioned off in a gender specific ‘sacred area’, was often referred to by men I spoke to when they claimed that ‘men’s *kastom* is stronger’.

Apart from Deacon’s earlier work, women’s grade-taking ceremonies have only been explored in and of themselves since the 1970s when anthropologists influenced by an emerging feminist academic tradition undertook research in the area (Jolly 1994b; Patterson 1976). Today these women’s graded systems are also being explored within the context of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre’s women fieldworkers workshops (Bolton 1999, n.d.). Yet the bias reflected by this lack of information on women’s grade-taking stems not only from the chauvinism of early anthropology, but also from the practicalities of doing ethnography in places where male and female are segregated. My own data on women’s grade-taking is clearly inferior to that I obtained from the men, a lacuna for which I hold my hosts to be as responsible as I am myself.
Plate 3.4: My adopted mother Suitlé, dressed in ceremonial style.

Plate 3.5: Neeleng-pas ‘hat’. Each notch represents a grade acquired by the woman who wears it. As a woman went up in rank her ‘hat’ became longer.

Plate 3.6: Women dancing Neeleng-pas for the opening of the Na’hai Kaljaral Senta (see chapter eight).
Much of the information I obtained on grade-taking was described to me by people who had not taken a grade, or even attended a ceremony, for several decades. However I did attend two grade-taking ceremonies during my time in Malakula (one Niluan, one Nimingi) at Venambuas and Loo’oorbap, and on Ur I witnessed numerous dances belonging to these ceremonies, performed for reasons other than grade-taking. On three separate evenings I organized a meeting with some of the elder men at which I had a photocopy of Deacon’s ethnography. I taped the discussions we had whilst looking over the book and took notes as well. On one occasion almost the entire session was spent discussing the list of Nimingi titles for Sinesip (Deacon 1934: 274-275).

Whilst there are slight differences, mainly in naming, between the Sinesip and Hurtes grade systems, they are nearly identical. Or rather, the variation between Sinesip and Hurtes is not necessarily greater than variations between amel within the Hurtes-Na’hai speaking area. I never actually got a clear, unquestioned list of grades in hierarchical order. This may be partly due to memory issues, but probably reflects variations in ritual practice between amel. Points were debated and disagreements arose, yet all were clear that a number of the grades listed in Deacon as Nimingi, were in fact Niluan grades. Although this may well have been due to an error in Deacon’s understanding in the field, or a difference in practice through time, it is more likely the result of a misunderstanding which arose from the highly difficult task presented to Wedgwood of translating the muddled field notes of an ethnographer no longer available for questioning, into a finished ethnographic text.

The list given in Malekula: A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides contains 32 Nimangki (Nimingi) grades whilst the list I compiled contains only 24. My informants assured me that the grades 25 (Nousoun Nevet) to 31 (Nevet Imbal)
(listed in Deacon, 1934: 274-75) belong to Nikuan. The last grade Neru Wenoung left my companions perplexed, and my field notes contain only a question mark next to that entry. Moreover the twenty four grades I list do not converge neatly with the first twenty four in Deacon’s list. This error stems partly from some misunderstandings in the social reverberations of language groups and the way Wedgwood used Deacon’s notes to delineate ‘tribes’ or ‘groups’ in the region. Wedgwood seemed to consider Ur as a distinctly separate socio-cultural entity to the area she called Hurtes. She states:

Layard reported that according to his informants barang and loh were both words from Tomman Island, but as we have seen, Deacon states that the latter belongs to the dialect of Hurtes (Deacon 1934: 276).

In fact Layard was correct, because both Ur/Tomman and the area on the mainland called ‘Hurtes’ in the ethnography are where the Na’hai speakers live. There is no error on Layard’s part as both are Na’hai words. It seems Wedgwood wanted to see the small island as a distinct ‘culture’; she was seduced by the illusions of islands.

Moreover, the ritual complex is highly similar throughout the language area, and it is also possible to see the language areas of Nahati, Na’ati, Nawien, Nahava, and Na’hai as forming one broadly similar ritual/cultural matrix, in contra-distinction to the other languages of the area. However this should not suggest a distinct and discrete social entity, but rather a configuration of similar rituals with some variations between each specific amel, or even ‘arms’ of an amel, and of course, even more so between language groups.

---

2 Here there is a footnote with a reference Layard (1928).
In practice grades do become shuffled in sequence and people often dispute the legitimacy of other’s ritual practice. As Jolly pointed out among the Sa speakers of Pentecost, contest about the sequence and details of the rituals of the graded-societies are in fact a crucial part of the negotiation of power between men (Jolly 1979). When I tried to get the list of grades, all agreed that it was best for them to discuss this in a group, rather than just ask one man. On other occasions, when asked separately, people gave different accounts and varying numbers of titles and grades. Longdal told me that in his own inquiries for the VCC workshop, he too had encountered the same problem. Camilla Wedgwood tacitly acknowledged this problem when she presented “the names of the Sinesip Nimmingki grades in the order in which they are usually entered…” (Deacon 1934: 274, emphasis mine).

All of this reconfirms the questioning of the graded society as a fixed or reified institution, and indeed as Jolly has noted, contests over the execution and sequencing of the rituals lie at the heart of political process associated with the rituals (Jolly 1979, 1994a). Moreover, the fact that rituals and their associated grades and titles can be exchanged between amel of the same or of different language groups means that a definitive list of grades is likely to miss the point
anyway. Malakulan narratives regularly associate the objects, songs and dances that are part of a ritual with a specific *ples* or *amel*. These can come from other languages and other islands.⁶ In these ways the graded society should be seen as a dynamic institution, one that is adaptive and transformative and yet at the same time constantly grounded, through the association of each ritual, of each artefact and each dance, to a specific *ples*.

Plate 3.7: A Mbatgat speaker taking a *Namangki (Nimingi)* grade at Venambuas in 1997. He is painted black and standing next to the artifact that marks the grade he is taking, and which he will have the right to produce. In the background, behind the bushes (which are actually a fence) is the roof of the *amel* to which he belongs, and in which he is taking the grade.

⁶ In particular Ambrym.
### THE NIMINGI STEPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Na'amb ti loh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Na'ari nmbangk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Navat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Na'ai timbarap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Nimingi shem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Nahap ndal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Natan Mwaelp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Teurteur nanemeo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Teurteur meremba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Car'neremba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Nambat-iru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Nimingi vat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Nambalbal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Nelo'wis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Nimwi'il-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Nevelvel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Nimbung nemwenai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Meleun sum'bran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Nu'um bweo timbarap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Neterlip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Navat itoh bo'on amel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Navat itoh ran sisive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Navat ilong vayum itoh bo'on yum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Ni'at vian ohr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The rituals of the *Nnimigi* grades were a public affair. With each ‘step’ taken in the *Nnimigi* society, men gained new names and public rights, as well as increasing their *lohi* their ‘sacredness’. The *Nnimigi* grade-taking rituals determined, among other things, where within the area of the *amel* men were allowed to sit and which fire they could cook and eat from. Payments in pigs and the correct ritual and grade had to be made before a man could enter the *amel*. As a man took successive *Nnimigi* grades so he ate and positioned himself further and further back in the *amel*. The first *Nnimigi* grade is called *naamb lohi*, meaning ‘the sacred/taboo fire’. At this stage a child entered the *amel* and cooked and ate over the first of the sacred fires. As the fires were situated toward the back of the *amel*, so the grade-taker and the ground on which he stood were considered ever more *lohi*, taboo, sacred. Deacon noted that:

> In passing from the *naai seve [sisive]* towards the *amel* the ground becomes more and more *ileo [lohi]* until the most *ileo [lohi]* spot is reached—the patch of dense bush lying a little distance behind the *amel*...
> In accordance with the principle that the further from the *naai seve [sisive]* the *ileo [lohi]* the place, we find that ... the compartment belonging to the highest grade is situated at the back, while that of the lowest lies nearest the door (Deacon, 1934: 24).

After a certain number of *Nnimigi* grades a man attains the status of *Meleun*. The first grade in which a man may be called *Meleun* is called *nevelvef*; ‘we’ll talk’, or ‘let’s talk now’, indicating the right to access higher-order secret knowledge and, I suspect, the keys to reveal certain hidden meanings encoded in more commonly known myths.¹ *Meleun* were men who had obtained the highest name possible; they were feared and respected by others not only for the political legitimacy their title gave them, but for the spiritual potency with which they were imbued. *Lohi* is a power that was seen simultaneously to

---

¹ I was not able to confirm this, but Longdal first pointed me towards the idea of ‘coded talk’ or ‘secret language’ (which he did not know) and later discussions with he and other fieldworkers, as well as expatriate researchers David Luders and Annie Walter, have given reason to suspect that some of these ‘translated words’ also unlock hidden meanings to commonly known myths.
enhance productivity and fertility, whilst at the same time it is imbued with the potential for destruction, infertility and death.\(^1\)

*Meleun* had their own areas at the back of the *amet*; and they did not tend to mix with women or low-ranking men in daily activities. They were exempt from many of the more tedious chores of day-to-day life such as washing and sweeping (implied in the *Meleun sits down* grade). They did, however, cook their own food on their own ‘sacred fire’. Indeed, people often commented that certain *Meleun* of the past would not eat canned food as they did not know on which fire, or by whom, it had been cooked. A man eating from a lower-ranked fire than that to which he had rights could lose some, or all, of his *loh*. On the other hand, a woman or low-ranking man who ate from a high-ranking fire was in danger of falling prey to disease and misfortune. *Loh* is a spiritual power considered dangerous to those who are not ritually prepared to encounter it (Jolly 1994a).

After a man achieved the highest name, *Meleun*, at the grade called *Nevelvel*, he went through three more grades to achieve the title/rank of *avat* (stone). Then there is a trilogy of grades which all refer to stones moving within the *amel* area. These are simply called *Navat itoh van siseve* (the stone is at the fence); *Navat itoh bo'on amel* (the stone is at the door of the *amel*); and *Navat ilong vayum itoh bo'on yum* (the stone goes in the house and stays at the door). These names are both a literal and metaphoric idiom for what these high grades involve. They are literal, because the rituals of grade-taking involve the placement of ‘real’ stones in ‘real’ places in a specific spatial relation to a ‘real’ men’s house. And they are metaphoric because the moving stasis of these stones was also an indicator of that man’s moving status within and between the worlds of the living and those of the ancestors.

\(^1\) In these ways *loh* is similar to the concept of *kon* among the Sa speakers of Pentecost (Jolly, 1979, 1994a, 1994b).
The highest of the *Meleun* grades, and the final one for the whole of the *nimingi* sequence is called *Ni'at vian ohr*: the sago palm has born fruit. This refers to the completion of the worldly tasks of a man. The sago palm has the peculiarity of bearing fruit only once, after which it usually dies. Obtaining this rank therefore implies a completion in life, of having achieved all that there is to achieve.

**Masks of Niluan**

*Niluan* is only one, although there are plenty of steps for *Nimingi*. Sungrang Apu (Discussion on the beach. May 1996).

*Niluan* is a different kind of ‘secret-society’ to *Nimingi*, and is concerned with different, although related, aspects of life. In an important way, whereas *Nimingi* has primarily to do with the worldly achievements and status of men, *Niluan* is more concerned with major life-cycle rituals and what kinds of ancestor spirits those men will become in the after-life. In *Niluan*, men are already ‘shaping’ their afterlife.

Most of what goes in *Niluan* is secret, and not discussed here. Although I was not able to get a full picture of what was involved in the all of the *Niluan* rituals, some information was given to me on the condition I would not share it, including writing it down for public viewing.¹

Nevertheless, there are some important points about *Niluan*, and it’s difference to *Nimingi*, which were missed in Deacon’s ethnography, and which are only hinted at in Layard’s article “Degree-taking rites in South West Bay, Malekula” (Layard 1928). Firstly, *Niluan* should not be seen as a series of steps, or ‘grades’, in the way that the *Nimingi* rites can be.

¹ However Some of this information was taped on audio cassettes and stored in the ‘tambu room’ of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (see chapter two for an explanation of the tambu room).
Although some rituals may require prior passage through other *Niluan* rituals, the ensemble does not fit together in a linear sequence. Sungrang’s statement that ‘*Niluan* is just one...’ demonstrates that they need not be separated, at least conceptually, at all. In that regard the term ‘chapters’ provides a more helpful way of delineating between the *Nimingi* and *Niluan* rites of southern Malakula. Whereas *Nimingi* can be seen as a series of steps, or grades, *Niluan* rituals are better described as ‘chapters’, thus inferring that they are separate parts of a unified entity. Unlike the chapters of a book however, they need not necessarily be traversed in sequential order. Nevertheless some chapters are connected to grades in the *Nimingi* society, and it is in this sense that the two can be seen as parallel.

It is for *Niluan* that the ‘secret’ masks, well known to art dealers and collectors, were produced. It is during *Niluan* rituals that they were taken out of the *amel* for public display. Masks are still manufactured today, but usually with various other purposes in mind. Most often they are manufactured for either performances or for sale, but in both cases they are still kept hidden from women and children, although not always in an *amel*. Furthermore, payments still have to be made for the rights to manufacture masks, and if they are not made in an *amel*, they are always made in remote parts of the bush: once again, so as to be away from women and from men who do not have rights to them. Many women still refuse to carry them, for fear of misfortune or disease, even when the masks have been specifically produced for sale to art dealers and tourists. They have also been produced for people of other places who wanted to ‘make *Niluan*’, but who no longer possessed the knowledge of how to make the masks, so that they purchased this knowledge from Ur elders.¹

¹ In 1991 Ayar Rantes, one of the last five or so Na’ati speakers, and a long term fieldworker for the Vanuatu Cultural Center, took a *Niluan* chapter with the help of Tomman elders (from
The masks for *Niluan* are in some ways, the ‘ranking’ of the chapters. Thus when I tried to get a list of *Niluan*, Longdal eventually suggested it would be best to do it as a line of masks. Indeed the masks/headdresses are ranked in an order of appearance, although the *Niluan* rituals, and activities, do not necessarily follow that sequence of rank. After some reshuffling and debate, the *Niluan* artefacts were placed in a line on the ground. This was my ‘list’.

Plate 3.8: Talking about *Niluan* (from left to right: Longlel, Longdal, Ambuas and Aisir).

whom he ‘*kastom* purchased’ the knowledge). The ceremony, and previous visit to Tomman to purchase the rights of the mask, was the subject of a TV-documentary entitled ‘The Secret of the Masks’ (produced by EOF films, Munich, 1993).
A: No’on Meulolo
—The soft face—

This spider-web headdress indicates entry to the Niluan society. It is also called Nivui nan Mat, the skin that has been shed by a snake.

Nambatin Umbou
—The head of the post—

The Nambatin Umbou and Natavis are essentially the same. However, they are not Niluan grades (headdresses) in themselves. Rather, they are placed in various positions around the amel when a ceremony is held. If used for a Nimingi or other ritual, they also serve to indicate that the person performing the ceremony has entered into the Niluan society.

Natavis
—Side face—
B: Nu'nu Von

-Nu'nu with no face-
The beginning of the Nu'nu series, and entry to the second chapter of the Niluan society.

C: Nu'nu On

-Nu'nu with face-
The number of faces on the headdresses (one or two), indicate ranking within the chapter.

D: Nu'nu Mararau

Nu'nu Mararau is the highest of the Nu'nu series. Nu'nu Mararau belongs to the female ancestor spirit-being, Lindanda; and to her ples on Ur, Vanhah.
E: Nembweng nan mwil
- The shoot of the cycas plant -

♀

The spider web indicates that this headdress represents a female ancestral spirit.

Nembweng nan mwil
- The shoot of the cycas plant -

♂

The higher-ranking male ancestral spirit associated with this chapter. Sometimes called Nakanian Veu: The new yam.
This important chapter included a one- to two-year period of seclusion from the village, and from women. It is also linked to male circumcision.

**F: Nambatin Avi**

-Head of the *Nakavika* (Malay apple tree)-

No photo available, but this high ranking mask resembles *Atbwidian*, without the 'hair'.

**G-Atbwidian**

-The 'bender'-

This mask is considered to be of a very high-rank and can only be used by men who have reached the upper echelon of the *Nimingi* steps, after a man reaches the title of *Meleun* (see chapter three). Called the 'bender' from: *Atbwid* (to bend) and *ian* (noun).
J: Temes Mwe'leo

- The spirit called Mwe'leo-

This high-ranking mask represents the spirit-being called Mwe'leo and belongs to both Niluan and Nimingi. Temes Mwe'leo, 'the megapode bird spirit' is a bush spirit who can only be found in the interior part of Malakula. The mask thus belongs to the interior region, and is said to be located in the now uninhabited Wien region (Navwien language, which only five people speak today). Mwe'leo is known as the one of the highest and wealthiest spirits in the naa'hap - the invisible and parallel spirit world.
In other important ways which I do not detail here, Niluan is also intimately concerned with the cultural construction of gender and the social and historical ramifications thereof (at least for men, but this also effects the lives of women). Niluan has a similar ethos to that described for many other male cults and ‘secret societies’ in Melanesia (and Amazonia) (Godelier 1986; Gregor & Tuzin 2001; Herdt 1987; Hill 1993; Weiner 1995). In chapter five I discuss an important mythopoetic figure in local cosmology, a spirit ogress called Vin’bum’bau, who is closely linked to the Niluan rituals (particularly the masks Nambatin Avi, Atbwidian and Na’pal). Other female ancestor spirits, the Lindanda (who made the masks Nu’nu and Nembweng nan Mwil) also play an important role in the exclusively male Niluan rites (Allen 1981; Deacon 1934; Layard 1928; Wedgwood 1966).

The most ‘important’ Niluan ritual is Niluan Vinbamp, for which there is no headdress. This is closely related to male circumcision. Niluan vinbamp is in fact much more than a ritual, but a process that can last for up to two years, and included the important life event of circumcision for the boys. A classic ‘rite of passage’ (Herdt 1982), Niluan Vinbamp is no longer practised today. The boys were called Vinbamp during their two year seclusion in the bush. For the entire period they were not allowed to see, or be seen by, women. Their mothers and other female relatives were not told anything about them until their ritual return to the village, even if, as sometimes happened, they died. During the dances held for the return of the Vinbamp to normal life, and the village, the boys would return led by the hand of their respective initiators. Those who had died during the period of seclusion had their skulls preserved, modelled over with clay and painted, and then put on a stick that the initiator held in his hand while dancing during the ‘re-entrance’ ceremony. People often mentioned the understandably high state of tension among the mothers and other women kin of the initiates prior to this ceremony.
Namas Bang:  
— Spear with many teeth —  
A man who had achieved high status in Niluan would carry these spears when performing rituals for both Niluan and Nimingi.

H: Na’pal  
— Bald head —

Na’pal is a very high-ranking Niluan chapter and headdress. This particular headdress has only one face, however some Na’pal have two or four faces, and are considered 'higher'. Each face is adorned with a set of pigs tusks, so that a four faced mask means that four tusked pigs were sacrificed to make it. Entering this chapter and wearing this headdress requires a corresponding status of avat (stone) in the Nimingi cycle (see chapter three).

I: Ni Vin'buri:  
— The woman of Buri —

This high-ranking headdress comes from 'Buri', one of the 'branches' of Vunbangk amel on Ur. This headdress was made first by ni Vin'bum'bau - the ancestral spirit ogress (see chapter five).
Today circumcision takes place during *Krismas* (Christmas), when the young boys, (roughly between 8 and 12 years of age) are on school break. There is a much shorter period of exclusion (between 2-8 weeks), during which time the restriction on any contact with women still applies, but without much of the ritual content of before. Many aspects of Malakulan men’s ‘traditional knowledge’ were transmitted, as well as somewhat objectified, through the trials and tribulations the *vinbamp* endured during their prolonged period of seclusion (or exclusion were we to take a female perspective). Since the abandoning of the rituals as a result of conversion to Christianity, much of that knowledge has either been lost or if still held, is no longer being passed on. And yet people still fervently preserve, and sometimes jealously hold secret, much traditional knowledge related to gardening, hunting, basic medico-botany (*lif*, or ‘leaf’ in Bislama), as well as other bush skills (Walter 1991).

And the trauma of circumcision continues.

When some of the elder men who had passed through *Niluan Vinbamp*, talked to me about the period of seclusion, they expressed a mixture of feelings: both admiration and aversion. Both the ‘hardness’ and ‘excitement’ were stressed. But overall they agreed, as men who had grown up ‘full *kastom*,’ that some aspects of the older rituals were better abandoned. Some of those men who had converted to Christianity as adults, continue to condemn the grade-taking rituals entirely, following Seventh Day Adventist or Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian rhetoric. In both cases, theirs is a notably different discourse to those from other islands who promote *kastom*, after much longer periods of missionization. On islands such as Efate, Epi, or the Shephard Islands, where Christianity was adopted roughly a century earlier than the people of Ur, a more idealised attitude to a ‘recuperated’ *kastom* seems to prevail.
New kinds of houses

It was some time in the late 1940s that several high-ranking men from Ur did what until then would have been one of the most provocative and potentially socially self-destructive acts they could have done. They publicly went and ate with women, eating food that had been cooked over a normal domestic fire rather than the taboo-fire in the men’s house.¹ This was a kind of primal supper, the first in a new way of eating, and being. It was a public statement of their conversion to Christianity. In doing this, they were surrendering the spiritual strength, or force, called _lah_ in Na’hai, that they had painstakingly acquired through years of preparing and executing the rituals of the _Nimingi_ and _Niluan_ societies. The men who converted by this act, abandoned their _amel_, or men’s house, and joined the women and children in the new villages. These influential elder men were throwing their weight behind a politico-spiritual momentum that had been gathering for years, even decades. Indeed by that stage all their immediately neighbouring villages, and language groups, had been Christian for four to five decades.

After conversion, women’s daily lives were also dramatically changed as they began to cook for men as well as themselves, and wash the clothes everyone began wearing. Children started attending school, thus separating them from the adults on a daily basis. When they went to boarding schools, this separation could last for months at a time (Jolly 1989). In all of these ways the daily activities and living spaces of women, men and children were dramatically transformed.

It is difficult to pin-point a precise date for the conversion to Christianity for the people of Ur, as it was an uneven, protracted and debated process. But in

¹ This idiom for conversion has been noted in other parts of Vanuatu as well Jolly (1989), Patterson (1976), Walter (1991).
any case that is not the usual way local people tell the story. Among the many stories told about conversion, dates are often vague or in contradiction. When Sungrang Apu, a man from Ur with whom I worked regularly, told me his version of the story there was another focus, not of dates and times, but of houses and places. He stressed the construction of a series of church houses, as not only a symbolic but material unfolding of the communal conversion to Christianity.

So a fixation on dates would miss the point. If Westerners seek out crucial dates to condense drawn out processes of social transformation, Malakulans do this condensation by stressing the uses, descriptions, and manipulations of the places they inhabit and experience. What mattered in Sungrang’s story was not so much ‘when’, as ‘where’ things happened. Of course, ‘who’ did those things mattered as well. In conversations about conversions I was struck by the importance placed on the actual construction and endurance of a church house as an indicator of a Christian community. His story tells of church houses that were destroyed by the faction opposed to Christianity, and equates the actual conversion with the building of the church house that would eventually last for 30 years, until a hurricane destroyed it in the late 1980s. In Sungrang’s narrative, Christianity was successfully adopted when a physical manifestation of it was established in the village, rather than when people changed their beliefs. Eventually a church was established permanently and, apart from a handful of men who refused to convert, Tomman Islanders became practising Presbyterians. The last recalcitrant ‘heathen’, a man named Aili Ran, died in 1986. He was still living in his amel.

The stories of conversion as told locally, are also stories of political disputes and alliances. People often explicitly articulated who sided against whom when

---

1 Except in speeches during ‘official’ ceremonies, when they are often enumerated chronologically, like the stories of missionary arrival (see chapter four).
village meetings were held and decisions made. People were also seen to be siding in opposed camps according to which administration, British or French, they sought to be aligned with. Some wanted no church at all, others wanted to be Catholic, and thus were more in line with the French administration (represented at Lamap). Others, those who would eventually win over the majority, were pushing for a Presbyterian pastor, and affiliation with the South West Bay mission and thus a link to the British administration. They were clearly aware of the rivalry between the administrations. So the building of the church house can be seen as both the seed and the fruit of a religio-political struggle. It became a new house of being.

Plate 3.9: Church under construction. This picture, taken in November 1997, is of Lawa village, South West Bay, (Ninde speakers-Mewun area). The red roof is for the new church, by far the most imposing structure in the village.
Interview with Kaising Biangk (son of Masingtahila khu, Mindu amel)-Wintua village, South West Bay, Malakula (8-11-1997).

**Kaising:****
So we were thinking of going to the mission then. Some people had prayed for us, over and over, I think God was working through the oldfellas, they wanted us to come down.

**Tim:**
What year was that?

**Kaising:**
Oh I don’t know....

**Tim:**
Was the big war over, or not yet

**Kaising:**
Oh no, not yet, it was a long time ago, there were heaps of people up top (in the bush). There was no World War Two yet. But I don’t really know what year it was, because I was a true heathen man. I just lived up there, but I didn’t know what year it was.

**Tim:**
But had you shaved yet?

**Kaising:**
No, I wasn’t shaving yet. Ahhm, in our village there were no more women with children, I was the only one, me... just one small boy only. That was when I lived with Papa and them. The oldfellas looked after me well, they would say ‘hey, we don’t have any more men. But him, this is a man that we must look after well’. So then, they wanted to come down to the mission. They were talking about it now, and, well, you see my mother was very wise (had much knowledge). If you did something, one year would go by, and she could tell you exactly what it was. So then, one day, we were in the house with my brother and Worsin’s father, and his two brothers. Then there was one of my other brothers. So we were four. They were four, which made five and six with me. Mama was with us and Papa as well, we
would sleep on one side of the house, and they
would sleep on the other. This house was *tambu*.
Worsin’s grandfather would sleep in the *tambu*
place, and he made a place for the fire only. So
that people could get warm from it. So we slept
like that, and we would tell stories at night. At
night, with a light like this, we would start
talking, and talk and talk and talk. So they said
‘hey, should we go to the school? They say that if
we go then afterwards we will go up (to heaven),
... but that could be a lie, they could be lying to
us.’ So they talked about it. Then they said to
Mama, in the evening, they said: ‘you will try it
during the night (flying by night-spirit travel), you
will look. What is the situation? Do people really
go up (to heaven), or are they just lying?’ ‘That’s
true, because for us you go and stay in the forest.
Those who have passed on, their spirits come and
stay at that place, at that stone there which stands
up on the ground of that place’. That is how they
told it. Ok, so Mama said ‘that’s alright, if you
fellas want it, I will go and look’. They said, ‘but
just one thing, we want to test you first. Can you
go to the sea tonight, and tomorrow we will see.
You will take two of the stones from the beach,
and you will bring them here to us. So in the
morning when we get up we will know if it is
true, if what you say (about your power) is true’.
So she said, ‘oh, I can do that, that is alright’

*(she then goes and gets the stones, thus passing the ‘test’)*

So then one of them said, Ok, you will go see, do
they go up (to heaven) or not, or are they lying?
Go and see the graves at that place, at Hambuing.
Go to Hambuing and see, do they go up or are
they just lying to us so that we go down and join
them at the mission?’ So Mama said, ‘Ok, I will
find out, I will tell it straight to you, tomorrow’. So
they slept that night. Then Mama went, she went
and she looked up and she saw that there were
people who were trying to go up, to go up the
ladder, but they just kept falling down. Some were
trying and trying, they would get up to the
middle, but then they fell down.
This is the beginning of a story told to me by Kaising Biangk, a man from the Mewun area of South West Bay (Mindu amel). It is a story of when and why his parents, and other members of his amel, left their nasara in the hills, and came down to the coast to convert to Christianity. He told it to me after knowing me for over two years, and it was he who asked me to come and record his story. It is not that the story was secret, like some kastom stories, but he wanted it recorded, written down somewhere in the kastom corpus I was understood to be compiling. This story, somewhat like stories of ancestral origin, is ‘strong’, it is also histri: history.

Kaising’s story is one of many told about ‘the past’, and it highlights the interplay of political, spiritual and economic context and motivations that surrounded most conversions to Christianity. Having verified that the Christians were not lying about the afterlife, the people of Mindu amel, Kaising’s ‘family’, started moving down to the coast, leaving their ancestral ples, embarking on a new way of life, and afterlife.

And yet there was much more behind this quasi-revolution than purely metaphysical concerns. Christianity has arguably been the most profoundly transforming aspect of the colonial encounter throughout the Pacific. So much so, that it makes less and less sense to even see Christianity as an essentially ‘western’ religion in Oceania (Barker 1990, 1992). The fact that Christianity, or more specifically missionization, had direct and intricate links to the political and military enterprise of colonialism has been well documented not only in the Pacific, but throughout Africa and the Americas as well (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; Keesing 1992; Sahlins 1985; Taussig 1987; Thomas 1994; Young 1997). Yet, the success of Christianity as an enduring cosmology in the region cannot be attributed solely to colonial imposition. Something about Christianity appealed to the people of the Pacific, so that well after most foreign missionaries and colonial officers have left the islands people continue to practise the
religion, and today much more fervently than the majority of Europeans.\textsuperscript{1} This has become a point of celebrated difference.

Kaising's family had been under pressure to convert well before they 'tested' the metaphysical claims of the Christians. Not only from the 'direct' pressure of persuasion by relatives living in the mission, but also more 'indirectly' by the fact that the presence of the mission was changing the social matrix around them. As people were descending to the mission, the complex ritual and exchange networks associated with the graded-societies were disintegrating. Each amel that converted meant that people left their ples to go and live on the coast, thus representing another tear to the social web associated with the graded societies, which linked the various amel through specific ritual, economic and military relations and obligations (Deacon 1934). This is crucial in understanding the pervasive effect of Christianity throughout Malakula, and probably most of Melanesia: each village was, and still is, intricately linked to others (and not necessarily of the same language group) in terms of kinship, economic, ritual, and political obligations. Each village which converted to Christianity therefore had a profound effect on the lives of people of the other villages around them. Correspondingly, as people descended to the coast, new venues for political authority were created through the mission presence (Bonnemaison 1994; Lindstrom 1990). In these ways Christianity simultaneously created new webs and wedges in the social matrix. As Epeli Hau'ofa suggests for the islands of the Pacific (see Chapter two), no Malakulan amel, or even language group, exists as a 'social isolate'(Hau'ofa 1993). This was true prior to conversion, and remains the case today even if

\textsuperscript{1} Still foreign missionary activity has certainly not disappeared in the archipelago. Today, newer styles of missionization are predominant, those espoused by Pentecostal or Charismatic Christianity as well as the more 'traditional fringe churches', if that expression may be used, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, or Seventh Day Adventists who were already active in the islands over a century ago. In general such missions do not set up base in the outer islands, but come to Port Vila from Australia, New Zealand or the United States, and tend to work their way to the islands through the networks of urban rural 'circular migration' which remain prominent in Vanuatu Haberkorn (1989), despite increasingly permanent migration to town Bonnemaison (1985).
the modalities of inter-community relations have been dramatically transformed by conversions to Christianity.

Today Kaising Biang is a respected elder, who is seen as both a Christian and a man who knows a lot about kastom. In a rather remarkable twist to his life, in 1996 he married an Australian woman, after he had been widowed a few years earlier. What was unusual about this marriage was that the woman in question, Beverly, was the ex-wife of the Reverend Barry Lakes, one of the former missionaries to South-West Bay. 1 Both now live in Wintua where they have constructed a brick-house and run a small store. His story is one of the many conversations of conversions I had during my time in Malakula.

The light and the dark

A few weeks after I arrived to do fieldwork in Malakula, I witnessed the largest ‘event’, and pig killing, that I have ever seen there. The event was the Centenary celebrations of the establishment of a mission at South West Bay in 1895. 2 The grand-daughter of Arthur Boyd, who established the first mission in 1895 came for the festivities as did the Reverend Ian Taylor, the missionary in Wintua from 1957 to 1966. The celebrations went for four days and the highlight of the events was the opening of the new church house that had been built in Wintua. The impressive and large new church house, built of cement brick and corrugated iron, was opened on the second day (August 22 1995). In front of the church was a line of plants,

1 Barry Lakes was the Presbyterian missionary in Wintua for most of the 1970s. He is quite fondly remembered as one of the kinder missionaries to have stayed in Wintua. Some were outraged at the wedding of Kaising and Beverly, particularly Kaising’s sons. What was particularly disturbing to them was the fact that Barry and Beverly had divorced. However after the initial uproar things eventually settled down. On my last visits I was pleased to notice that their relations with the rest of village seemed to be quite smooth.

2 Michael Young, who also did some work on the island of Epi, has argued that such celebrations of the arrivals of Christian missionaries have come to form what he calls ‘narratives of nationalism’ Young (1997). For more detailed discussion in the context of the Solomon Islands see White (1991).
representing the ‘bush’ that the various missionaries had ‘cleared’ so as to bring the ‘light’ of Christianity. As a church elder read out the dates of the various missionaries, people representing the missionaries cut down a section of this ‘line of bushes’. When all of the bush had been cleared, culminating with Beverly (the ex-wife of Reverend Barry Lakes who was the last missionary before independence), the church was opened.

The establishment of Christianity was thus represented as a clearing of bush, of ‘darkness’, and the establishment of a house and village, of ‘light’ (see also (White 1991). The dates that were given in the speech as the various participants cut down the bush, and which correspond to those found in the church histories, correlated to the arrival and departures of the various foreign missionaries. However, talk of Christianity circulated in the region prior to these dates. In many other contexts in which I discussed the beginnings of Christianity with Malakulans, the people of the region credited a man known as ‘one-eyed Tom’, or Tom Sandu, with being the first Christian in the area. Tom Sandu, one of the many Malakulan men who had been recruited into the infamous ‘blackbirding’ trade for the sugar plantations of Queensland, returned to South West Malakula some time in the late 1880s. He was a Nahava speaker from Lembinwin (Sinesip) who had converted to Christianity in Queensland. When he came back he tried to persuade his relatives at home to do the same. According to local accounts, he met with hostile opposition, and some of the powerful sorcerers of the region threatened to kill him if he did not stop. Both mission and local accounts tell that he then went to stay at Aulua on the east coast of Malakula, where the Rev. T. Watt Leggatt had already established a Presbyterian Mission (Miller 1989). When the Rev. R. Boyd arrived to set up the Wintua mission in 1895, Tom Sandu, or ‘Tom one-eye’, soon joined him, becoming the first ‘teacher’ of the area, and helping Boyd to establish the mission in the face of hostile opposition.

---

1 There has been much debate as to the nature of the contracts and work relations involved in ‘blackbirding’ trade. See Moore (1985), Shineberg (1999).
Boyd was not venturing into an area totally ‘untouched by the light of the gospel’, as much of the mission rhetoric proclaimed (Miller 1989). As has been shown for the circulation of objects, ideas also sometimes travelled further and wider than the people who produced them during the nineteenth century.1 Talk of Christianity had arrived in southern Malakula at least a decade before the first missionary set up a base.

Initially, during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, Presbyterian discourse held that indigenous ritual practice was in fact under the control or influence of Satan, although the locals themselves were deemed to be unaware of this (Adams 1984; Inglis 1887; Paton 1964; Paton 1891). The early missionaries to the archipelago were particularly, and sometimes obsessively, concerned with eradicating all ritual activity they had not themselves instigated. Theirs was a vision of light and of dark, and the book they held was the light with which they were to penetrate the darkness of the islands (Shineberg 1967; White 1991).

Sea-cucumbers and guns: other exchanges of the nineteenth century

The missionaries were not the first Europeans to settle in the area. During the nineteenth century, many ni-Vanuatu entered into ongoing economic relations with traders and plantation owners. The so-called ‘beachcombers’ were European traders who went from beach to beach, and island to island, searching for various riches, most often trepang, or sea cucumbers (bêche-de-mer).2 Of course, this would also involve hiring locals to collect the sea cucumbers, which meant that the islanders became engaged in short-term

---

1 For an analysis of the circulation of objects through the Pacific in the nineteenth century see Thomas (1991).

2 Sea-cucumber, or holothurian. ‘Bêche-de-mer’ gave the word for the language Bislama (pronounced bishlamah). Sea cucumbers were in high demand in Asia, and particularly China, where they were used for cuisine. Sandalwood, the other important commodity in the nineteenth century, particularly in the south of the archipelago, was also collected for the Asian market, where it was used to make incense (Shineberg, 1967).
work for goods or guns, a form of economic relationship they had not experienced before. Given the transitory character of these traders, and their nineteenth century fantasies of racial superiority, relations in these endeavours were often highly volatile (MacClancy 1980; Shineberg 1967, 1999).

As a result of these ongoing exchanges, many Malakulans were armed with muskets they had traded with passing Europeans. This had two somewhat conflicting effects in the subsequent colonial history of the island. One was to limit the ability of Europeans to set up any kind of effective colonial administration until the beginning of the twentieth century (and until the late 1960s for the north west of Malakula, among the so called ‘Big Nambas’ people). The other was to encourage a continual entanglement with European traders through a growing and ongoing dependence on goods such as bush-knives, guns, and steel axes: goods which the people of Malakula became dependent on, but were unable to produce themselves. Nevertheless, they continued trading for such objects, whilst maintaining political autonomy on their own ancestral lands in the interior regions where they usually lived. The guns the islanders had acquired from European traders helped to prolong that political autonomy.

In 1906, by which time resistance to the European invasion had virtually come to an end elsewhere in Melanesia (even New Georgia had succumbed), there were still tribes in the interior of Malekula that had never seen a white man’s face, though they were all armed with the white man’s rifle. That was the way they intended to keep it. (Docker 1970: 138).

If Malakulans maintained political autonomy on land during the nineteenth century, they soon lost control of the sea. It was during that century that long distance travel by sea ceased, as the military superiority of European vessels, even trading vessels, meant that islanders had little freedom of movement on water. Encounters with Europeans at sea often resulted in years of enforced labour in the sugarcane plantations of Queensland or Fiji
(Shineberg 1999). Previously the people of Ur would go on a series of sea voyages for trade and ritual, along the south coast of Malakula. Large canoes, called *nanangk mbarangin* in Na’hai, were used for trading expeditions to Santo, Epi and Ambrym, as well as throughout the south coast of Malakula (Huffman 1996). All of this virtually disappeared by the turn of the twentieth century, as the previous decades had seen the seas come under ever increasing control by Europeans. This reflected what was occurring throughout the Pacific, where colonial military domination required, first and foremost, the control of the ocean.

**Momentary lapses of sociality**

Aileh Ranmap, the father of my adopted father Longlel Ranmap, was known as ‘Chief Tom’ to those in the colonial administration. Aileh Ranmap never did become a Christian. It was not that he was an enemy of the Reverends Stallan, White or Taylor, the Presbyterian missionaries at Wintua between 1941 and 1966. He had many meetings and discussions with the white people of the mission and of the administration, but he refused to convert to Christianity; or as Longlel put it, ‘to wear trousers, or to eat with women’. This continued for roughly two decades after nearly everybody else on Tomman had joined the *skul*. He died in the late 1960s and is buried at his *pies*, Meleut, on Ur. But instead of a Christian cement slab, or a traditional *rambaramp* (an effigy of the deceased man which was kept in the men’s house, the *amel*) his life is marked by a large stone in the bush.

Longlel my ‘father’, put that stone there because he was caught in a momentary vacuum of social relationships. His father could not receive a Christian burial as he had never been baptised, but nor could Longlel find people willing to fulfil the ritual roles for a traditional mortuary ceremony.

---

1 Conrad Stallan was the Presbyterian missionary in Wintua from 1941 to 1946, Ian White was there from 1952 to 1956 and Ian Taylor from 1957 to 1966.
One of the things that required such a specialist, was the removal of the
dead man’s head so that the skull could be modelled over and placed on the
rambaramp. No Christian would do this. Longlel would have found
someone to do this if he had been old enough at the time to have the proper
connections with the people from the interior regions of the mainland. His
father and others on Tomman did, and they would sometimes participate in
rituals and ceremonies with the ‘kastom people’ of the bush. But Longlel
was young, and when his father died his other relatives took him and his
brother To’leo to church. So Longlel had his father buried and a stone
erected at the site; a kind of compromise between the proper consideration
he owed to his father, and the new way of being he had embarked on. The
stone was definitely kastom, inspired by grade-taking symbolism and the
amel (men’s house). But burying him like that, and marking the place with a
large solid object, was an idea drawn from Christianity.

In fact Aileh Ranmap not only refused to convert to Christianity himself, he
enthusiastically and actively sought to stop others from converting to the
new religion as well. He was not alone in this endeavour, and was backed
by a group of high-ranking, and powerful, older men in the 1940s and
1950s. These men had vested interests and a commitment to maintaining
the Niluan and Nimigi societies, which were outlawed by the Presbyterian
Church. ‘Chief Tom’, Aileh Ranmap, was their public spokesperson.

When he died in the late 1960s, Aileh Ranmap had only one ‘full’ kastom
colleague left on Tomman: a man called Aileh Ran, a descendant of the
Na’ati speakers of Yum Lo’or (on the mainland) who had fled to Tomman
six generations earlier. Aileh Ran was the last person to complete the
Nimigi ritual cycle on Tomman. In 1983, he reached the highest grade,
‘ni’at i van ohr’ (the sago palm has born fruit), roughly three years before his
death in 1986. He lived in his amel at (Nburi) with his eldest son Okis. He
wanted to keep Okis in kastom, but sent the next son, Lelran to the skul
(church). This was undoubtedly a concession not only to a recognized
Christian future for the community, but to all his Christian relatives and neighbours at the time. When Aileh Ran died his Christian kin also took his son Okis away from Nburi, where he had entered the *amel* and started the ritual cycle, and brought him to the *stesen* to become a Christian with themselves.

Plate 4.1: Estel and Okis Aileh Ran, beside their father’s grave. Their father, Aileh Ran, was the last man to complete the *nimingi* cycle on Ur, obtaining the rank of *meleun avat balias*. The grave is not a Christian grave, although it resembles one. The inscription reads: 'In loving memory of Aileh Ran Estel. He was the only heathen custom chief left behind at Tomman island. He died on 26th of June 1985 on wensday [sic]. He belonged to maloor’s family.' Below these words they carved an image of a plant, with its name: *naingloor*. The plant is the symbol of Yum-loor, their *amel*.

Far from being unaware of, or even avoiding the administration(s), Aileh Ranmap had even persuaded some colonial officials to support his resistance to Christianity. At one stage there was an administrative restriction on establishing a mission presence on Tomman. A letter from the Reverend Conrad G. Stallan, the Presbyterian missionary based in Wintua, to the British Resident Commissioner dated 4th July, 1941, refers to it:
Dear Sir,

May I ask for clarification of the position regarding Toman [sic] island and mission work. There is a belief here that there is a law forbidding school activities on the island.

I find it difficult to believe that there is any such regulation, and despite the fact that for a year I have cultivated friendship with the heathen section on Toman because of my interest in anthropology and my belief in the development rather than destruction of the old culture, and also in spite of my persistent refusal to consider appointing a teacher to Toman, I am bound to recognise the injustice being done to a large majority on the island.

I have made a careful and leisurely enquiry into the attitude of Toman islanders to mission work and present the following figures as an accurate statement.

NATIVES LIVING ON TOMAN: -

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Anti mission</th>
<th>Pro mission</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOMAN ISLANDERS LIVING ON THE MAINLAND: -

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Anti mission</th>
<th>Pro mission</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures have been secured only after careful and unhurried enquiry and with the full friendship and cooperation of all parties. Men only are counted.

Those living on the mainland are doing so because of the supposed Government prohibition of holding school activities on Toman. For the most part they would return to Toman if assured of religious freedom. They show a most unwanted process of depopulation of the small island.

Let me state clearly that I am not asking for permission to do anything more for the Toman islanders than to remove the impression that the Government favors a small heathen minority and is intolerant of a large Christian majority. I believe such a statement is necessary for the conservation of the population on Toman and preservation of peace on Toman.

May I make the following suggestion with a view to the conservation of a healthy and developing people on Toman. Taking into consideration the steady growth of the Christian party under opposition, and the inevitable change that comes with education, cooperation between the Government and mission in developing people within their own culture will result in bettering the people. Attempts to prohibit Christianity to the Islanders will meet with frustration from the people themselves, as is usual with prohibition.

I am, yours respectfully

(Sgd.) Conrad G. Stallan

(R.F.N.H 4 July 1941-Stallan to Blandy)
This letter reporting Stallan’s ‘careful and unhurried enquiries’ about pro- and anti-mission numbers (in which only the men were counted!) was part of an ongoing correspondence.\(^1\) Stallan’s letter was followed up with one from the British colonial official, and Malakula District Commissioner, Mr. Adam:

Sir,

I have the honour to acknowledge receipt of your letter No 371/442/38 dated 9th August and to report having, in the company of my Colleague visited Toman [sic] on the 22nd of September.

ii. The figures as given by Mr Stallan are correct as far as the anti-mission are concerned. I have counted 36 natives who have actually joined the School, these are at Milip, various villages of the South side of S.W. Bay and 13 at Toman. Others are said to be scattered elsewhere and I did not see them.

iii. There is no doubt that the majority is pro-mission and have in fact joined the Mission at various villages.

iv. The opposition and indifferents number 11 of which the chief Tom is definitely [sic] against the Mission. I believe he fears he would lose his powers of Chief and be supplanted by a teacher.

v. Most of the pro-mission natives having left Toman island is sadly depopulated. The granting of a school would I think remedy this (Adam to Blandy, 2 October 1941; R.F.N.H 3/10/38).

These letters clearly show that conversion to Christianity was a much more complex issue than a mere question of capitulation to the colonial order. In this case establishing a mission even appears to have been counter to colonial policy. There is no doubt that the missions, and the process of evangelisation, were intimately connected with the colonial enterprise (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991), but that does not allow us to trace a causal correlation between missionary intention, colonial policy, and indigenous conversion. The early missionaries were not locally powerful enough to enforce their religion, and indeed the history of nineteenth century Christianity in the then New-Hebrides is replete with cases of failed conversions (Adams 1984; Douglas 1989; Lindstrom 1990; Miller 1981;

---
\(^1\) Conrad Stallan was the Presbyterian missionary at Wintua, in South West Bay (Mewun) from 1941-1946.
Paton 1891; Steel 1880). Furthermore oral histories stress the role of indigenous people who first brought ideas of Christianity back with them from overseas (usually the plantations in Queensland or Fiji) (Jolly 1987).

It becomes clear from all of this that the question of Melanesian Christianity needs to be posed from a perspective that seeks to understand local motivations, as well as external forces. In doing this, western academics would be wise not to equate 'our own' humanist/secular historical entanglement with Christian thought, doctrine, and politics, with the entanglements and concerns of Melanesians.¹

Missionary and colonial histories are of course not 'monolithic', and the changing discourses and contexts for colonialism, as well as the differences in agents who implemented policy, all contribute to the impossibility of seeing the colonial encounter in any sort of homogenous way. Conrad Stallan did not hold the usual Presbyterian view on indigenous cultural practice, not least because of his 'belief in the development rather than destruction of the old culture'.

New Christianity, new kastom

And so by the time of the second world war, when the letters were being sent back and forth between Malakula and Port Vila about the plight of the 'heathen' of Tomman Island, Christianity had long been part of the South Malakulan social landscape. Tomman islanders had already been well aware for a few decades of the transformations that conversion to Christianity would entail. They were consciously resisting it. For a long time on Malakula, there was little compromise between being 'man blo skul', a Christian, or being 'man blo kastom', a 'traditionalist' (or woman blo...). You were either one or the other, and this polarisation lasted until independence, after which time kastom started becoming revalorised by ni-

¹ For a more detailed development of this argument see Dureau (2000).
Vanuatu Christians as a basis for an emerging national identity (MacClancy 1983).

The people of Malakula negotiated these changing political contexts in terms of local relationships with neighbouring villages and languages. Broadly, it could be said that when it came to Christianity, and to politics, the people of Tomman usually did the opposite to the Ninde speakers of South West Bay. For roughly half a century they resisted all attempts by the South West Bay mission to install a church presence on the small island (from about 1895 to 1948). Then in the 1960s when talk of political independence was starting to emerge, Aileh Ranmap and most of the other men aligned themselves with Jimmy Stevens Nagriamel movement in Fanafo, Santo. Nagriamel promoted *kastom* as a positive symbol, particularly in relation to land tenure and socio-political organization. On Ur this led to some re-evaluation of Presbyterian doctrine, especially that which regarded Malakulan ritual and artefacts as heathen or satanic objects. Dances were revived, more people took *Nimingi* and *Niluan* grades, and Ur itself became locally known as a ‘place of *kastom*’.

Plate 4.2: The Nagriamel flagpole at Caroline Bay. The white markings on the ground form a five pointed star, the symbol of Nagriamel.
During the 1970s, when independence was turning into a more imminent possibility, Nagriamel was vigorously opposed to the National Party, which became the ruling Vanuaaku Pati at independence, and which the people of South West Bay had long supported. At independence in 1980, Nagriamel made an unsuccessful attempt at secession from the freshly created Republic of Vanuatu, the so called ‘coconut rebellion’. The stand-off in Santo was quelled by the arrival of the Kumul forces of Papua New Guinea at the bequest of the then newly installed prime-minister, Father Walter Lini (MacClancy 1981; Miles 1998).

Although Nagriamel is better known for its secessionist and anti-independence stance in 1980, Nagriamel was initially a movement that sought political independence. They sought to establish the Nagriamel Federation, consisting of the fifteen islands of the north. A remarkable document in the Résidence de France archives, which are now located in the Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mers in Aix-en-Provence, testifies to their initial yearning for independence. The date on which the letter was signed, April 1st (April fools day), is also remarkable. Although whether this was deliberate choice, with irony intended or not, or an unfortunate oversight of the effect such a date might have on a colonial administration that was sceptical about islander abilities for autonomy, is something I have not been able to ascertain.¹

¹ A copy of the letter can be found in Box 276, Series Locales, in the Résidence de France des Nouvelles-Hébrides archives at the Centre des Archives d’Outre Mer, in Aix-Provence.
Figure 4.1: A 1976 declaration of independence. This letter was sent to both of the colonial administrations, and was signed by the two leaders of Nagriamel, Jimmy Stevens and Chief Bulluk of Fanafo. In English, the wording reads:

To the two ruling governments in Vila and Santo,
We natives are glad to tell our true thoughts to you two governments.
Today, all of us natives are independent, in the name of Nagriamel Federation, Santo and the islands, on April 1st, 1976.
Goodbye to both of you, our governments.
By authority of the Nagriamel Federation Upper Council.
Soon after the events on Santo at independence, all the main Nagriamel leaders were imprisoned, and the people of Ur ‘abandoned’ kastom in favour of a new charismatic, radical Christian church (a branch of the Christian Life Centre). Following this church involved a total ban on all aspects of kastom (as well as both kastom and modern medicine), and resulted eventually in the destruction of a large number of the sacred stones and sites on the small island. At the same time, the ‘long term’ Christians (the Presbyterians of South West Bay) were reviving all sorts of kastom, with the full encouragement of the national government and the ‘father of independence’, Walter Lini.

As one of the local ex-Nagriamel leaders put it somewhat bitterly:

…but today, all the pastors who used to tell us that we were doing Satan’s work, that we were working for the snake, many of them dance naked today. They don’t know their own talk anymore...

The effect of pre-independence politics on the local social matrix was profound. One Nahava-speaking village splintered into three. Beneaur, at the southern tip of South West Bay, saw a large proportion of its inhabitants leave and create the villages of Whitesands (Witava) and Caroline Bay. Caroline Bay was where the French Government built a new Francophone school in 1975, and where the regional Nagriamel headquarters were based.1 The changing differences between these villages can be shown thus:

---

1 By the mid-1970s the French Government was developing links with Nagriamel to re-enforce opposition to the National Party’s imminent project for political independence, which had the ‘official blessing’ of the British and Australian Governments, if not of all their expatriate residents in the islands.
Pre independence (1966/7-80)

South West Bay:

Christian: Vanuaku Pati: Father Walter Lini- man ple (ni-Vanuatu)-man
blo skul (Christian)

Tomman:

‘Traditionalist’: Nagriamel: Jimmy Stevens - ‘halfcas’ (mixed ancestry),
man blo kastom (kastom man).

Post independence (1980-88: Tomman-centric dating)

South West Bay:

‘new kastom’: Presbyterian: VP:
Anglophone- pro-kastom

Tomman:

‘new Christian’: Charismatic: UMP:
Francophone- anti-kastom

Figure 4.2: Political and historical environments. Tomman and South West Bay

Paddling by legs

The people of Caroline Bay carrying prime minister Maxime Carlot Korman on a canoe when he visited them last week. This is part of the welcome and a start of generous hospitality extended by the people of Caroline Bay, Tomman Island in Malekula to Prime Minister Maxime Carlot Korman and his delegation. The Prime Minister’s visit to this tiny island must be a very special occasion because nothing like that has ever happened to the islanders. Mr Carlot Korman was the first Prime Minister in 14 years to arrive in the island. The people of Caroline Bay welcomed Mr Carlot Korman and his delegation with glad hearts. To show their gratitude, chief Sungnan allowed Mr. Carlot Korman to kill a pig in a custom decorated ceremony and named him Melim A’munat and Melim Pulyes. The Prime Minister’s visit was his first official tour to the region of Malekula after 2 1/2 years in office. Photo: Mark Amele.

Figure 4.3: Paddling by legs. Vanuatu Weekly Hebdomadaire, No 507, Saturday 20 August 1994, page 1. Because of their initial affiliation with Nagriamel, most Tomman islanders became supporters of the Union des Partis Moderes, the main opposition party after independence. The political allegiances forged in that period continue today, if in a more ‘diluted’ manner.
The affiliation of the ex-Nagriamel people (Ur, and Caroline Bay) with the radically anti-\textit{kastom} Charismatic church ended on Ur in 1988 when Longdal Nobel Masingyao organised a two-week ‘Na’hai Arts Festival’, during which traditional dances, songs, and games were performed. One of the main purposes of the Na’hai Arts Festival was to familiarise the young people with these activities. But perhaps the major effect of the arts festival was that it brought about the end of the charismatic church to which the community was affiliated. Practising in the charismatic tradition and performing \textit{kastom} were considered incompatible by the Tomman leaders. It had taken Longdal three years to persuade the leaders to hold the arts festival. I was told by these leaders that one of Longdal’s statements that finally convinced them to go ahead with the project was his claim that should there be any sin in \textit{kastom} (that is, in making the artefacts and performing the dances), then he himself would ‘carry it’.

In the decade between the Na’hai Arts Festival and today, there has been a proliferation of denominations in the south-western area of Malakula. On Ur alone there are three established churches (Presbyterian, United Pentecostal and Seventh Day Adventist), and a few members of a fourth denomination based in another Na’hai-speaking village on the mainland (Holiness Fellowship from Malfakhal).

That diversity and differentiation have flourished within the context of a common Christianity is perhaps to be expected given the pre-existing mosaic of rituals and beliefs found in Malakula. The situation is similar in most of the nearby villages and indeed, throughout Malakula. Is this a kind of island mimesis of earlier ritual diversity and abundance, a reproduction of its complexity, another case of ‘deliberate differentiation’?
Tom’s tambu house

Tom ‘Moses’ is a man from Vanhah who lives on the outskirts of Milip village, and who claims to speak with God. There he has built a house which he has declared tambu, or taboo/sacred. Around it he envisions a new living space, following directions given to him from God. He also broke off his membership with any of the churches in the area, and started proselytising his interpretations of, and communications with, the Holy Spirit and/or God. For Tom the creation of the tambu house, was at the core of his enterprise of ‘being like a prophet’. On the door of his house is a sign, which reads:

NEW JERUSALEM

This House belongs to God
Men who get drunk or
chase women, thieves,
sorcerers, businessmen,
smokers, and rich men
are not allowed inside.
It is Taboo. It belongs to God.
God with us. Emmanuel
(ROM 6.6.)

I first saw Tom’s ‘tambu house’ in September 1995. The hut is surrounded by a fence in front of which stand two objects: a flagpole embellished with a horizontal plank representing a Christian cross, and a slit-drum painted bright yellow. Rather than being decorated with the usual motif of a face, the top of the slit-drum is crafted in the form of a stone tablet, inscribed with the ten commandments.

On that day, I was on my way to a cocoa plantation with Estel Aili Rahn, the second born son of Aili Rahn. The sign on the door and the flagpole in the form of a cross were the only indications of the purpose of these
structures (the slit-drum was absent), as the area was deserted. In April 1996 I returned with Longdal to attend a ceremonial event: Tom Moses was unveiling a new slit-drum he had made. Longdal, who had told me about the occasion, suggested I bring my video camcorder. After my first visit to this place I had mentioned to Longdal that I was interested in the house, and in the man who constructed it. He had told me about what Tom was doing and promised he would arrange for us to meet in the future. On this second visit I interviewed Tom on film, and then filmed segments of the speeches he gave that day. He seemed happy with the presence of the camera, to which he started performing and displaying some of his oratorical talents. He explained why he made this house, recounted parts of his own life history, and shared some of his ideas on Christianity, churches and kastom.

Tom had entered the early stages of the Nimigi as a child before his parents converted to Christianity. As an adult he gained his prestige and status through other means that accompanied colonialism and conversion. He was a plantation labourer, a 'ship worker', an assessor for the condominium, a 'chief' in the sense of a colonially created category, not a Meleun, and after Independence he briefly became an elder of the Presbyterian church. Today he claims to be none of these, seeing himself instead as doing 'the work of a prophet', even citing Enoch as his biblical role-model. He no longer lives with his wife, he has moved outside of the village settlement and is establishing a new stesen around the tambu house in which he communicates with God.

I had met Tom a few times previously. I had heard him speak at the funeral of a Tomman Island elder, during which he discussed the role the dead man had played in bringing Christianity to Tomman. He spoke of pre-Christian Tomman as a place ruled by sorcery, which he called taem blong lion (the time of the Lion). Tom stressed the common fear of sorcery and thus of travelling, so that as a child he had never been to the other side of the small island. He then discussed how 'the light' (Christianity) had freed him and
the other islanders from 'the lion', how people could now visit each other much more freely, and are able to travel around Tomman and to places on the mainland without fear of harm. Thus, he acknowledged the man's role in bringing Christianity to Tomman.

Tom said that the dead man visited him the night before dying, and he had told him that God was pleased with his life and that it was right for him to go. This was my first glimpse of Tom's public assertions of supernatural powers, and more particularly of his claim to a 'privileged' relationship with God. I knew that the dying man had been bedridden for some time and had been particularly weak during the last few days. It seemed highly improbable that he had canoed over to the mainland, where Tom lives, to ask for permission to die. Not only would it have been physically taxing, but the man in question was an established elder in his own right, and belonged neither to Tom's ame / nor to the Seventh Day Adventist denomination to which Tom still was affiliated at that stage.

I slowly realised that Tom was not talking of a corporeal visitation. Rather he spoke in terms either of the world of dreams, or of the naa hap. This is a vernacular term for what might best be described as an intersecting, yet parallel world: the world of spirits and magic, which exists within the same space occupied by people. The naa hap is neither distant from the everyday world nor separate from it, although it is invisible. It is possible for people to 'enter' or see within the naa hap, and when a person does so, he or she can not only see spirits but also simultaneously influence and interact with the world of everyday existence. Tom was referring to an encounter that assumed his capacity to 'know' beyond the physical senses, a form of knowledge and power which his audience seemed to recognise.

Tom was not a conventional church leader. Such leaders tend to reiterate received denominational doctrine, often emphasising extrinsic rather than
familiar concepts in sermons. Thus, when Longdal suggested several months later that I film an event orchestrated by Tom — the unveiling or ‘opening’ of his slit-drum — I was excited by the chance to meet someone who embodied indigenous, or local, forms of Christianity in very graphic ways.

I heard several sermons in which *fasin blong waetman* — ways of the white man — are valorised at the expense of *fasin blong yumi* — our ways. Of course, the same church leaders may on other occasions, and in other contexts, stringently criticise foreign or introduced practices.
Spacing, status and sacredness

I used to pray in open places, but he [God] told me 'From now on don't pray in open places, if you want to pray go inside that room. I have blocked it. And the places of high men as well, you don't pray in them.' You see in church I don't pray; I sing, and I read, but I don't pray.

Tom’s claim to spiritual authority is partly based in his professed ability to talk with God. This is derived from several restrictions he observes: living away from his family, sexual abstinence and not eating meat. Yet his spiritual authority is expressed and reinforced by the uses he makes of space. He built a house away from the village and surrounded it with a fence. He made the house taboo to married men and women, while allowing single men and women to enter the first room, but not the second, where he goes to talk with God. He draws both on his communications with God and on the symbolic associations of pre-Christian social spacing to assert himself as a tambu man.

Figure 4.4: Diagram of Tom’s stesen
Tom also imparts his sacred power to God, while deriving it from Him. He regularly refers to things that ‘God told him to do’, rather than these being his own ideas. He insists that God told him not to help build a church for the Christians (opposite his tambu house). He claims God told him not to participate, as this would make the church ‘as tambu’ as the other house, thereby making it inaccessible to drunk, married or otherwise profane people. They would not be able to ‘stand up to read or pray’ in it. Tom’s sacredness would ‘rub off’ into the building, putting the same restrictions on it that exist for his tambu house. His sacredness is contagious, it is situated in his body and emanates from himself. It is potentially debilitating to people not meeting certain criteria, such as sobriety or sexual abstinence. Furthermore, it extends from within himself to the objects he builds and the spaces he constructs. He had to ask God for ‘special permission’ so that Longdal and I could safely enter. Here the similarities with the effects of accumulating loh for a high-ranking man in rimumingi are evident. It is not that contact with ‘lesser sacredness’ is dangerous to Tom, but that Tom’s sacredness could debilitate others.

Tom is delineating spaces according to what he considers their sacredness/loh. Here ideas of sexual activity, rather than gender and rank per se (as in the nasara), seem to define sacredness. His plan accommodates the reorganisation of gendered space that accompanied conversion, while maintaining a hierarchy of people according to their sacredness; a hierarchy which moves from the young men who drink kava and so on to Tom, who talks to God. This hierarchy is translated directly into physical living space, not unlike the organization of a pre-Christian village. While I need not infer that these are all deliberately created associations, it does seem that Tom has, consciously or not, mapped pre-Christian social space (with all that implies concerning prohibitions, status, and access) onto a new religious space of his own devising. He talks about how he has changed kastom (a slit-drum with ten commandments or a pole with a flag rather than a flower), rather than how he has changed Christian
ritual. His own comparative associations seem to be with *kastom* rather than with other Christian denominations.

It would be wrong to see all this as a kind of perpetually imposed reproduction of ‘traditional’ forms or structures through differing historical circumstances. Rather I wish to stress the constructed nature of such reproductions. In other words, Tom is not bound to make a slit-drum because such is Malakulan tradition, but rather is deliberately reproducing traditional Malakulan symbolism within a Christian context. One effect is to allow him to distinguish himself from others, and to draw on local symbols in meaningful ways. This is an important analytical difference, particularly in the postcolonial context where church leadership, even for mainstream denominations, has been removed from the hands of foreign institutions and individuals and put more and more into local control.

Ultimately, Tom’s attempts to attract converts have not been altogether successful. He has deliberately refused to affiliate himself with any of the other churches. Although he maintained close relations with the Seventh Day Adventists at the time of the filming, joining them in their Saturday worship and singing, on a return trip I made in October-December 1997 he told me that he had severed these links completely, going fully independent. My general impression was that Tom was considered not quite the prophet figure he claims for himself, yet nor was he shunned as an eccentric. While no-one I know actually left a church to join him, nor moved to live in his *stesen*, many people did go and see him when afflicted by disease or other ailments. He attends most village events such as marriages, fund-raising and so on. His relationship with other people is the usual one of that of an older man; he commands a certain amount of respect, and I saw no-one publicly challenge even his more provocative declarations, such as his claim that his next miracle would be to raise a dead person to life. That Tom tried to use my presence with a camera to boost his credibility on the day of his inauguration of the slit-drum was clear to both myself and others,
yet in the longer term it seems quite insignificant. He is not the only person in the area to ‘speak to God’, but what is distinctive about him is the ingenious and elaborate way in which he has drawn on local symbolic constructs, particularly the use of space, in part to negotiate a position of authority within a Christian context.

Within his new place, Tom tries to influence the movement of people by appropriating and referring to concepts of sacredness. In doing so his actions, discourse and motives echo pre-Christian notions of the relationship between a man’s power, his sacredness, and the use of ples as an index of these aspects of his public self. The symbolism he uses, and the discourse he produces are anchored in his vision of himself as a Christian, and not only a Christian but a tambu man with whom God has chosen to converse.

There are two aspects of the ‘sacredness’ that Tom draws upon. One uses space as well as the importance of ples, while the other is grounded in his talk, and more particularly in his ability to talk with God. Just as conversion to Christianity involved moving from older villages, centred around the nasara, to new villages, centred around a church, Tom is also physically and symbolically reinforcing his differentiation from the more mainstream forms of Christianity by trying to set up a new living space, this time centred around his tambu house. At the same time he redefines the partitioning, significance and uses of space within the new village.

Film is in many ways about event, and in the film we are presented with the undertakings of a specific person, based on our interactions on a particular day — the unveiling of the slit-drum. Yet the lens I use in writing, seeks to contextualise this within a wider sphere: the local production of meaning and its relation to forms of authority and/or power. This relation is not binary but multiplex. Notions of sacredness merge with ideas of power or authority and prescriptions of physical spacing so that it is difficult, if not
impossible, to disentangle each from the other to identify a primary or causal factor.

This nexus of spacing status and sacredness has its foundations in an older Malakulan sociality: with the spatial prescriptions. Tom is ‘innovating’ insofar that he draws on powerful pre-Christian symbolic associations while trying to establish status through his interpretation of Christianity. His innovation is consistent with pre-existing Malakulan political practice, rather than the result of trying to reconcile supposedly differing ways of being and/or knowing.

**Innovating power, creating place**

I don’t belong to a church I am in the middle. I work for the angels, every church. Because I love all people. I pray for people whose faces I have not seen, I pray for people whose faces I have seen. I pray for people who are chased away, and my prayers can bring them back. But if I just prayed people wouldn’t know, so that is why I made this place: to ‘pull’ people here.

As Allen has shown in West Ambae, political innovation is nothing new in North Vanuatu, and Tom is an albeit ‘colourful’ example of some of the forms contemporary religio-political innovations take(Allen 1981). Tom is not easily situated within the broad literature on ‘cargo-cults’ or messianic/millenarian movements, for several reasons. First, much of the earlier interest in cargo-cults (Gregory 1984; Guiart 1951, 1952; Worsley 1957) focused on the colonial contexts against which these movements emerged, which does not seem pertinent here. Tom symbolically embraces the state by raising a Vanuatu flag every day, and does not promise material goods to his followers. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Tom is neither messianic nor millennial per se: he claims neither to ‘save the world’ nor ‘bring about its end’, but simply to communicate with God and give practical assistance to those who ask him of it. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, I hesitate to label Tom as the leader of a ‘movement’. His
innovations do not seek to radically overturn social norms, nor does he have a large following. It is more fruitful to see him as one of many who have created new forms of spirituality and ritual practice with effective, if not always explicit, political dimensions to their enterprises. The point, as Allen has made, is precisely that rather than being radical, these kinds of innovations are a relatively common way for men to negotiate politico-spiritual authority in the region.

Michael Allen’s discussion of ‘innovation, inversion and revolution’ in Nduindui in the 1960’s argues that “...non-conformist tactics are an integral, widespread and much ignored feature of Melanesian politics...” (Allen 1981: 109). It is within this perspective that we need to situate Tom. However unlike Allen’s interpretation of the relationship between ‘conformity and non-conformity’ in which he states that they “... constitute alternate though related tactics for those who aspire to social eminence and leadership” (ibid.), Tom demonstrates how innovative tactics still conform on certain levels. Furthermore even the most conforming leaders (be it through Church or grade-taking) must distinguish themselves from others in one way or another, and this often involves a strategy of innovation, albeit of limited kind. The difference is subtle but important: rather than being alternate but related, conformity and non-conformity are both crucial dimensions to Tom’s project of ‘being a prophet’. Tom is innovative, or even revolutionary (from the perspective of mainstream church leaders), whilst at the same time he reproduces important Christian and other older indigenous symbolic arrangements. Tom’s case shows that it is not a simple issue of either innovating or conforming, but rather that every ‘act’ of acquiring authority needs to embody both, even if the discursive emphasis is usually on one or the other.

Tom’s innovation seems consistent with pre-Christian practice, both in the way he uses constructed spaces, and in the practice of innovation itself, even though he at times proposes a historical and cultural rupture between
being Christian and being *kastom*. Here, the labels of Christian, traditional, or syncretic religion seem misleading. By examining his project in terms of his physical manipulations of space and the local meanings associated with it, rather than exclusively what he says, we can make sense of a character that on the surface level seems to be moving between presumed antithetical religious expressions. While not wishing to refute purely discursive analysis, analysis of words alone, can eclipse crucial and illuminating dimensions of (non-verbal) symbolic communication. This seems particularly pertinent in cases where historically divergent, or even supposedly oppositional, discourses merge in the complexities of lived religious expression and experience. The point in all of this is that, in the case at hand, an examination of the embodied nexus of spacing, status and sacredness provides a more coherent understanding of Tom, than attempting to situate him in antithetical discourses, labelled ‘Christian’ or ‘traditional’.

**Places transposed and places between**

In all of the phases and styles of Christianity that have been played out on Ur, there is always a connection to *plies* and the relations between *manplies*. Conversion to Christianity involved an alteration in daily living spaces, mainly in conjunction with the creation of new villages. The performance and experience of conversion to Christianity was expressed as much, if not more, in terms of the move from the *amel* to the new Christian *stesen*, as through the transformations of cosmology, worldview, or belief. Most often this meant moving from inland villages to the new coastal settlements: from the *bus* (bush) to the *solwata* (sea).

The stories of conversion are also told as stories of abandonment, of a substitution of one embodied, or emplaced, spirituality for another. This embodied or corporeal aspect of religious practice is also a key consideration for explaining the success of Pentecostal and Charismatic
forms of Christianity since the era of independence, when most of the foreign missionaries left Vanuatu.

Christianity may have traditionally been obscured, or sidelined, by anthropologists working in Melanesia. There are of course a few early exceptions, most of them from insular Melanesia (Boutelier 1978; Jolly & Macintyre 1989; Tonkinson 1981). Yet more recently several authors have developed a substantial critique of this omission (Barker 1990, 1992; Douglas 1998; White 1991). In reaction to a previous perspective on Christianity as foreign and inauthentic, the move toward exploring Christianity as a legitimate form of Melanesian cultural expression and according it a recognised and accepted centrality in contemporary ethnographies of the region, has highlighted the ‘Melanesian-ness’ of Melanesian Christianity. For Barker, this is concentrated in an understanding of discourse so that ‘Melanesian religion combines indigenous and Christian elements at all levels of discourse’ (1992:163).

While I do not dispute the validity of this perspective in general terms, it is perhaps more helpful in this case to understand conversion as a grounded move from *nasara* to *stesen*, rather than in terms of abstract levels of discourse. By looking at how conversion is expressed in lived and embodied space, rather than how it operates as a conceptual terrain, it is possible to avoid the pitfalls of designating certain practices as indigenous or local, and others as Christian or introduced. An analysis of Tom’s project, for example, that focuses exclusively on what he says would most likely lead to the conclusion that Tom is somehow lost between two worlds: caught somewhere between *kastom* and Christianity, or the local and the global. By looking at how he expresses himself in terms of creating and controlling spaces, however, it is possible to discern interesting expressions of status and sacred power. These are interesting not only because of their manifestation in both the pre-Christian and the Christian context, but also because sacredness and power both model and are modelled by the living
spaces and the objects they encompass.

In Malakula, people continually move between seeing kastom as ‘darkness’ and seeing it as having an enduring and inalienable positive effect on contemporary society. Writing soon after independence, when kastom was being reappraised as a tool of national unification in Vanuatu, Robert Tonkinson noted that:

Until the 1970s, then, kastom evoked in the minds of most Christians an era of ‘great darkness’ and thus was devalued. Since then, ni-Vanuatu have had to unlearn decades of conditioning about their ‘barbarous’ past while coming to terms with the notion that this past—or at least those aspects of it that were not antithetical to Christian teachings—should now be valued positively (Tonkinson 1982: 313).

Whilst many ni-Vanuatu today, no longer hold a simplistic view of kastom as darkness, and indeed probably never completely did, the discourse has not altogether disappeared from the national scene. In 1995 when the Vanuatu Cultural Centre moved to a new locale, opening a new Museum, there were comments on the Radio and in the newspapers about how the arts festival, with its traditional dances performances, represented a return to the ‘sinfulness of past times’.

If Christianity was in many cases a precursor to the colonial regime, on both a practical and ‘ideological’ level (missionaries often appeared before governments, while Christianity also provided a moral justification for colonisation in general), the new religion was appropriated, construed and experienced by local people in ways that were quite different to the intentions of the early missionaries. That is, while some missionaries have become national heroes (Young 1997), and Christianity has been strongly ‘internalised’, this does not mean that ni-Vanuatu have accepted the totality of the European colonialist enterprises in their differing forms and guises.

1 See also Jolly (2001).
The ways in which Christianities are conceived of and represented by ni-Vanuatu is fluid and diverse and it is perhaps telling that Vanuatu’s first Prime Minister, Father Walter Lini, was an Anglican priest who nevertheless led an anti-colonial independence movement. Thus, (and this is an important point) Christianity itself was appropriated within a nationalist and anti-colonial discourse, despite the fact that it was also an important moral, ideological and practical, dimension of many of the initial imperial enterprises (Jolly 1996).

The role of *kastom* as a nation building concept has now been the subject of discussion in much anthropological literature of the Pacific (Jolly & Thomas 1992; Lindstrom & White 1994; Linneken 1992; Linnekin & Poyer 1990; MacClancy 1983; Tonkinson 1981, 1982). One of the main lines of argument that emerged from the literature was the tensions between traditions as distinctively local, and tradition as a concept of national unity and identity (Larcom 1990; Lindstrom 1982). For some *kastom* then becomes a tool for a new national elite to subjugate peripheral groups to the newly created post independence indigenous elite (Babadzan 1988; Keesing & Tonkinson 1982; Philibert 1986). However others have pointed out that such an approach presumes that local tradition were ‘fixed’ and devoid of political context (Jolly 1992a). From that perspective, denying the legitimacy of such discourses can also be a denial of post-colonial nationhood.

The point I wish to make here however is that much the same kind of arguments could also be applied to the contemporary Christianities which have spread through the archipelago. Clearly Tom’s practice and discourse is not addressing the same concerns as those who/involved with established

---

1 For a detailed discussion of this in the African context see Comaroff and Comaroff (1989, 1991).
2 Keesing changed some of his views on this matter in later publications Keesing (1991).
3 Jolly’s argument was to challenge a sense of authenticity, an apolitical local *kastom* vs claims of inauthentic politically motivated national *kastom* (Jolly 1992a).
denominations such as the Catholic, Anglican or Presbyterian churches. This raises the question of whether contemporary Christianities should also be understood in the same kind of terms as *kastom* in the anthropological literature. Indeed churches too can divide and unite, both nationally and locally. Church affiliation, as a sign of being Christian, and a specific kind of Christian, is also a contextually dependent discourse. Within both these discourses, of belonging to a specific church or of following a certain *kastom*, peoples’ allegiances and affiliations still follow a logic of *ples*. 
Part Two

The Placing of Knowledge
Chapter five

RELATIONS OF CREATIONS

Cross-cultural dialogue: an ethnographic reflection

When Simety asked me a question, I had a problem answering for several reasons. His question involved a menstruating woman and a yam, it involved an apple and a snake, as well as monkeys and skulls.

I was engaged in a classic ethnographic encounter, asking him about his family and origins. I wanted to know who he called what, what they meant to him, and what he meant to them.

I hadn't been there long enough to realise that genealogies without their stories are not real genealogies in Malakula. They carry little weight, don't make sense, and have no real value. With stories they are everything.

I mean it quite literally: the stories of different origins validate rights to land. That means the control of food and prestige, of both money and magic. They are public secrets that are partially told. The details are what count and they are kept strictly 'within'. People know which spirits are associated with which people and which places, but only those in control know precisely how. Everyone knows the basic story, but only a manples, a man-place, can tell details. Only manples has that right, that knowledge.

So Simety told me the 'public secret' version of his story. He told me that he comes from a yam. A type of yam they call n'ambat'nbat, a reference to the Ambat brothers: the five fingers of the hand, the five ancestral beings. One day a woman was planting a yam, but she shouldn't have been because she was menstruating. When that yam had grown, she and her family came and dug it up and put it in the yam-house. When the next Nimingi ceremony was held, the yam burst into a man and went to the men's house and borrowed ritual things like clubs and anklets, to join in the dance.
And when the dance was over he went back to the men's house, returned all the objects, continued on to the yam house, and became a yam again. This happened several times until he was finally caught by the woman and her husband. After explaining the circumstances of his birth to them, how her menstrual blood was on the wild cane pole that was planted alongside the yam, they decided that he should remain as a man. So started the Vunbangk amel, or men's house. The one Simety belongs to. The one that is no longer a house, but still very much a place.

Then he assured me that this story was true, not like other kinds of stories that are told. It was not ndingning hur'ian ('told to anybody, all over the place), but nambatin nokoh'ian, (head/root of existence). In Bislama he said: it is not storian (story) but histri (history).

Then he asked me if I thought it had really happened.

That was when I started to get stuck. I answered something like: 'yes, well I don't really know, but it is possible'.

He told me something to the effect that while he appreciated the respect I was showing for his history, he still wanted to know whether I believed that it really happened.

I couldn't answer. I shrugged.

So he asked me what I did believe, and after a brief pause I answered with my own 'public secret' version of an origin story: long bilif blong mi, mi kam out long ol mangke— in my belief, I come out of monkeys.

He burst into laughter, shook his head, and then looked at me with a slightly patronising smile.
Amidst mediations

An anthropology that refuses to accept the universality of mediation, that reduces meaning to belief, dogma, and certainty, is forced into the trap of having to believe either the native meanings or our own. The former alternative, we are told, is superstitious and unobjective; the latter, according to some, is ‘science’. And yet this kind of science can easily degenerate into a form of indirect speech, a way of making provocative points by translating idiom into fact and by over exoticizing one’s research subject for symbolic effect. This is possible because anthropology is always necessarily mediative, whether it is aware of the implications or not; culture as the mediative term, is a way of describing others as we would describe ourselves, and vice versa. (Wagner 1975: 30).

Had I been able to draw Wagner’s quote to mind when Simety asked me if I believed that his family came out of a yam, ‘mediation’ would have been the answer I would have liked to have given him. The dialogue here was not only one of origins, of stories told to position the tellers in time, but even more so from Simety’s perspective, about place. In this chapter I explore how some of the origin stories that are told about place amongst the Na’hai speakers, are not only fundamental to people’s lived experience of place, but that this notion is central in models of, and for, their relationships with each other. These stories form the basis of amel identity, and hence land tenure. Fortunately, the Bislama term manples (man-place) elucidates this ‘social nexus’ in a way which proves convenient for English speakers.

Following the words I quoted above, Wagner goes on to argue that ‘we must be able to experience our subject matter directly, as alternative meaning, rather than indirectly, through literalization or reduction to the terms of our ideologies’ (ibid: 31-31). This is at the heart of ‘mediation’, and of any serious attempt at ethnography. I stress this here because the subject matter of this chapter warrants a strong ‘warning’ signpost from the outset. By focusing on the relationship between origin stories and
contemporary economic resources, particularly land, it is important to stress that such stories are not only about controlling resources and power. It could be tempting to see origin stories as a kind of Marxian ‘mystification’ for example, serving to justify and entrench existing power relations within a Na’hai political-economy, or to see control of narrative as control of the means of production (or reproduction- after (Godelier 1986)). However, in doing so we may be falling into the very trap Wagner warns against, by imposing our concerns onto a context where they are not necessarily appropriate, and by eclipsing the saliency with which supposedly ‘distant’ or ‘mythic’ narratives influence contemporary social relations and identities.

To sum up, the signpost should read:

MEDIATION WARNING: the following explanation of origin narratives as tools of control of economic and political resources, as a resource for power themselves, is an exploration of an important dimension to them, but not of their ‘total significance’, or even less, of their ‘truth’.

Stories of time, spirits of place

Just as Malakula is a place with ‘many cultures’, a place of many places, so it is a place of multiple origins. People tell countless tales of how things came to be in the world. The Bislama term that people use for origin stories is histri. The term histri usually covers both the genealogy of the amel, and the accompanying origin story. While a direct translation of the term with the English word ‘history’ is obviously to be avoided, it is worth pointing out that some Ambat stories are called just that ‘ol storian’, as distinct from an amel’s histri (which may or may not involve an Ambat figure). In Na’hai these histri, the origin myths of specific amel, are called nambatin nokoh’ian (the head/root of existence), and are considered to be of a different kind to the stories called ndingnding hur’ian (to tell anybody, all over the place).1

1 Nambatin translates as both ‘head’ and ‘root’ (stamba in Bislama). Note also the lexical
The first are considered ‘real’ and ‘heavy’, to be kept secret and with ramifications for land tenure (histr). The second I was told are like ‘children’s stories’ which everyone knows and can be told openly and by anyone (ol storian).

Stories of origins vary not only between, but also within, the numerous language groups found on the island. Moreover, within the many language groups, each amel has its own origin story and ancestor-spirit. Each creation story links together a group of people into amel—men’s houses— and this is done through a shared ancestral relation to place, or ples.

**The Ambat: brothers as fingers**

It is generally understood that Tomman Island was created by Ambat. Ambat is the name of the eldest of five ancestor-hero brothers who are also referred to collectively as ‘the Ambat’. Deacon discusses them repeatedly in his ethnography, and states:

> In speaking of the Ambat, however, a certain confusion arises, for the word is sometimes used in the singular, sometimes in the plural. Thus, in saying of an object ‘the Ambat made this’ the native is using the word as a singular noun, but questioning will reveal that the Ambat were five brothers…. (Deacon, 1934: 617-18).

The brothers are said to be the five fingers of a human hand, and the names for these fingers in Na’hai are the names of the five Ambat. The thumb is Ambat, the eldest and most important. The next (index finger) is called avu-kinduas, then there is avu-gnotgnot (middle finger), sumbiarwiliu (ring finger), and avu-ra’ra (little finger). The names of the Ambat brothers are also indicative of their personalities: *avu kinduas* (‘grandfather wild-yam’), is wise; *avu-gnot’gnot* is lazy and stubborn (from dingot, ‘no, I don’t want to’), *sumbiarwiliu* (*sumb:* sit down, *vwiliu:* turns around, overturns) is unpredictable; and *avu-ra’ra*, who is the youngest and most important next
to Ambat, is intelligent and hardworking (avu-ra’ra ‘grand-father’ who works hard, who makes happen’). In some stories, in some other places, avu-ra’ra is said to be more important and powerful than Ambat himself, but on Tomman they consider Ambat to be ‘the highest’.

Deacon observed: ‘there are several tales concerning Ambat and his brothers, or it might be accurate to say that there are several versions of one or two tales ...’ (1934a: 618). However, it is not the case that there is one or two Ambat tales, with several versions, but that there is a variety of versions for each of the many Ambat stories. The differences are partly due to the memory of the specific narrator, and to the time and context within which the story is told. But more importantly, variations are also determined by the amel, or ples, to which the narrator belongs. Between two different amel the key roles were sometimes inverted, although the general narrative plot remained the same. For example, the people of Woron, descendants of Naa’vinveo, told me that it was Naa’vinveo who initially gave the Ambat knowledge when they came to the small island, whereas people from some other amel claimed it was the Ambat (specifically Ambat himself) who brought that knowledge.

Ambat created Tomman island by transforming himself into an owl and piercing the mouth of a giant clamshell with a stake. From his home on the mainland, he had seen the clamshell spurt out the saltwater for several days. First he had tried to send his brothers, who also metamorphosed into different birds and set out for the place where the sea was spurting upwards. But each, in turn, failed to pierce the giant clamshell. Finally Ambat himself decided to try, he transformed into an owl and when he eventually succeeded, the island of Tomman emerged at the very spot that his stake

---

1 However, there are two Ambat stories (the creation of Tomman and the death of Ambat) which are by far the most commonly told.
had pierced the clamshell.¹

Pleased with his unintended creation, Ambat decided to leave the big island and move there with his brothers. They lived at Yum-Oran, at the centre of the small island. And so Yum-Oran, (literally the ‘House-of-Oran’) became a special place, a special amel, the home of Ambat and his brothers.

Yet when Tomman emerged some other spirit beings, the ancestors of the people who live there today, emerged with it. Each being emerged or arrived at a specific place on the small island, giving both origin and ancestry to a specific amel. Apart from Yum Lo’or, where the Ambat settled, there are four other main amel on Tomman: Vanhah, Woron/Meleut (although as we will see, there is some dispute as to whether Woron is a primary or ‘subsidiary’ amel), Dineūr and Vunbangk. The founding ancestor for Vanhah is Nipma’al, although Lindanda –Ambat’s ‘wife’ in other contexts- also resides there and is the female ancestor. Dineūr was founded by Atbwengman, who remains present on the island in the form of a large boulder. And finally, Vunbangk is Simety’s amel, whose origin story I gave at the beginning of the chapter.

Naa’vinveo

At the northern end of the island, at the place called Woron, lived Naa’vinveo. Naa’vinveo is the founding ancestor of Woron and its associated amel, including Meleut, the one I was adopted into. The story I was given by my father, Longlel tells of the encounter between Naa’vinveo and the Ambat when they came to the island. He told me that when the

¹ This is a synthesis of the variations on the same story that one hears. This story can also be seen in (Deacon, 1934a: 715-18). The sexual imagery here is obvious not only to an foreign observer, but also to the Na’hai speakers themselves. Clamshells (nintili) recur in important symbolic and mythical contexts throughout Southern Malakulan societies, and in Na’hai ‘everyday jargon’, clamshell (nintili) serves as a semi-humorous analogy for a vagina and namarai (eel) for a penis. In this light, the piercing of a clamshell by a stake held in the mouth of an owl, is ‘overtly’ sexual.
Ambat came they didn’t ‘know things’, they slept under banyan trees, and didn’t know how to make tools, houses, or rituals. They claim Naa’vinveo taught the Ambat these things, although other people told me the opposite. Some say it was Ambat who taught Naa’vinveo, not the other way around. In any case my adopted father Longlel said that when the Ambat came they found Naa’vinveo who taught them to make tools and houses, and then told them they were going to make a Nimingi. The Ambat replied that they had no pigs, and thus could not make Nimingi, but Naa’vinveo replied that he would take care of the pigs and that they should get everything else ready. So they worked to get things ready and on the day of the ceremony they said to Naa’vinveo: ‘we have made everything ready, but there are still no pigs, what shall we do?’ Naa’vinveo told them that he was to be the pig for this ceremony: that they would slaughter him, and distribute the meat. They were to eat every part of him except his head, they had to preserve the head (as for a rambaramp). The Ambat protested against killing him, but Naa’vinveo insisted. So they made the Nimingi, killed Naa’vinveo and then shared out his body parts and ate them. Afterwards, Ambat (the eldest) took his head and went to put it some where. First he put it in the bush, but the next day it had come back to his house. Then he put it in the ground, and again the next day it came back to the house. He then threw it into the sea, but still it came back to the house. Finally, he threw it in the air, where it remained. Naa’vinveo returns every night as the moon.1

Thus the moon is actually Naa’vinveo’s head. (there are two words for the moon in Na’hai: one is Nivul the other is Nambatin ti Naa’vinveo, the head of Naa’vinveo). This origin story differs from most others in that the tale was about how it came to be that Naa’vinveo’s head lodged in the sky as the moon, rather than how a spirit being went about becoming or creating a line of human ancestry.

1 This substitution of pigs and humans is common in myths throughout the northern islands Allen (1964), Deacon (1934a), Funabiki (1981), Jolly (1984), Layard (1942), Patterson (1976).
Plate 5.1: A stone representing Woron amel. The carved face is Naa′vinveo: the moon (*nambatin ti Naa′vinveo*). The markings on the side of the nose are pigs tusks, referring to Naa′vinveo becoming the replacement of a pig for Ambat′s *Nimingi* ceremony.

This story emphasises Naa′vinveo′s connection to the Ambat, and rea affirmed Longlel′s family′s claim to an ancestral association with Yum Oran. However, this is not the only story that people tell about Naa′vinveo and later in this chapter I explore some narratives and claims emanating from some of the people of Vanhah amel, in the context of a dispute within the Vanhah clan. The other section of Vanhah invoke the other spirit ancestor who emerged on Tomman, the founder of Dinétir (and sub amel): Athwengman.
Atbwengman

Atbwengman lives in the south of the island, where you can see him in the form of a large boulder. His wife, Lising Mavial, is the sea snake ancestor with whom he founded the Dineûr amel. As with most other large amel, there is some dispute about who has the strongest claims to it. This dispute is further exacerbated by the fact that the eldest male person recognised as belonging to ‘strel Dineûr’, the core amel as opposed to a branch-amel (see chapter three), has resided in Malfakhali with his wife, children, and grandchildren, for more than twenty years. Yet it was he who brought me to see certain Dineûr places on Tomman, that others would not. His right to circulate and reside on Tomman, his status of marple, has not eroded. This does not mean that the actual political influence he could hold in the village is more important than those who actually reside there. Indeed he has lost his influence in daily matters because of his departure.

Ancestors today

The relationship between these kind of ancestral stories and contemporary concerns, such as the global flow of capital for example, is evident in the ways the Ambat brothers have acted lately. Longdal sometimes mentioned to me that he would like to undertake an expedition to find the Ambat brothers. They exist he assures me, and on occasion interact with people of the place. The most common exchange they engage in these days is to leave mattresses, tinned beer and food on reefs or beaches as presents to those who may stumble across them. Sometimes a large steamboat can be heard on the Matlelamb river, a means of transport that could only be the Ambat. They are white and have access to white men’s goods, but unlike the white-men who are just men, they understand Melanesian notions of reciprocity. They are also morally tied to place so that unlike other white prophets or spirit beings such as John Frum in Tanna,1 they have no links with America.

or distant lands, they are indisputably *manples*.

Sometimes, I was told by Sungrang, they appear as ordinary white people, pretending to be tourists, and it is only when one stubs a toe and swears in Na’hai, or through some other slip of the tongue, that people realise that they are actually the Ambat. They are cunning tricksters, but ultimately hold the interest of *manples* at heart. In local idiom they are said to be wise men.

The Ambat live in the realm of existence called the *naa’hap*. It is possible for people to ‘enter’ or see within the *naa’hap*, and when a person does so he or she can not only see spirits but also simultaneously influence and interact with the world of everyday existence. It is in this realm that sorcerers practise their art, that the dead can meet with the living, that people can travel vast distances speedily. And it is through this realm that the Ambat bring mattresses and tinned beer, ride steamboats up the river, and watch over the lives of *manples*.

So the Ambat are not merely ancestral figures of a bygone time, although they are the original ‘holders of culture’. Yet nor are they the most prominent concern in daily religious imaginings today. Indeed, I was told that they are no longer as ‘strong’, that they were ‘shy’ and didn’t intervene nearly as much as in the past. This is because today ‘church has come strong’ and people no longer ‘think heavily’ of the Ambat. Yet the brothers remain active, somewhat on the fringes of peoples’ concerns, intruding every now and then into the centre, reminding them of their origins, of the other kind of ‘white man’. When they do this it can be trickery, but never of a dangerous kind, and usually they help *manples*, leaving objects or knowledge for those who pay attention.

**Heads and roots of existence**

The most serious kinds of narratives, the ones which concern people most,
are the *nambatin nokoh'ian*. *Nambatin* is the word for 'head' but also for 'root' (*stamba* in Bislama), and thus *nambatin nokoh'ian* means the heads and roots of existence. These stories are of great importance because these narratives give rights to land. Vanuatu's independence in 1980 established customary land tenure as the only legally recognised form of ownership, and thus these origin stories have obvious contemporary (i.e. monetary) economic value as well. Chapter 12 of the Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu is entitled 'Land' and its first three articles read as follows:

**LAND BELONGS TO CUSTOM OWNERS**

73. All land in the Republic of Vanuatu belongs to the indigenous custom owners and their descendants.

**BASIS OF OWNERSHIP AND USE**

74. The rules of custom shall form the basis of ownership and use of land in the Republic of Vanuatu.

**PERPETUAL OWNERSHIP**

75. Only indigenous citizens of the Republic of Vanuatu who have acquired their land in accordance with a recognised system of land tenure shall have perpetual ownership of their land.

(Vanuatu 1980)

This constitutional legislation encompasses a vast array of local land tenure systems, and as such it defers to local village authorities in settling land disputes. In the Na’hai speaking, area the *nambatin nokoh'ian* provide the basis for 'a recognised system of land tenure' (article 75) and 'rules of custom' (article 74).

The *nambatin nokoh'ian* tell of magical encounters and mythical events. I
soon noticed that collecting these stories was something people became very aware of, and eventually I found myself obliged to collect them among more people than I initially intended. In my initial understanding I was not really there to do ‘that kind of research’. Aware of the dangers inherent in depicting a depoliticised ‘tradition’, of a structural analysis of myth devoid of history, as well as the dangers of exoticism, I was keen to engage in a more contemporary kind of anthropology. Yet in Malakula, origin stories are not merely ‘good to think with’ (à la Levi Strauss) but have practical applications for the control of resources as well as playing a crucial role in the way people understand themselves, their relationships to other, and their ‘place’. To ignore these stories would be to ignore a key aspect of how people in Malakula construct self and sociality. It would also be to ignore land, a crucial economic resource available to people in the islands.

I was often told that land disputes mushroomed considerably after independence, particularly over land that had previously been alienated, sometimes for several generations. Moreover, whenever the last (male) member of a lineage dies, disputes are predictable, as land can be claimed by women, by the daughters or sisters of the deceased male. This can sometimes lead to tensions between rights based on seniority and ancestry, and those based on residence and usage (since the deceased man’s wife is likely to have been living on her husband’s land). Such tensions and disputes can also occur in cases where there are too many scattered male descendants with rights of ancestry, but the usual pattern of viri-local\(^1\) post-marital residence has a general effect, from a patrilinear perspective, of helping to avoid potential tensions between rights of ancestry, and rights of usage.

---

\(^1\) The problem of naming the system as ‘virilocality’ rather than ‘patrilocality’ is not so relevant in the villages, where agnates tend to stay together in hamlets. But when a son moves to town, or to another village for long-term employment (e.g. teaching), their wives generally move with them. Furthermore, newly-weds establish their own house(s) within the hamlet where both husband and father-in-law (HF) live (they build a cooking house as well as a sleeping house), thus suggesting virilocal as the more appropriate term than patrilocal.
Of course virilocal residence also has the effect of removing newly wed women from the places and the people they are familiar and comfortable with, thus disempowering them dramatically for an initial period at least. Indeed, the gendered nature of ples has been the topic of some research, and there seems to be consensus at least that women experience ples in different ways to men in Vanuatu (Bolton 1999b; Jolly 1994b, 1994a; Patterson 2002; Rodman 1992). Local variations in land tenure, descent systems, and ‘ples attachment’ mean that there are obvious differences in the ways women relate to ples between islands. Women on matrilineal Ambae (Bolton 1999b; Rodman 1992) do not necessarily have the same relationship to ‘place’, as the women of the patrilineal Sa speakers of Pentecost (Jolly 1994a) and Na’hai speakers of Malakula.¹

As someone who was perceived to be there to ‘write kastom’, the nambatin nokoh’ian were stories that people thought I should collect. But this was no nostalgic romance about preserving folklore, as these stories also have practical applications for the control of resources. They are of crucial contemporary concern, and imbued with political and economic ramifications for the most ‘modern’ development projects. Even the most ardently committed Christians, who refused kastom in all of its material or corporeal manifestations (masks, dances, men’s houses), swore by the validity of such ancestral origin stories: those stories called nambatin nokoh’ian in Na’hai, or histri in Bislama. As I said earlier, the collection of these stories and their associated genealogies was what most people initially perceived my work to be. These stories are kastom in what we might call the strong sense. They continue to be of importance, even among those who call themselves Christian in the strictest sense, in opposition to

¹ Although it is important to note that residence does not always follow descent. Bolton states: “In east Ambae kinship is organised through matrilineal moieties, a person’s social location is inherited from their mother ... Landholding and land transmission are predominantly male practices. Women exercise their relationship to land by bearing children to it. By bearing children to a place, a woman connects a descent group to that place” (Bolton 1999b).
*kastom.* They are ‘strong’ *kastom* precisely because of their ramifications for control of resources: the stories control access to land, which in turn controls the access to the stories (Lindstrom 1990b). I heard no one reject or deny them, and nearly all were concerned with ‘recording’ them, usually in written form.

People rarely tell the *nambatin nokohian* openly. Apart from those I collected in private interviews, they were also told, often in heated dispute, in court cases held over land tenure. In fact in certain contexts, my presence as a foreigner became a benefit. Some people who had not trusted Longdald with their origin story gave it to me, with the intention that it would be deposited in the National Cultural Centre’s taboo room. On the other hand, I once returned from an interview to find my family gathered together under the instructions of Longlel, both boys and girls, to discuss and learn their own ‘history’. Their unusually coy reaction when I appeared suggested to me that Longlel was looking to ‘sort things out’ with his children, without me around, precisely, I believe, because of my ‘writing it in a book’. In this case, my proximity to the family I was living with was a reason for some caution on their behalf.

What struck me in these stories was how they were largely about violation and innovation. *Kastom,* as *histri,* is based more on revolution than reproduction, on confrontation more than conformity. *Amel* were born of women violating taboos, of people disobeying spirits, of challenges to established orders and questionings of ancestral ways. This is the stuff of ‘tradition’: innovations and usurpations pervade these ancestral stories (Allen 1981b, 1981a, 1993; Bolton 2003; Bonnemaison 1996; Jolly 1994b; Rubenstein 1981).

Of course, the theme of innovations and inversions in myths or histories is nothing new in anthropology. It is found in the ‘stranger king’ motif throughout the Austronesian world (Barth 1987; Sahlins 1981a). In many
patriarchal societies in Melanesia and Amazonia, it is found in the secret, or semi-secret, stories of women as the original 'holders of culture', the creators of the sacred flutes or masks (Hill 1993; Weiner 1995). These are all histories/myths where contemporary established ways of being and acting are set in motion by initial acts of usurpation or revolution.

When collecting such stories I was also confronted with what I initially perceived as contradictions. The stories were fractured by chronological inconsistencies and 'ideological' tensions. Those stories about the local 'culture heroes', the Ambat brothers, some of which are documented in the appendix to Deacon's ethnography (Deacon 1934: 715-736), do not provide an historical account of the unfolding of 'culture' (Wagner 1975). Nor do they propose a chronology of the world, an explanation of its beginning. Rather they help to provide a moral template for understanding the relationship between people and places: a sort of blueprint for being mamples. They are history precisely because they are about the present, and possible futures, more so than about distant origins or misty pasts.

Such historical inconsistencies emerge not only in different versions of a story, but in comparing the events and actors of different stories. For example, in one common story the oldest brother, Ambat, dies at the hands of the youngest, Avu-ra'ra, and in another it is the youngest who dies whilst the eldest survives. When I confronted my adoptive father, Longlel, with this apparent contradiction, he thought about it as if it were a novel problem, a problématique that only became problematic in his interactions with myself, an anthropologist seeking to reveal the secrets of 'culture'. His answer, which was somewhat unsettling for me, was: 'Well, aren't you here to straighten all of that out?'

This problem, of historical consistency, of resolving contradictions, was clearly mine, not his.
Engendering origin

Imagine a scene:¹

In one corner of a circle stand five brothers. They are white skinned, each different yet similar. They are the Ambat. The oldest has a wife who are in fact two, also light skinned. The wives are beautiful, intelligent, powerful. Then the brothers all fade and merge into each other. They re-appear and the wives now belong to the youngest brother, yet at the same time, but separately, they can only be the wives of the oldest brother.

It makes perfect sense.

In another corner stands a large female figure, dark skinned and hairy, with crooked arms and legs, and long sharp teeth and nails. Her ears are longer than those of any known creature. She is a menacing figure exuding intelligence and power. She is called ni-Vin'bum'bau.

She has a husband who sits behind her, and several children hanging off the side of her hips, suspended to her bark belt. Her husband is light skinned, an Ambat, named Ambat Maloun, but unlike the brothers he doesn’t move. He is submissive, passive. Between his legs lies an enormous penis. It is so long he cannot rise to walk about. He just sits there, so that his ogress-wife does everything. He is a slave to his penis, to his wife, who in many ways is more man than a man.

The five brothers and the ogress eye each other, circling around and exchanging insults. Then all hell breaks loose and a fight ensues. The ground trembles, the mountains sway. The white man with the long cock whimpers. The beautiful wives smile knowingly.

The brothers are victorious, the ogress lies dead on the floor. Her last words are: ‘You fellas can’t kill me... I will finish you...’. But the first born brother answers: ‘You can’t finish us...’

The brothers go back to their corner. The ogress’ body vanishes.

Then she reappears in her corner of the circle, standing in front of her cowering long-membered husband.

The parties in the two corners eye each other again, exchange insults...

A fight erupts...

And so on, and so on, and so on...

¹ This passage is presented as my own interpretive summary of a collection of stories I recorded in the field. It is not an actual account that was given to me by anybody.
The other important figure in local mythopoetic discourse is the female enemy of the Ambat: *ni-Vin'bum'bau*. As for the Ambat, *Vin'bum'bau* can be used in both the singular and the plural. In the singular the word refers to the large ogress, connected with the Ambat stories, and many rituals and masks of the *Nimingi* and (particularly) *Niluan* societies. In the plural *Vin'bum'bau* refers to small beings in the bush, living in families, and referred to in Bislama as ‘*lisepsep*’1 (a term used throughout Vanuatu, although in other islands they are not linked to the ogress figure, but usually described in English as ‘dwarfs’). On Tomman they are said to dwell on the hill in the centre of the island. For the sake of clarity I use the vernacular prefix ‘*ni*’ when referring to the large, original *Vin'bum'bau* (i.e. *ni-Vin'bum'bau*), and will talk of the small beings by using the English prefix ‘the’ (i.e. the *Vin'bum'bau*). I borrow this strategy from speaking Bislama on Tomman. In telling the stories they used *ni-Vin'bum'bau*, but when referring to the beings in the bush I often heard them described as *ol' Vin'bum'bau*.

The confusion between the *Vin'bum'bau* as bush beings and *ni-Vin'bum'bau*, as the mythological ogress who fights the Ambat, may have been part of a misunderstanding between Camilla Wedgwood and John Layard when Deacon’s book was edited. Wedgwood claimed that Layard

not unnaturally regarded Vin-bumba-au as being intimately connected with the mythology of the Ambat brothers, but in view of what Deacon has shown to be her manifold associations, and the great variety of stories which he has recorded about her, it seems questionable whether we can any longer agree with this opinion (Deacon 1934: 628).

Layard responded to this by including it in the list of errata he eventually managed to impose upon the publishers:

1 The Bislama term *lisepsep* is often confused with the *temes savsav*, the guardian to the world of the dead in the Na’hai (and Nahava) region. *Temes savsav* is well known through the sand-drawing that one must complete upon encountering this spirit, described in Deacon (1934a).
the opinion here attributed to me is in direct contradiction to my published statement to the effect that ‘there is not sufficient evidence to show’, to what extent Win-bumba-au (misquoted Vin-bumba-au) is fundamentally connected with the Ambat (Deacon 1934: 792)

In fact the debate is largely irrelevant, as it seems more about the definition of what fundamentally or intimately ‘connected’ means rather than giving any understanding of the relationship that does exist. I myself was told by my fathers Longlel and To’ Leo that as far as Ambat and ni-Vin'bum'bau were concerned, ‘ol taem tufala I mas faet’ (the two always had to fight). This suggests that in fact they are connected, even intimately or fundamentally, albeit in an antagonistic relationship. This does not deny other dimensions to ni-Vin'bum'baui’s existence, and her appearance in the mythology in other contexts where the Ambat are not present. Rather the problem stems from an academic desire for certain forms of narrative consistency and homogeneity.

Ni-Vin'bum'bau holds an ambiguous position in traditional Malakulan cosmology, not least because she represents a female source of male knowledge and power. According to Deacon it was ni-Vin'bum'bau who first made a naamb loh (sacred fire) and then sold the right to use it to the Ambat (Deacon 1934: 627). The Lindanda (or Lindanda), the wives of Ambat, are accredited with creating the nunuk masks of the Niluan rituals,¹ and hence represent another female origin of male power. Unlike Lindanda however, ni-Vin'bum'bau is also threatening. She holds both the powers of magic and of warfare, an exceptional intelligence combined with exceptional physical strength. She inverts the usual ideal of male/female relationships: her husband is the pathetic Ambat Maloun, dominated by his wife, restricted in his movement, the ‘stay at home’ man who is dependent on his wife. Furthermore, it is his exaggerated ‘maleness’, his abnormally long penis, that incapacitates him, that restricts him, even from being able to stand up, I was told.

¹ See chapter three.
Ni-Vin'bumbau is also said to have several children by Ambat Maloun. These children are represented in ritual dances either by small dolls that hang off the dancer’s waist, or as a sitting figurine on top of a head-dress. The son is called Ambun Mwing and the others, all daughters, are Lit'ur Mat'npang, Livandaf'iep, Lit'ur Meleng, Lises'bad' bx(rh)eu,bx(rh)eu, Litu'tap'rit, Lingil'barap. These names all have humorous connotations and can be used as ‘cheeky’ adjectives for people. For example, calling someone Ambun Mwing implies a kind of anti-social behaviour, someone who, as Longdal explained, ‘always stays in the bush, doesn’t come and shake hands, a bit of a wild man’. Livandaf'iep can be used as an insult for a woman who is seen as disrespectful, with some connotations of being sexually ‘loose’.

The ambiguity of Ni-Vin'bumbau’s gendered status is explained in the story of the ‘discovery’ that she has a vagina. I was sitting in a hous cuk (kitchen) with several of the elder men, those that are said to ‘know kastom’, with a copy of Deacon’s ethnography when they decided to give me the story. As I recounted in chapter three, we were going over the lists of grades in the text and they exclaimed that some of the titles listed in Nimingi were in fact Niluan grades. On this occasion they differentiated the two ritual systems by explaining that Nimingi has no masks. I myself wanted clarification on Ni-Vin'bumbau’s association with the rituals:

Tim ... I want to ask, on the other hand there are all the stories of ni-Vin'bumbau, but does ni-Vin'bumbau have a mask?¹

(silence)

Combined Yes...
Sungrang The one to dance Niluan with
Tim Can you tell my why ni-Vin'bumbau is connected with Niluan
Sungrang Oh I don’t know that. It could be taboo ... eh... I don’t really know! Yes, we have just heard the

¹ See chapter three about the masks of the Niluan society.
 Sungrang: Sometimes she said that she becomes a man!
Tim: *ni-Vin'bum'bau?*
Sungrang: She made herself like a man
Tim: She became a man?
Sungrang: Aha, she made herself like a man, she wore a nambas! That was her trickery/lies.
Longlel: That’s what I have been saying this woman she is special. She is smart and she is ... like Ambat! The wise of *ni-Vin'bum'bau*... she is a special woman!
Tim: But she made herself like a man?
Sungrang: Yes, she made herself like a man. She put on a nambas! And even more so, this woman.... She would marry women!
To'leo: Yes, ten or how much? (background)
Tim: Ten wives?
Sungrang: Ahah, they were her wives, just like that... and then go, go, go... there was a man from Umaas, Longdal’s place. He lived there, his name was... *Nipma’a*l. He lived there and he heard this woman who wore a nambas singing. She was married to women, and she said... she said that she had a sore. I say it like that but you know, (laughter, then he points to groin area), she said she had a sore, but she said that she was a man. So she said that she had a sore, and asked if anybody had medicine for it? Men came from all over! From Southwest Bay, and from... all the way down (north 2), and from the Maskeylene, all around Malakula, they came to look.
Tim: Where, here on Tomman?

---

1 The name of this important ancestor spirit means ‘dove’ or *sotleg* (short leg) in Bislama. Thus this ancestor spirit is also a dove.

2 In southern Malakula, ‘down’ refers to travelling north, whereas ‘up’ (*antap*), refers to southern movement. I suspect that this is related to the water currents, as travelling south usually means going against the flow (i.e. upstream), and north with the current (*downstream*). For a linguistic analysis of spatial directions on Ambae, see Hyslop (1999). Hyslop demonstrates the relation between physical terrain and linguistic directionality on that volcanic island.
Sungrang: No, at that place, on the big island, they came to see her. They came and looked and said, ohhhh, bumbu you will die, that is a huge sore! That big sore, it is eating you up! They made medicine for her, they prepared leaves, they washed them on it, they did this again and again... but the sore swelled up, it really swelled up.

(...)

Sungrang: Then, go, go, go, there was a man one day, ahmm, Nipma'al, Nipma'al, he came then. This man, Nipma'al he is a bird, like a bird. So he came and he looked and he said 'Hey bumbu, I heard you had a sore?' So ni-Vin'bum'bau said 'Yes, a big sore here, do you have any medicine for it?' So he said 'Can I see this sore' So he looked, he opened him/her and looked.

Longlel: She was a woman.

Sungrang: She was a woman, she made her 'grass' (pubic hair) for the nambas. She made it like a nambas, she made it, just like, just like, like a cock (low voice). So Nipma'al said 'oh true, this is the sore? Oh bumbu, you could die from this! I will make you some medicine for it.' So then he mounted her, he went on top of ni-Vin'bum'bau, he mounted her and felt 'this is good...' (Sungrang mimes and others laugh). That was his medicine (more laughter).

*(Nipma'al exposes ni-Vin'bum'bau to her ten wives and subsequently steals the wives)*

Tim: But did ni-Vin'bum'bau think she was a man, Nipma'al?

Longlel: Yes, she thought she was a man, she had all the paraphernalia of a Meleun on her body. In her hair and on her legs.

Sungrang: With pig tuskers as well, she wore them.

Tim: Did she take Nimini steps?

To'le: Yes, just like a man.

Background because there were no men

---

1 Bumbu is the Bislama word for avu, grandfather or grandmother, but it is also used generically for ancestors.
Sungrang  that is right... she made the nambas
Tim  *Ni-Vin'bumb'bau, she was the first to make a nambas?*
Sungrang  That is right
To'leo  And this bird, he became a man. *Nipma'al*
Tim  Ok, so that means... I just want to ask: was *Ni-Vin'bumb'bau* the first to make those masks?
Sungrang  She made the masks so that she could wear them, as hers (...)

This is a story that highlights some of the many ways by which Malakulan mythologies construct, combine, and inform contemporary concepts of time, place, power and gender. *Ni-Vin'bumb'bau* not only invented sacred artefacts associated with the exclusively male *Niluan* societies, she also accomplished all the ‘steps’ of *Nimingi*. She wrapped her pubic hair in a penis sheath, or *nambas*, and married ten women, a much higher number than normal for a high-ranking man, or *Meleun*.

The contexts of telling such stories are obviously heavily inflected by gender. The genders of the tellers, the listeners as well as the story characters. It does seem that a lot of the hilarity and relish of telling this story is dependent on it being an all-male group, where men can joke about vaginas as sores needing medicine with greater alacrity. These ancestral stories are fixated on relations between women and men, on beautiful wives and deadly ogresses, on men with power and mobility versus passive men with unduly long penes and on women who put on penis-sheaths and take wives. The masks of the *Niluan* ceremonies (see chapter three) that were kept hidden from women, were in fact originally created by mythic female figures: by *ni-Vin'bumb'bau* and the Lindanda. However, it is not simply that such stories talk about past times, about women originally having power and then losing it, as has been discussed in much of the literature on Melanesian mythology see (Gregor & Tuzin 2001), but also that they
position gender relations, and their association with place.¹

Places that matter

Marilyn Strathern, has argued that Melanesian persons are permeable and partible, and that there is no strong distinction between person and thing, between subject and object. So in exchange, persons become ‘distributed’ through the circulation of personified objects (Strathern 1990). In terms of Malakulan attachment to land, of relations between people and place, it is also helpful to think of persons being distributed not only through, but also by land. In this sense land stands as an object of a different kind. Unlike a gift, which is the personification of an agent into a ‘thing’, and then a ‘thing’ into an agent (Gregory 1980, 1982) land is a ‘thing’ which personifies (human) agents. This dialectical relation of people and place is crucial. In short, whereas people produce and circulate gifts, land, as place, can be understood to produce people. Gifts may move between people, but people (and their gifts) move between places. In Malakula, as elsewhere in Vanuatu, both people and the objects they exchange, are products of place (Bolton 1999b; Bonnemaison 1987; Jolly 1981).

So place, or places, is more than a formalised, or legal, basis for the recognition of land rights, but also an integral part of the social formulation of person and collectivity. The human agent has only limited control, if any at all. The point is not to say that land produces people independently of their existence, but rather that people understand themselves to be products of place. Thus, in the same way that in western bio-medical discourse, bodies are seen to be the ground of persons, as male or female for example, place in Malakula produces persons. Indeed we might ask ‘is place to

¹ For a similar point about the Foi of Papua New Guinea see Weiner (1995).
land/ground as gender is to sex’? Not having a ples might thus be understood as potentially producing the kind of confusion in social and self-identification for a Malakulan that gender neutrality or ambiguity does for a contemporary European.

Of course, using ples as an integrated aspect of self does not negate the existence of gendered relations of power and I do not wish to imply that gender is not as important for Melanesians as it is for others, although how bodies are understood as social artefacts can vary considerably (Strathern 1990). Yet the analogy is useful in ‘bringing home’ the central, or concrete, and embodied, role of ‘ples’ in ni-Vanuatu identity. Being manples, is not the same as being a ‘Parisian’ or an ‘Australian’.

The analogy between place and gender is helpful insofar as it alludes not only to the integrated, or inalienable, nature of ples, but also because it invokes a connection between culturally presumed innate characteristics of persons, and wider social relations of domination and submission. To be ‘of the place’ in Vanuatu, is to have certain inalienable rights over all the people who are not. This means, of course, that a discursive control must be established by those ‘in the right’, and the most effective way to have control over ples, on Tomman (and throughout Vanuatu?), is through the simultaneous control of narratives and of spaces. Narratives help control what is understood to constitute place, and how in turn, a place is understood to constitute people. Restricted spaces give a ‘concrete’ grounding to the narrative association of people to places, or places to people. These restrictions are often enforced through the association of spirits and places, and through intrinsic characteristics of places that are spiritually and physically dangerous to those who do not have the proper affiliation, to those who are not manples. When people in Malakula argue about land they are not only disputing over the control of material

---

1 See Butler (1993).
resources, but in a very real sense, competing for their own identity and agency. They are vying for the ability to define themselves as ‘completed’ persons, able to act in, and on, the world around them. This is the importance of being mangles.

Plate 5.2: People from place: Longlel pointing out an indent in the reef to the north of Tomman. This feature of the landscape was created by Naa’vinveo, Longlel’s founding ancestor-spirit, who used it as a resting place.
Chapter six

ON GODS AND GROUND

Trouble in Vanhah

Some time during the late 1970s, when talk of national independence was amplifying throughout the islands of the archipelago, Ambuas Ambong Lei'lei, or jif Ambuas as he was more usually called, made a decision that would change his life. He left the small island, where his ancestors had lived since the time of their ancestors, and went and settled across the strait at Milip village, on the ‘big island’. He was a supporter of the Vanuaaku Pati, whilst the majority of people on Tomman were pro-Nagriamel, a difference in political affiliation that became more and more difficult to reconcile in everyday life as independence approached. As in the late 1940s when he was one of those who pushed for conversion to Presbyterian Christianity, Ambuas had chosen to align with what turned out to be the winning side of the wider politico-historical struggle. After independence in 1980, Walter Lini’s Vanuaaku Pati held government for fourteen years; Jimmy Stevens and other Nagriamel leaders were imprisoned.2

Today the turbulence of independence politics has largely subsided, and party political divisions have become far more complicated and fluid. Earlier divisions between pro- and anti-independence, or Anglophone and Francophone speakers, have been eclipsed by differences of inner and outer

---

1 See chapter three.
2 For a more thorough overview of the post independence fate of the Nagriamel leaders see Miles (1998).
islands, church denomination, and a more personalistic politics. So Ambuas moves freely between Milip and Tomman, where he still holds respect and speaks publicly. In the eyes of both those of Tomman and those of Milip, he is *n'mar-Ur (man-Tomman)*, and to be even more precise, he is *n'mar-Vanhah (man-Vanhah)*.

He and his family are involved in an ongoing land dispute with another Vanhah family. This is the family of Aisoh Amboranbuas and his wife Ling’is, a woman from Gawa, in the Banks whom he met in Espiritu Santo during the second world war. The people of this family are nearly all members of the Seventh Day Adventist church, and have often spoken out about what they perceive as the ‘evil’ of *kastom*. Yet Aisoh was quick to validate the truth of his *nambatin nokoh’ian*, explaining that God had made the world and put all the spirits in it, who in turn generated the various *amel*.

Vanhah is the place where the Lindanda lived, and because of this it is also the place that holds the strongest love magic. The site of the old Vanhah village is now uninhabited and overgrown by bush. The old stone walls and some of the grade-taking stones can still be seen there. The families of Ambuas and Aisoh are the largest families of Vanhah: they live in Worles, on Tomman (Aisoh family), and in Milip village on the mainland (Ambuas family).

Vanhah is by no means the only *amel* to be in dispute, on the contrary such disputes are more the norm than the exception, but I focus on this particular ongoing dispute for two main reasons. First and foremost it as an example of the kinds of ‘narrative controls’ people in Malakula use to explicate and justify the relationships between people and places, places and people, and people and people. And second, quite simply because this was an ongoing dispute that affected my day to day living. Aisoh’s hamlet was the one next to mine. Its inhabitants are also involved in a dispute with my family from

---

1 See Hemelin and Wittersheim (2002).
Woron, which I also discuss. Thus my father, Longlel, had become an ally to Ambuas, whereas a couple of decades ago, independence politics had made them enemies.

Aisoh and Ambuas both asked me to record their ‘history’ during my second fieldwork trip in 1997. By that time I was keen to collect these stories as I was well aware of the tension that existed between their families. Both sides in this dispute claim to tell the original and eternal ‘truth’, and both sides thereby claim primary or almost exclusive, control of the Vanhah land. Aisoh and Ambuas tell slightly different versions of a similar origin for Vanhah, yet the differences in detail are the cause of much friction. The details are about the doings of gods, but it is the ground that is at stake.

Stories, spirits, sex: at the heart of the trouble

The dispute in the Vanhah amel revolves around a practice called *nanangenangk*. *Nanangenangk* was a kind of *kastom* ‘spouse sharing’. *Nanangenangk* could be practiced either as two couples alternating between their sexual partners, or in some cases, by two men marrying the same women. In the latter case, the men slept with one woman in turns. In both cases my male interlocutors insisted that it had to be based on a close friendship between the men, that there could be no jealousy. I was quite surprised to hear about this practice, as in some ways it sounded suspiciously like a form of polyandry, something that I was not, and am still not, aware of in any literature on Vanuatu.\(^1\) In the first case (two couples sharing spouses) one can hardly speak of polyandry. However the second case where two men can marry a single woman does resemble polyandry, even if either of those men may continue to have other wives, as was sometimes the case.

\(^1\) Although Thomas refers to polyandry in the Marquesas Islands Thomas (1989).
Although one could hardly talk of a polyandric system, since nanangenangk was an exceptional rather than regular occurrence, this practice merits mention not only for the way it relates to these stories, but also because it is unusual in a cultural context where polygamy was highly valued, and descent was patrilineal. In the past, when nanangenangk occurred and there was some uncertainty about which man had fathered a child, there were special stones at the origin ples of the concerned amel which could be used to determine the father of the child. Those who had been initiated into the magical arts would travel into, or through, the naa'hap and ‘hear’ the verdict of the stones.

Today notions of genealogical ‘bloodline’, or bladlaen in Bislama, have become crucial in disputes about land. This notion of bladlaen appears to be a recent development as none of the earlier ethnographies refer to it. On the other hand Greg Rawlings who was doing fieldwork on Efate at exactly the same time that I was on Malakula, also came across this concept in disputes about land (Rawlings 2002). The emergence of bladlaen as a concept for kinship means that nanangenangk now appears as a threat to the rationale of patriliny: when sex and reproduction are linked to blood, rather than place, stones can no longer mediate on questions of paternity. Add the sexual practices of ancestor spirits to this equation and we come to the heart of the trouble in Vanhah:
Aisoh
30 November 1997

Plate 6.1 Aisoh and Jake Amboranbuas
under the banyan tree of Yum Vanhah.

Aisoh: It's like this.... I will tell it just like the old fellas
told it. The oldfellas told this story, they spoke
about it... It was that wild cane, (saltwater wild
cane) and the dove (Nipma'al). The dove took it to
that place, the passage there, Worles. It took the
wild cane and made a nest with it, so that it could
lay eggs there. When it laid 3 eggs, they hatched
and the three of them fell out. They fell to the
ground and that thing grew...

Tim: The wild cane?
Aisoh: Yes. It grew, and it started this place then... it
started Vanhah stesen... It grew, and the three
grew on it... the two women and the man... that
is it...
Then, go, go, go, they became big, they suckled on the wild cane only, they grew because of it and they became big and lived. They lived, and they came from that place, their birth-place is still there today... the place they came out of... it is at Yum Vanhah.

When they were big they lived by themselves... there was only three of them, and they lived liked that 'go,go,go' ... They played all the time,... And then one day they heard that a man was listening to them... an oldfella from another place was there, ... he lived at Yum Lo’or.

Aisoh: At that place over there, where Ambat was still living. He heard that they were playing all the time, and he said: 'Man! I am by myself, I live like that. On my own. I don’t have anyone to talk to!' He wanted to go and see them.

Tim: Who was that man?

Aisoh: Who?...that man... Na’avinveo. He got up then, and said: 'I’ll try to go and meet them'. He knew that they lived there, the two Lindanda and Namalmal. ‘They are always playing and I am alone, I have no one to speak to, I’ll go and see them’

(...) So, then he started going to see them regularly, he came to spend time with them and they played. They played and played and played all the time and when they had finished he would go back to his place. It was very close, just like from here to Vunai’amp, something like that, not even Vunai’amp... to Lo’or Bati only... at the oldfellas’ house. So he would come and go. One day, they said to him: ‘Why do you keep going and coming? You should just stay here’. So the oldfella said, ‘Yes, it is good if I stay, this place is close to my yam house, it is close, it is good. I will come and stay here. I will stay so that we can play together. It is good ... So he would sleep at Vanhah all the time... and then, ... Namalmal said: ‘Do you want to go back, or will you stay for good’? ‘No, I
will stay for good now' he answered. Namalmal said: 'That is good, we will stay here now' ...

(...)

It was like this ... Namalmal had married one of the Lindanda, and one was left unmarried... So Namalmal got up and said ... 'Ok, you will take this woman. I have already taken one, so you take one, I take one, and we will live here'. And he said, 'Good! That is good. I will give you one (wife)'. So Na'avinveo married the second one, Namalmal had the first one.

(...)

And then they made that thing (\textit{nanangenangk}) ... they shared wives ... one would go with one today, and one with the other tomorrow...

Alright, the one that went with one wife today, would take the one the other was with, and the other would take the wife that he was with...They did this. They were friends.

Tim: They swapped wives?
Aisoh: Yes ... Then the first had a baby, Namalmal's baby, she had that baby. Namalmal said 'Oh, we have been here for a while now, and my wife is pregnant. It is good'. So then he got up and took the child. The two of them looked after the child and stayed like that. Then another one was born to the other ... and he said: 'That's it, we both have children now .... That one will go to you. Yes, it is good, we are both straight now. For you there is one as well. This one goes to you, to your \textit{amel}, and this one is for me, for my \textit{amel}. So that is it, Vanhah and Woron. Yes, the root (origin) of these places is like this. For this place, Vanhah, it is like this. It is a half \textit{amel}. Half only, from there and from here. It is like that, Woron, Vanhah.

Tim: Ah yes, the two are joined.
Aisoh: Yes, and there are marks to show it.

(...)

Aisoh: So you see, we call it \textit{nanangenangk}. They call us the children of \textit{nanangenangk}, because of what I have just told you, when one goes with one today, and the other tomorrow. Yes but the origin (root)
of it is this then. It was not our oldfellas who did it, it was the Lindanda who made it. These days some people say it was the oldfellas who made nonangenangk. No, they do not know, because the story of before exists. The say it was the oldfellas but it was not like that, it started right at the root (origin, beginning). From the origin (root) it has come down to us today, it is like that. That is it, the story is like this, just like our oldfellas told us.
Ambuas: When the small island, Tomman island, started, all the things which would come, came to live on the small island. But I can’t talk about other people, I will only talk about us [Vanhah]... We have a bird called nipma’al, that one they call ‘shortleg’ in Bislama (dove). It flew, it came from a place they call na’ranavat on the big island. When it came, to Vanhah, it carried three eggs. Then, the three eggs stayed there until they broke: two for Lindanda, one for Namalmal.

Benson: Lu’us
Ambuas: Yes, Lu’us ... Lu’us-Lindanda, these two names. Lu’us and Lindanda, both. It carried them both, then broke, it broke into this: Lu’us and Lindanda... And Namalmal... just three eggs. Not four, only three. And that’s how they started the root of us [Vanhah] then. Namalmal ‘carried’ a girl of Atbwengman [the founding spirit of Dineiir amel], he came and took her to Vanhah. He took her and came and lived at Vanhah.
Tim: So they are the three eggs ... that Nipma’al carried here.

Ambuas: He carried them here from the big island and he came to Tomman
(...)

Tim: But are there two Lindanda?

Benson: No, only one.

Ambuas: Well, it’s like this, one is Lindanda, one is Lu’us, but together they are Lindanda..., 

Tim: Ahh, ok, you can say that both of them together are Lindanda?

Ambuas: Yes, that is it.

Tim: But the Lindanda, were they white or black?

Ambuas: No, they are white.

Tim: Like Ambat.

Ambuas: Like the misis ... but..., Namalmal is black.

Tim: Ahh, yes, Namalmal is black.... Because I heard that, they (over there) told me that Namalmal and Atbwengman, ... no sorry, not Atbwengman.... Namalmal and Na’avinveo they made nanangenangk with the Lindanda.

Ambuas: (chuckle) ... Oh no, they are lying. It’s not like that ..., Na’avinveo is something different.

Benson: Na’avinveo lives over there....

Tim: At Woron...

Benson: Yes.

Ambuas: They say it is the ancestor spirits, but the ones who made nanangenangk, they were already men. Our fathers saw these men.... The story I have told you, that is the straight kastom ancestor spirit, I don’t know about them. Our root is this, but that thing about nanangenangk, it was already men who did that... yes, it is true, but it was men not spirits... Aidu Vereh, the boss of our station.

Benson: And you see Namalmal,... well it’s like this at our place... you know, we don’t think heavily about women.... So when one gets married it means she no longer has her place, she gets married into another amel... so we don’t know so well. They say Lindanda was married to Ambat, the oldfellas said that Ambat carried Lindanda... Ambat. But
us, we follow Namalmal only, Namalmal’s line only...

Tim: Ah, yes, I see...

Benson: So Namalmal married into Dinei, he married Lising Mavial [daughter of Atbwengman], and they gave birth to Aidu Vereh.

Tim: But Aidu Vereh, was he still a spirit being?

Benson: Yes, he was a spirit being, well he was already half human. Afterwards, he had a boy called Amba Vereh.

Tim: Was he a human?

Ambuas: Yes, now he was human.

Tim: Amba Vereh, then Angot ...

Benson: Yes, Angot, and Ambor ran Aileh... Yes them two, they went to Queensland. They went to Queensland and died on Akhamb.¹

Tim: Ah, yes.

Benson: Because they dropped them back on Akhamb. Both of them went to work in Queensland with a man Akhamb. You know before, if a man crossed over that place there, they would eat him. So the man Akhamb kept them so that they stayed on Akhamb. And they stayed and stayed until they died on Akhamb. (…)

Ambuas: You see, Vanhah is a true village of Tomman, and we are the root of Vanhah station. It’s like that, Aisoh is only half-half, because he is from Vanhah and from Woron.

Benson: Yes that is it, our history comes out of this place. And we have all the things that go with it, the place where each of them died, their graves. And Lindanda too, Lindanda’s grave is there too. Namalmal, well his cock is there … the place where they buried him too, everything.

Tim: But is his cock still there, I went to Vanhah but I didn’t see it.

Ambuas: Because they broke it … during the time of the charismatic church.

Benson: Yes, they ruined everything.

¹ Akhamb is another small island off the south coast of Malakula see (Map A - Prologue).
Ambuas: But when you went with them, did they show you the grave?
Tim: No, well I saw only some parts of the place.
Ambuas: Well there are also the graves of Lindanda, two of them. One in the house and one to the side.
(…)
Ambuas: Yes that is all, but they know that Aisoh is wrong. He tells a different thing. He talks about the nanangenangk, he gave it to you to write it down but he says that the nanangenangk was done by the founding ancestor spirits, but it is not like that, the nanangenangk was by men, by the oldfellas. It was not the founding ancestor spirits.
These two versions of the origin of Vanhah, similar and yet divergent enough to create social tension, reflect self-consciously entangled discourses. The fundamental element – a spiritual attachment to place, with a founding origin spirit and an associated narrative – is evident in both versions. Yet the detail about nanangenangk, of sharing wives, is clearly explained and explicated in Aisoh’s version, and totally absent from Ambuas’ story. It was only when I questioned Ambuas about this interpretation that he mentioned it at all, by accusing the others of lying. This is the major point of dispute between the two parties. Ambuas claims that the nanangenangk never occurred between the founding ancestral spirits but happened instead among their human descendants. This has different ramifications for land tenure, and other implications which flow from being manples.

Links between origins: ramifying disputes

The ramifications of this dispute are not limited to Vanhah amel alone, as it affects those who claim descent from Na’avinveo as well, that is Woron amel. And here other layers of meaning play into the dispute, ones more familiar to western reasoning. The Aisoh family, in a dispute with Longlel’s family (Woron), appeal to the notion of biological fatherhood, of bladlaen, as opposed to the prior recognition of fatherhood through the customary procedures in cases of nanangenangk. There is thus a dispute between privileging the genitor versus the pater.

Jake (Aisoh) claimed that Longlel’s family originated from Vao. He told of a man from Vao who became lost on a canoe and ended up on the opposite side of Malakula, and saw a small island (like Vao) and went there. He was taken in, initially secretly, by a man from Woron and eventually they became so close that they made nanangenangk together. Jake’s point was that today we know about blood, and the oldfellas said that Longlel’s ancestor was actually born of the Vao man, although at the time kastom
made him man Woron. Therefore Longlel’s family, by ‘blood’, came from Vao and not Tomman. Longlel and his family however, deny this, saying they were of the Woron man, not the Vao man.

Jake and Aisoh claim that Vanhah and Woron are joined through another *nanangenangk* made by the founding ancestors, Namalmal and Na’avinveo (Vanhah and Woron), whereas their opponents, Ambuas claim that this association comes through a *nanangenangk* made by men, not spirits. Thus, Ambuas’ version of Vanhah’s origins are also an argument in favour of Longlel’s claim to Woron. If the spirits made *nanangenangk*, as Aisoh claims, then Aisoh and Jake have full rights to both Vanhah and Woron. If on the other hand, humans did it, (as Ambuas claims) they are half Woron, half Vanhah, with full rights to neither.

Indeed these disputes within Vanhah and between Woron and Vanhah are connected not only by the details of the doings of the various ancestors, be they human or spirits, but also by the rationales invoked in arguing each case.

This reasoning is also played out in the dispute between the Aisoh-Vanhah family and the Longlel-Woron family. In that case Jake claims that the *nanangenangk* undermines Longlel’s claim to being man-Woron, and in doing so he is arguing that a human *nanangenangk* can betray rights of ancestry. In other words, if his own ancestry is enmeshed in a human *nanangenangk*, then the basis for his rejection of Longlel’s rights also undermine his own claim to Vanhah. What is important in all this is that the rationale is based on *bladlaen*, (blood-line) that is biological fatherhood, which was of much less importance at the time when *nanangenangk* was still practised, when stones, or *ples*, determined the kin affiliation of *nanangenangk* children.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VERSION</th>
<th>ORIGIN SPIRIT- (PLES)</th>
<th>HUMANS</th>
<th>RATIONALE</th>
<th>EFFECT WITH WORON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AISOH</td>
<td>Bird</td>
<td>♂</td>
<td>♂</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Namalmal (Vanhah)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lindanda (Vanhah)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISPUTE</td>
<td>nanangenangk</td>
<td>'children of nanangenangk'</td>
<td>Kastom</td>
<td>DISPUTE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vanhah &amp; Woron (both)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Na’avinveo (Woron)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lindanda (Vanhah)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| AMBUAS   | Nipma’al             | Namalmal (Vanhah) | Lising Mavial (Dineur) | Man Vanhah | Ples | - |
|          | Dove (mainland)      |                  |                        |            |     |   |
|          | Ambat (Yum Lo’or)    | Lindanda (Vanhah) |                        | Man Yum Lo’or | Ples | - |
| DISPUTE  |                      |                    |                        | Aido Vereh –Man Vanhah | made nanangenangk (one or the other) | Descent bladlaen | - |

Figure 6.1: Diagram of Vanhah disputes and their ramifications for Woron.
The table shows how the main points of dispute occur when the logic rationale used is based on notions of practice, or *kastom*, (such as *nanangenangk*) which then get transformed into ‘bloodline’. Bloodline is a newer rationale, influenced by the bible, the missionaries and the legal implications of the constitution of Vanuatu. In all of this the practice of writing plays a central role, which I explore in the next chapter. What is important here is that *ples* as a basis of identity and land tenure is in many ways not up for negotiation in such disputes. What is argued are the details of *how* people are related to place, not the notion of attachment to *ples* itself. Thus *bladlaen* is a ‘newer’ rationale used not so much to undermine the importance of place, but to destabilize how people can be attached to place. In this context, ‘place knowledge’, such as the details of stories and objects related to primordial ancestors that would constitute ‘proof’ of being *manplies* in prior times, are now challenged by notions of biological ancestry. It is the forms of knowledge about place that are questioned, rather than the intrinsic association between people and place.

The placing of histories

Origin stories are not recounted on Malakula simply to trace a trajectory of ‘culture’ or ‘society’ from nature, even if that teleology has sometimes been imputed to myths. More importantly, such stories legitimate and perpetuate certain norms, or values, concerning social relations, at the expense of others. These are not benign accounts of the origins of the world or the beginnings of culture, but are stories which take their power from place. That is while the stories themselves do tell of beginnings and creations, on a more important level they also define who has what rights where, who is *manplies*. This is crucial in trying to understand south Malakulan societies, and the importance and value people attach to place. Of course, precisely because of this, these stories can be the source of heated, and on occasion violent, dispute.
It would be wrong to suggest, however, that disputes only arise in a post-colonial context, that they stem purely from a greater engagement with the cash economy. Heated disputes occur over land that does not directly generate large amounts of cash (such as Yum Oran), or garden produce, whilst other areas which hold successful coconut or cacao plantations are not necessarily under dispute (such as the Alo amel in Wintua which owns the airstrip and other land that was initially sold to the Reverend Boyd). In fact, the fight for narrative control, or discursive authority, is as much at the root of a dispute as the actual, or potential, material or resource value of the land (Lindstrom 1990b). Still narrative control is implicated in the flows and whirlwinds of material history, so that economic interest and discursive authority are both crucial.

The problem stems more from the separation of one form of value (economic) from the other (discursive/narrative), from the rigid distinction between idealism and materialism. In the interface between narrative, place, and power relations, the division between what is ideal and what is material is not only hard to distinguish, but inappropriate. In Malakula, the control of one of the most important material aspects of life (land), is entwined and dependent on very ideal narrations (understanding the origins of life), so that we would do well to heed Sahlin’s warning:

Clearly, the twin anthropological (or historical) errors of materialism and idealism consist in attempts to link the meaningful significance and the worldly happening in some mechanical or physicalist relation of cause and effect. For materialism the significance is the direct effect of the objective properties of the happening. This ignores the relative value or meaning given to the happening by the society. For idealism the happening is simply an effect of its significance. This ignores the burden of “reality”: the forces that have real effects, if always in the terms of some cultural scheme (Sahlins 1985: 154).

Land is indeed an important reality, one that has the most material, or grounded, of repercussions: the production of food, the sustenance and shelter of people. Yet it is through talk that land gains and gives meaning to
people and their products, and it is in this sense that it becomes *ples* (Rodman 1992). Place in this sense, is space plus talk: material *and* ideal simultaneously.

If we consider the relationship between the narration of past, present and future and that of being in place, what may appear as ‘contradiction’ from the perspective of someone seeking a linear chronology portending the contemporary configurations of human relations, may be quite ‘logical’ from a perspective which grounds such stories in the contested relationships between people and places. These stories are better understood when we acknowledge that in Malakula land, or better *ples*, is intrinsic to the constitution of self.

**Divergent stories, different *ples***

The Vanhah dispute illustrates how control over narratives of origin have considerable contemporary political and economic weight. Furthermore, a series of historical encounters, from a floating canoe from Vao, through to a fight between people on Tomman in the 1920s, to conversion to Christianity, the rise of the cash economy, and independence politics, have all contributed to the understandings and arguments that have surrounded these stories. In doing so such contexts influence the emphases and directions of the stories, and thus transform. They are both mythical histories and historical myths.

These stories are of great value to people, but it is important to bear in mind that we are also dealing here with different genres of telling, with *histri* as opposed to *ol storian*. While such narrative classification can highlight and reflect different inflections and content from both an emic and an etic perspective, the categories used can also, in and of themselves, shape content and signification by suggesting an epistemological ordering. The obvious danger for ethnography comes from using one set of genre
distinctions, those of a western secular academic tradition, to frame narratives that are told elsewhere, of confusing *histri* with History. There is a particular danger of buying into our own burdensome differentiation between the mythical and the historical, a distinction which can only ever be partial.¹

After all, it is not only Malakulans who make myth of history: Cleopatra, King Arthur, Joan of Arc, Adolf Hitler, and of course Jesus Christ. All these names testify to the creative interplay whereby European and Middle Eastern societies have produced historical figures of mythical significance. More than just invoking past happenings, these figures point to issues of moralities and ideals, to various social schemas and cosmologies (civilisation, divine kingship, nationhood, modernist totalitarianism, the afterlife/divinity). They embody ways of being and believing that inform contemporary action in the world. Moreover, places can play the same role: Jerusalem, Stonehenge, the Vatican, la Bastille, Buckingham Palace, Auschwitz, all have historical, moral and socio-cosmological significance. They are places that mean much more than just a physical locale to almost any western European. The process by which history becomes myth, and place is infused with both, is not the reserve of ‘small scale’ oral societies.

In other words, we must be careful not to relegate what has (in western frameworks) a mythical content, but an historical effect to our category of ‘myth’, just as much written ‘history’ has an historical content, and a mythical effect. From this perspective, distinguishing myth and history is meaningless. What is at issue is the creative interplay between myth, history, and society, where each moulds and determines the other. ‘Authenticity’ might thus be adjudged by contemporary efficacy, how important these stories are in people’s lives today, rather than in terms of how long they have remained the same. The tinned cans and mattresses left

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of this in the Amazonian context see Hill (1988, 1993).
by the Ambat brothers, or T-shirts representing amel affiliation, and Christian prayers for the harvest of the new yam, are all as authentic, and distinctively Malakulan practice as are the carving and placing of stones at the front of men’s houses.¹

In that respect, by exposing some of the claims, and counter-claims around these origin stories, my aim is not to determine which story is ‘truer’ or carries more weight. To do so would not only be intellectually foolhardy, but also ethically questionable. It would compromise what I found myself obliged to repeat constantly to my interlocutors: that I was not there in a role to ‘judge’ who is really manples. To do so would also contribute to the process whereby the written word tends to eventually eclipse the validity of spoken statements. Outsider interpretations can come to constitute a kind of local ‘truth’, because they are written down. This is already happening with Deacon’s work. Beyond the realm of academia, the audience this work is most likely to reach will be the people of southern Malakula themselves. As we will explore in the next chapter, written statements made in France or Australia about kastom can no longer be considered safe from circulation in Vanuatu. Then again, nor should they be.

¹ For more discussion on the politics of authenticity in foreign writings about Pacific people see Jolly (1992a).
Chapter Seven

STONE MEN AND THE POLITICS OF PAPER

One, two, three,
Stone smashes scissors,
Scissors cut paper,
Paper covers stone...

Other cases of the in-dwelling of ancestors in stone will be met with in the course of this work, and it is for this reason, coupled with the natives' absorption in megalithic ritual, that I have chosen the title "Stone Men of Malekula" (Layard 1942: 19)

One evening, in February 1996, I was sitting in a kava bar in Malakula's administrative capital Norsup, talking to a tertiary educated Malakulan man. I was recovering from the first, and most difficult, of what would turn out to be a series of malaria attacks. Although my mind was not very focused at the time – caught as I was in the cognitively liminal, if illuminated, worlds of malaria and kava – he told me something that evening that has remained clear in my memory and continued to intrigue me ever since. As the conversation developed he started talking about a particular land dispute that he was involved in, which then led him to the topic of kastom, and from that to the discipline of anthropology. This man who was literate, articulate, and widely travelled, proclaimed to me his admiration for John Layard. He told me that the title Layard gave to his monograph, Stone Men of Malekula, was 'brilliant' and demonstrated that

---

1 This first attack was 'the most difficult' because it was the potentially lethal Plasmodium Falciparum strain of malaria.
Layard had indeed understood the essence of *kastom*.

What intrigued me was that this man apparently agreed that ‘people’ are ‘stones’, that he was highly literate and yet clearly committed to the values and forms of ‘customary’ knowledge, and mostly that he identified with a title conjured up by a foreigner who had visited his place in 1914. The motivations for this gloss of Malakulan identity, by Layard and by this man, converged enough for my kava companion to proclaim admiration. Yet their views collided in fundamental ways. In choosing the title Layard recognised stones as embodying ancestral beings, and marking origin places (Layard 1942), but his title also stems from his comparative classification of the cultures of Malakula as ‘megalithic’. This was in line with his theoretical predilection for both diffusionist anthropology as well as Jungian psychoanalysis (Langham 1981; MacClancy 1986).¹

The Malakulan man I was conversing with was talking about something other than diffusionist links with distant places or Jungian archetypes. He was more specifically and directly concerned with Malakula, although of course, I cannot certify exactly what he meant. Nevertheless the association between people, places, and stones is one that persistently emerged during my fieldwork. It emerged most significantly when I was doing genealogies, going to origin places, and collecting origin stories.

This chapter explores the relationship between paper and stones in the context of local attachment to place. I explore how Malakulans have engaged with the written word in as much as it has touched on their *kastom*. When I started collecting genealogies, and drawing kinship charts, I had

---

¹ Layard states: “It must be remembered that this phrase covers many aspects of culture other than the mere use of stone monuments... The phrase ‘megalithic culture’ is thus used to refer to a very definite culture-complex for which no better name exists, and is convenient simply because the stone monuments are the most durable aspect of it in a world in which material objects not only outlive their creators but are also so much more easy to observe and describe than the ideas which give rise to their creation” (Layard, 1934: 19).
little idea of the politico-economic sensitivity that surrounded such an activity. People knew about the triangles and circles of anthropological kinship studies. They were used to encountering them in the court cases held when land disputes became critical. They knew that in those contexts such images were capable, as were the stones in prior times, of proving or disproving land ownership.

Stones and Men of Malakula

Plate 7.1: Ian (amei Milip) at his ples, with the stones and the book in which he keeps his family’s histri: the genealogies and origin stories (nambatin nokoh’iam).
Throughout Malakula, as well as in other parts of the archipelago, large stones, or boulders, are often fundamental markers of *plies*. They are fundamental in both senses of the word, both essential and founding. Some stones are the embodied forms of ancestral spirits and stones are also often sites of magical power. The role of powerful stones has been discussed in much of the previous ethnography throughout both the north and southern regions of the archipelago (Bonnemaison 1987, 1994; Deacon 1934; Jolly 1994; Jolly 1999; Layard 1942; Lindstrom 1990; Patterson 1976).

One of these stones on Ur is a large boulder that lies on the path from Vunai’amp village to the southern tip of the island. The stone is actually Atbwengman, the founding spirit of Dinetir *amei*, one of the spirits to have emerged with the island when Ambat pierced the clamshell (see chapter five). This stone-spirit ancestor, Atbwengman, used to lie further uphill from the path, but rolled down following an earthquake in 1965.

Plate 7.2: Atbwengman: Ancestor spirit and stone
This change of place posed a real problem to people, as Atbwengman is dangerous to women who walk too close to him (particularly for their wombs). As the stone is on a path to the gardens, Sungrang Apu told me that several Dineîr elders decided to bury bibles under the spirit-stone and hold prayer sessions ‘over it’, so that it would no longer cause trouble for the women who needed to walk past it. And so today, men and women walk innocuously past Atbwengman. Buried in the ground, the books overpowered the stone.

Atbwengman is simultaneously a stone, a spirit-ancestor, and the founder of a ples and amel. This remains the case, despite his enforced ‘conversion’ and movement down the hill. Nobody questions Atbwengman’s association with the amel of Dineîr, his embodiment of ples. On the contrary, it is because Atbwengman is so important an index of ples that the people of Dineîr appeased him by ‘converting’ him. At the same time this new power, held in the books that they buried under the boulder, was obviously considered sufficient protection against any ‘retaliation’ on the part of the ancestor-spirit.

If stones like Atbwengman serve as markers of human attachment to place, and through this of kinship, other stones in Malakula are used as markers of individual male achievement. In times prior to Christianity, when men and women spent much of their lives moving through the grades of Nimingi (for men) or Neleng-pas (for women), men who were high-ranking in Nimingi were given the name avat, meaning stone (see chapter three). Stones that had been carved for the Niluan or Nimingi ceremonies of high-ranking men

1 Atbwengman is evidently a very male spirit. In one of the Dineîr dances he appears with a long penis that the dancer sways around. It is said that any onlookers who are touched by the penis will become sick, and pregnant women will lose their babies.

2 Other stones, the magical kind, were simply destroyed or discarded when the Charismatic church reigned on Tomman during the 1980s (see chapter four).

3 Stones were never used for high-ranking women, although women who obtained high ranks in Neleng-pas could also be seen as imbued with dangerous or life threatening powers that were attached to their rank.
were placed at the front of the fence that separated the *amel* from the dancing ground. These stones would stay there for long after these men had died, manifestations of past living achievements, and ongoing ancestral powers.

Plate 7.3: High-ranking stone: This stone is remarkable in the sheer number of faces that have been carved. It has 24 faces, in seven 'rows' of three (two of these rows are actually buried under the ground). This was by far the highest-ranking stone I came across in South West Malakula (many have been sold on the art market ever since the early twentieth century). This one represents an ancestor of Loorbap *amel* in Sinesip (Nahava speakers). My interlocutors told me that after completing the whole sequence of *Nimingi* grades a first time, the man associated with this stone started the sequence again and went through all the grades a second time. It was considered a high achievement to complete one full cycle in a lifetime (see chapter three).

---

1 See chapter three: Figure 3.1.
In all of these ways, stones are a material manifestation of the politics and embodiment of being *manples*. As local people remark, stones remain when all else rots, including the people who carved them and placed them. Stones mark the existence of groups and their *ples*. Half a century ago these stones served as undisputed markers of rights to land, but today, in the archives and courts of Port Vila, there is another artefact which is intimately implicated with land ownership: in those contexts, paper can be stronger than stone.

**Writings and things**

The concept of ‘writing’ avoids the assumption that a text is authenticated by its origin in a speaker; the issue becomes the effectiveness of the text. A speaker, by contrast, is the archetype of an intentional agent, a subject assumed to be the origin of meaning. (Strathern 1999: 239).

To describe Malakulan cultures as ‘oral’ has probably never been an appropriate gloss. Before the advent of the Bible in this region, and the many written texts that have followed it, Malakulan knowledge and practice was transmitted and communicated not only through the spoken word, but also with perduring objects and designs. These designs were imprinted on sculptures, on masks, on bodies, no mats as well as on the ground. In fact the Na’hai word for writing is *tis’mavus*, (*mavus*=beach - *tis* =mark), the term used for the sand-drawings that are still remembered and regularly performed today.1 These drawings are (usually) geometrical designs that are traced in a continuous movement based on a guiding ‘grid’ that the person draws first.2 Unlike much that is called *kastom*, sand-drawings were and still are executed by both men and women.3 In Bislama I often heard

---

1 Stephen Zagala is presently engaged in doctoral research on sand-drawings in Vanuatu. Also, Jolly has noted the same translation for writing among the Sa speakers of South Pentecost, who use the term *tsu tsu san* (personal communication). For similar translations in other languages see also Cabane (1997), Huffman (1996).

2 The drawings have also attracted the interest of mathematicians, see Ascher (1988).

3 Huffman (1996b) notes that in parts of Vanuatu there is now an erroneous view of sand-drawing as an exclusively male activity, so that women are excluded from learning them.
the *tis'mano* called *raeting long graon* (‘ground writing’). Some of these drawings serve to tell *kastom* stories (usually the non-*tambu* kind), others to relay concepts, and yet others are tools of casual communication. Kirk Huffman writes:

Some are just for children’s ‘play’; others, ‘free’ in one context as a message design, can also be sacred and an essential element in the passage of one’s spirit to the world of the dead in another. Some depict stories of the animal or natural world, others humorous or risqué human affairs Some depict material objects ... Others depict aspects of the spirit world, or historical events. Many are also linked to activities – string figures, games, songs, ... (Huffman 1996: 249-50).

But ultimately sand-drawing is a more ephemeral form of communication than writing. Sand-drawings are soon rubbed out, either by the hand of the person who made them, or by the wind or the sea at some later stage. Unlike books, sand-drawings are not transportable through space (without redrawing them) and their execution is often a kind of performance in itself. Nor do they carry the same connotations of authors and authorities that are imbued in Malakulan understandings of books.
Books in the bush: genealogies and genesis

The most common book by a long way in South Malakula is the bible. It is so far ahead of any potential competition that in local idiom it is almost synonymous with the concept 'book'. There is other literature that circulates, in the forms of magazines, pamphlets, and official documents. People adorn the bamboo walls of their houses with images, and captions, taken out of magazines from such distant places as Australia, America, Japan, and Taiwan. Biblical pamphlets from various American and Australian Pentecostal and Charismatic churches also circulate widely. But all of these texts are produced in distant places, and they are consumed with a mixture of curiosity, concern for spiritual salvation and inter-denominational rivalry.

Other texts are produced locally, and apart from written letters these are most often genealogies and origin stories. I was surprised on a number of occasions, to find handwritten genealogies, complete with triangles and circles, posted on peoples' walls.

Plate 7.7: Mathias, a VCC fieldworker for the Ninde speakers in Mewun (South West Bay), in front of his family's genealogy. He has posted it on the wall in his house.
As I have mentioned, when I started collecting genealogies, and drawing kinship charts, I had little idea of the politico-economic sensitivity that surrounded such an activity. I did not realize that people knew about the triangles and circles of anthropological kinship studies, that they were used to encountering them in the court cases held when land disputes became critical. They knew that such images were capable, as were the stones, of proving or disproving land ownership.

*Buk blo graon: problems with textual ancestors*

... I spent some time with Ayar today, and we read through some of Deacon’s book. He wanted to know what ‘kinship’ or ‘totemism’ means. We also looked at some of the kinship diagrams and he realised that rather than being ‘family history’ they were examples of kin classification. On hearing this he claimed that others have been using Deacon wrongly. He said that last month there was a land court in which a group of men pulled out Deacon saying that they were right, as they had been studying anthropology.

*Field notes (23 October 1995)*

This is one of the earliest and perhaps most striking references in my field notes to local commentary on A.B Deacon’s *Malekula: a vanishing people in the New Hebrides*. It is striking for a number of reasons. Firstly, there is the reference to an ethnographic text (collated from the field notes of a dead anthropologist) in legitimising specific claims over land tenure, and the associated claim to authority by ‘studying anthropology’. And secondly, there was the fact that Ayar subsequently pulled out a copy of this expensive and rare ethnography, which he had obviously kept in perfect condition.¹ He told me that he kept it well hidden and secret, it had become a valuable testimony to his status as *manples*.

¹ The ‘mystery’ surrounding his acquisition of the book was dispelled when I saw a note on the cover, showing it to be a gift to Ayar from the anthropologist Joan Larcom. I myself had recently given him a copy of Margaret Gardiner’s *Footprints on Malakula* (1984), thus perpetuating the flows and eddies of anthropological texts on Malakula.
As I mentioned in chapter two, Joan Larcom has also written about Deacon, and his continuing ‘presence’ in South West Bay (Larcom 1982, 1983). She discusses not only her use of Deacon for her own research, but also how people in Wintua were using the text. Larcom noted that whereas the people of Wintua had little knowledge or interest in Deacon during her main fieldwork, prior to independence, when she returned after independence this was no longer the case. By 1981, when Larcom returned, people were using the text in land disputes surrounding the return of alienated land to customary land owners, following the new constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu (see chapter six). All of this occurred within the context of a larger national project of revitalizing and valorising kastom (Larcom 1982, 1990).

One could also see Deacon’s text as creating a rupture, an anomaly, with the ways in which the past was constantly recreated orally on Malakula. The use of old ethnographies not only suggests a fixed rather than fluid description of the past, it also presents knowledge ‘openly’ for any literate person to access, rather then ‘secretly’, for initiates only. This seems antithetical to earlier processes of knowledge reproduction on Malakula, and rather subversive of indigenous forms of power.

Deacon complained that in 1927 that everywhere he went it was the same story, the old people who knew are dead (Gardiner 1984). I often got the same response myself, in 1995-6, yet the ‘old people’ who ‘knew kastom well’, that I was told about, died several decades after Deacon’s visit. Many of them would have been the children of those who complained to him in 1924 that they no longer knew kastom like the ‘oldfellas’.

It is possible therefore that this idea of losing knowledge through the death of elders, rather than just a response to the catastrophe of colonialism and depopulation, is in fact a central tenet of how knowledge is reproduced and preserved orally. Seniority, secrecy and ‘ownership’ are of great importance
in Malakula, and must be taken together. The paradox is that it is precisely because Malakulans consistently lament a loss of knowledge through the death of people, that many aspects of it are retained and recreated.

‘Ownership’ is an awkward term, as are ‘copyright’ or ‘intellectual property’ (Strathern 1999). In a western reading these words allude to individual appropriation or creation whereas the ‘ownership’, or ‘copyright’, of artifacts, stories and other knowledge on Malakula, links them to places. Those places then determine who has rights to what kinds of knowledge, depending on that person’s relationship to the place associated with the knowledge. This ability to access and control knowledge through the access and control of place, and of talk about place, is a crucial dimension to being manples. The potency of being manples then becomes weakened when that emplaced knowledge is inscribed on an object that is as transposable, and open, as a book.

It is true that specific forms of knowledge disappear, and that the rich artistic heritage of the area is threatened by the attacks of certain Christian denominations on ‘heathenism’. Nevertheless it is human mortality that keeps others attached to acquiring their knowledge. The sense of partial knowledge, combined with a deference to authority, makes the claim ‘I only know a little’ less often an indication of ignorance than an observation of cultural protocols. Perhaps the dead have always known more than the living, and this may be more an important aspect of the social reproduction of knowledge than mere indication of a vanishing culture.

If this is so, what happens when the words of the dead are immortalised in text? As one informant said:

The old people knew well, and they told it straight to him (to Deacon). There is no lies, it is all straight, and in the book.

It seems that Deacon too gains authority by being dead, but still present,
like an ancestral spirit, through his writing.

The man who made this statement is from the Seniang area, about which Deacon wrote the most, and with greatest detail in listing amel. Furthermore he was a prominent individual (the former Nagriamel leader for southwest Malakula) who has considerable authority in local matters, including land disputes. Tomman islanders on the other hand, have a different view of the text. Deacon was refused access to Tomman island and most of the Na'hai area and the ethnography notes that ‘... all the people of this place are now extinct with the exception of one man who was residing in Seniang at the time of Deacon’s visit’ (Deacon 1934).1 In the list of amel, Dinétir, Vunbangk, Yum Oran are recorded as being extinct, although I know several people belonging to Dinétir or one of its branches, and Vunbangk still had one family left when I was there.2 Yum Oran is still under dispute, although people recognize that the core amel is indeed extinct.

One of the things people asked when I started my fieldwork, and which consistently preoccupied them, was whether I was going to ‘straighten’ this out. In other words, was my work going to rectify the errors of Deacon (or Wedgewood). If the book was used to legitimate land claims in the Seniang area, could it not also be used to discredit the contemporary inhabitants of Tomman, to argue that they were not really manples? Indeed Deacon’s work had become generally referred to as buk blo groud – the book of land/ground.

Ironically therefore, in the very area Deacon saw as ‘vanishing’, people would use his text as an authoritative claim over ‘tradition’ and as a tool for resolving disputes over land tenure? An anthropologist who complained of the difficulties of not only collating, but also interpreting his material while

---

1 The ‘extinction’ issue was one of the things that initially drew my attention to Tomman, precisely because it was not true (see chapter one).
2 The story that opens chapter five is the origin story of Vunbangk, told to me by Simeti.
in the field, and then died before departing, has become an ‘expert witness’ for local people.

Such differences are not a question of cultural loss, or confusion, as many Malakulans themselves claim. Rather such contests were endemic in the past too. In the context of contemporary land courts, based on cadastral surveys and written reports, such divergences become more problematic, and hotly contested. The fluidity of orality is threatened by the rigidity of the written word. At the same time, this ‘freezing’ of epistemological fluidity by the fixing of words on paper is also a form of disembodiment, of *de-placing*. Talking is more grounded in context, in place, than writing.

Yet what is at stake for Malakulans, is much more than the malaise of a postmodern anthropology, but the ideational control of local resources: the access to both money and magic. The issue therefore, is not one of perdition, but re-invention. By encoding *kastom*, as both knowledge and practice, the people of Tomman (and Vanuatu in general) are carving a place for themselves in a world where their relations are increasingly entangled with abstracted or disembodied entities such as nation-states or multi-national companies. In such a situation oral plurality stands little chance against the legal monopoly of the written word. Stones cannot count as deeds.

**Circle and triangles: anthropology’s feedback effect**

No one has actually argued that Deacon was right, and that there were no more ‘true’ Tomman islanders, so that the power of written word is not enough to completely eclipse the world ‘as it is’. This is not to deny that there are several ongoing land disputes on the small island, and that similar disputes in the neighbouring area of Sinesip have been settled with reference to Deacon. In such an atmosphere, it is not difficult to understand people’s concern that a text, which had been used within the context of a
land court, claimed that Tomman islanders had been wiped out, and that specific amel had no more survivors.

This concern was to shape the very nature of the data I would collect, and quite rapidly I was being called on by specific families to write ‘their histri’. That I was being pulled into concerns with land disputes, despite my intentions, became obvious. Yet what is of interest here is the idea that a written text was seen to be a way by which to substantiate and validate a particular claim. Just as people of Seniang were using Deacon to go to court, people in the Na’hai area saw my work as a way of registering their claims. I had to consistently repeat that I was not interested in getting involved in land disputes and that I did not wish for my work to be a court document. When taken to a nasara or given a histri, my informants often produced a textbook in which they themselves had written their genealogies and origin myths in order to make sure what they told me was ‘stret’.

On some occasions rumours that I had been given false information caused considerable concern. The following letter was sent to me and Longdal by people from Malfakhal in April 1996, and forced me to visit the village in order to appease their concerns. I offer a translated version (from Bislama) of it here as an example of what I am talking about:

Dear Tim and Longdal,

We are very happy to write you this letter about the work you are doing today inside the area of Man-Na’hai.

There has been a rumour that has reached us that, Tim and you Longdal, have registered the Aising Marheu family as the true land owners of the BatBank clan.

This is a lie, and is not true evidence of your work. In a Land Court of Batbank land in 1991 they found out that Mr Aising Mahreu, or the Aising Mahreu family are straight man or Family of Akhamb, under the straight amel of Rota-vu.

We are not happy at all about the fashion and dirty work of these recorded lies which you are today making in the Na’hai area.

We will try to contact or write a letter to the head office in Vila, especially the National Museum of Vanuatu, straight to the Director,
to tell about this kind of fashion. That we are not happy at all about
the kind of records that you two are making today in the Na’hai area.
We and our families want to tell you and Longdal that you must
straighten this error quickly if it is true that you recorded the Aising
Marheu family of Akhamb island as inside the Batbank clan. The
Na’hai population will then respect and honour your work of honest
recordings in paper inside the Na’hai area.
We believe that you two understand what we are saying here. The
history of Aising Mahreu is Rota-vu, Akhamb island, south Malakula.
*The Longlel family of Tomman island has no right to tell all sorts of
lies*¹ to you two. Otherwise we will not be able to trust you two in
your work of recording and registering the old places and family trees
inside the Na’hai area today.
We are honest to tell you this straight talk, Tim and Longdal. Today
there is plenty of confusion about history, and you have to come and
talk with the straight man-ples, and not all the strangers, to record the
histories.
The Longlel family of Tomman comes from Vao island in North east
Malakula, as a source has come and said. So you and Longdal must
not get involved in such wrong ways of making records.
We wait for you to come to Benvat village (Malfakhal) when you
come to record each history or family tree. Please we ask you now
that you must take out the name of the Aising Mahreu family from
the Batbank clan and put it under Rota-vu family of Akhamb island,
South Malakula.
Thank you very much,
For the straight fashion
Families
- Aimat Ailul Manvar
- Masing Vundan
- Aitip Talon

The letter graphically illustrates the seriousness with which people took this
project of ‘doing genealogies’ and highlights some of the sensitivities that
surrounded my project of writing down peoples histri. At that stage I
obviously became concerned that collecting genealogies was having a
negative effect on my research. Not only because I was being threatened
with expulsion should I err in my jottings, but also because the ‘loaded’
nature of this data meant that I was never quite sure what ulterior motives
might lie behind any information I received. However, in the long term that

¹ This section was highlighted in asterisks in the original text of the letter.
concern actually missed the point, as this ‘problem’, rather than hindering my work, became an important focus of it. After all this turned out to be much more revealing about peoples’ ongoing concerns with kastom than whether southern Malakulans had a Crow or Omaha system of kin classification.¹

I managed to ameliorate this situation by firstly pointing out that I had not yet even interviewed the Aising Mahreu family, and then by trying to explain that I was not there to ‘register’ land. Two central concerns to this letter were the specifics of my sources, and the issue of ‘writing down histri’. The first was completely unfounded, and based on pure speculative rumour. I had not even worked with the family in question. The second, however, was a totally valid concern: the fact that writing a story can then give it local authority. Although I assiduously tried to avoid giving such authority to my work, no doubt one day, somewhere in Malakula, people will use my texts for a dispute.

Although as time passed people seemed to accept that I was not interested in establishing who had the right to which land, I was nevertheless constantly being told that such and such an individual was a liar and not to believe them. Written records validate particular points of view, often at the expense of others. The most I could do to defend myself against collecting ‘lies’ was to say that I had to get, and record, both lies, or rather both sides of a particular disagreement.

¹ In fact, as Larcom notes, southern Malakulans have a near unique system that lies somewhere between the Omaha matrilineal, and Crow patrilineal, systems of kin classification. Although they follow the three generational recycling, and use a Crow terminology, Southern Malakulans also recognise matrilateral affiliation Allen (1964), Patterson (1976). According to Larcom, the only other place this occurs is Yap, where David Schneider researched kinship and formed the base of his important critique of the ‘genealogical grid’ as a tool of cross cultural comparison, and its assumption, in his words, that ‘blood is thicker than water’ Schneider (1984). Appendix A shows the ‘anomaly’ in genealogical form, of the Ninde speakers (Mewun) Kinship, which is the same as their Nahava and Na’hai speaking neighbours, although obviously the terms of reference are different. Appendix B shows the Na’hai kin terminology.
From time to time, and place to place

The reference to *man Vao*, the ‘Longlel family’ (the one I was adopted into) is of course related to the *nanangenangk* I discussed in the last chapter. What becomes apparent here is that the drawing of genealogies is also part of the ‘solidifying’ or ‘essentialising’ of kinship. It is not only that specific utterances are jotted down and thus ‘immortalized’, but that the genres of representation can also inflect and influence meaning. The very act of drawing genealogies tends to emphasise descent, and lineage. It privileges the temporal notion of ancestry, rather than grounding the ancestor-spirits in *ples*, in spatiality.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that writing is a totally disembodied vehicle for knowledge, one that is completely devoid of place. After all the ethnographer’s sudden shift from ‘apprentice’ while still in the field to ‘expert’ as soon as he or she returns home, is actually a shift in status due to physical relocation, rather than suddenly acquired knowledge. But writing tends to eclipse spatiality and embodiment, as if to suggest a knowledge that is free of the restraints of embodiment, free of the constraints of space and of talk, of *ples*.

In other words writing, and specifically writing genealogies and origin stories is also an important part of the process whereby the dispute between the Aisoh-Vanhah family and my own Longlel -Woron family was argued along the lines of the concept of *bladlaen*. It is not that *bladlaen* replaced attachment to *ples* as the main rationale behind land tenure, but that writing genealogies, by emphasising biological ancestry as the connection between generations, privileges *bladlaen* as the process by which people are attached to place. Ancestors on a genealogy are located as temporally distant from ego, connected to generations and epochs, but devoid of association to place. The whole system of ‘ancestor worship’ that prevailed prior to Christianity and genealogies, locates ancestors in their *ples*. As I mentioned in the last chapter, prior to the use of genealogies, the
uncertainty surrounding children born of *nanangenangk* was resolved by referring to special magical stones in the concerned *amel*. Drawing diagram as an expression of origin is not the same as going to the very place one's ancestry originated, and locations the stones, landscapes, and other objects which 'prove' one's ancestry. In that context, the affiliation of a person to his or her ancestors, their 'clan', was expressed through common *ples*, through emplaced knowledge, rather than by ways of a 'line' that descends through blood and through time.

**Writing culture, encoding history, being *ples***

So where does all of this leave those who argue that the monolithic authority of earlier scientistic ethnography needs to be discarded in favour of a more pluralistic and reflexive approach to truth? The authors of the letter I received concerning my work expected precisely the inverse of me: to 'straighten things', to get information from the 'true *man ples*', to inscribe not just the story, but the local authoritative authors of that truth. The particularities and partialities of social actions is not something the authors of the letter were interested in. On the contrary they sought the underlying eternal truths of origin stories, and thus of inalienable land tenure.

In chapter one I discussed post modern ethnography's 'catch-22': that precisely at a period when anthropologists no longer attempt to give definitive and all-encompassing representations of a culture, indigenous peoples throughout the world are confronted with political choices and situations for which they have need to portray their 'authenticity'. In these ways ethnographic representations are finding new kinds of entanglements within the larger political and economic contexts in which they occur. It is not just that such contexts must be explicated in the ethnography, as the Marxist critique of the seventies (Asad 1973; Balandier 1967; Murphy 1972; Wolf 1982; Worsley 1957) and the 'writing culture' critique of the
late-eighties both argued (Clifford 1988; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Marcus 1997; McGrane 1989), but that the ethnographies have actually become a more important part of that wider ‘political and economic context’. Whether it be in land rights litigation in Australia, Canada, or Brazil; for mining projects in Papua New Guinea and logging in Indonesia; or in village disputes in south Malakula, ethnographic representations, and the authority they carry, have become important tools for access to economic resources.

Moreover, ethnographies are now being read by the people they are about, and are being used in ways that go well beyond any control of their authors. Just as missionaries in many ways ‘lost control’ of the bible and Christian discourse in Melanesia (see chapter four), so too are Melanesians appropriating the texts anthropologists have produced about them. Deacon surely never thought his work would become locally famous as the *buk blo groun*: the book of land. Only time will tell how my own work will be interpreted by Malakulans.

The issue is no longer ‘just’ a scholarly concern about representation, or even ‘truth’, but of how to acknowledge that writing about people, living and dead, can produce artifacts that go on to claim a life of their own. The only control left for the author, apart from not writing, is to make explicit the intentions, conditions, and contexts within which the ‘data’ is collected.¹ All of this echoes what has now been a sustained disciplinary

¹ Is this not at the core of the debate that Derek Freemen engaged with Margaret Mead work? In that relatively recent and well known debate, Freeman dismissed much of the theoretical foundations of contemporary ‘cultural anthropology’, particularly its privileging of ‘culture’ over ‘nature’, and saw Boas and Mead as the founders of what he considered to be an ongoing misconception of the discipline Freeman (1983). Although his arguments are much more complex and sophisticated than I can enter into, what is relevant here is that he sought to historically pinpoint its origins and seductions with Mead’s being duped by her teenage Samoan ‘sisters’ in their discussions about sexuality. This, he argued, formed the core data of her famous and influential *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Thus even Freemen’s avowedly strictly ‘Popperian’, and biologically oriented, critique of cultural anthropology was based in an important way on his historical conjectures (based on interviews with the same women in their elder years) about the contexts of Mead’s
self-interrogation, on what ethnography is, how it is produced, and its relationship to the fieldwork encounter (since Clifford and Marcus, 1986). The subjectivity of the ethnographic observer can no longer be ‘eclipsed’ in the name of scientific professionalism. Instead the subjective, albeit anthropologically conditioned, experience of the ethnographer is seen to lie at the core of his or her representation.

Yet subjectivity itself is not ‘fiction’, and the creative imaginations through which ethnographies are produced must remain geared towards an ‘outside world’. Rather it acknowledges the ‘situatedness’ of the ethnographer, one which is determined not only by cultural baggage or theoretical perspective, but by the laws of space and time themselves (Fabian 1983). Just as an ethnographer’s body is his or her main tool of research, so is her research constrained, and enabled, by the limits and possibilities of mnemonics and perceptions, and the techniques used for them.

In that sense the aura of an overreaching objectivity is illusionary, since, even at a most simple level, no ethnographer can be at two places at the same time. No ethnographer can repeat an ‘observation’, cross-check it, substantiate it. Moreover, as Geertz reminds us, human sociality is constantly changing, not just the observed but the observers as well, and hence particular and unique (Geertz 1993, 1995). This implies that a truly empirical approach negates systemisation, structures, and laws: all the stuff that science is generally thought to consist of, or that an empirical anthropology is expected to produce (Jackson 1996). We might consider how subjectivity then seems empirically valid—it is how the world ‘is’—and objectivity appears constructed, the product of a culturally specific, and selective, ordering of social life.

Most of this applies of course to our research subjects as well. Malakulans
are no less better, and probably even much worse, equipped to provide objective and overreaching descriptions of their 'culture' (nor any other culture for that matter), but they are nevertheless the ones who must endure the social and political consequences of such texts. This is a crucial difference, and particularly so when written words seek to engage oral traditions. That is, by writing a narrative in a context where most people are not equipped with the skill of literacy to contest it, we could inadvertently be playing into a kind of event-structure nexus, similar to that envisioned by Sahlins (Sahlins 1981, 1985). From that perspective writing words down is in some ways solidifying what is essentially a 'liquid' form. In Vanuatu, this 'freezing' can then become central to the settlement of court cases decades later. In those contexts writing takes spoken knowledge and sets it, once again, in stone.
Chapter eight

KASTOM AS DEVELOPMENT

Opening the Na’hai Kaljaral Senta

The Na’hai Cultural Centre was officially opened on October 24, 1998, at Leunari Bay, near Bwad Bangk, where Longdal Nobel and his family live. Leunari Bay is Umaas land, Longdal’s ples. Officially called the Na’hai Kaljaral Senta, it was the first language based cultural centre to exist in Vanuatu. The building resembles a typical local house, with cement floor, woven bamboo walls, and thatch roof, although it is far larger than a normal house in a village. In front of the building is a large dancing ground on which several tam tam, or slit-drums, had been erected. The ceremonies and festivities that marked the opening were the culmination of several years of work. The money for materials had been supplied by the Australian South Pacific Cultures Fund. Thus, to mark the event a visiting party of foreign dignitaries was invited. The diverse and cosmopolitan party included the Australian High Commissioner to Vanuatu, the director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, a broadcaster from Radio Vanuatu, the director of the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie in Paris, the former Curator of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, some Australian National University academics, some of the National Museum’s regional fieldworkers and a few

---

1 Parts of this chapter have been published. See Curtis (2002).
2 Since then, the Raga speaking community of north Pentecost have also set up their own cultural centre.
3 Dr. Darrell Tryon and Dr. Lissant Bolton who are also officially associated with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and run the annual men and women’s workshops.
companions of the people in the official delegation. Local people came from all of the Na'hai speaking villages as well as some of the neighbouring Nahava and Ninde-speaking villages of South West Bay. The events of the day included speeches, pig killings, ceremonial dancing, and food exchanges. This was a day to celebrate kastom. Yet for those who had worked to build the museum it was also much more than just a celebration of an ancestral way of life, it was also a day of ‘achieving development’, a day for celebrating a future vision of community.

PLEASE WATCH FILM 2

Opening the Na'hai Kaljaral Senta
Working for *kastom*

I first heard of Longdal Nobel’s project to build a museum prior to my departure for my main fieldwork in Malakula in 1995. As a Vanuatu Cultural Centre fieldworker, Longdal had received some funding from the Australian Government to do this. The funding (around $A 2000) was meant to cover costs for a cement floor, nails and hinges. The project was approved for funding in 1994, and the museum was opened in October 1998. In those four years Longdal had to encourage people in the community to join in his vision, to help him build the cultural centre, and to support him in his vision of maintaining and upholding *kastom*. During those years he encountered scepticism and at some times outright opposition, as well as support from a part of the population. Among those who supported the idea of the museum, he had to mobilize people to labour for its construction, to ‘*wok fri*’ or ‘*wok nating*’ (‘work free’, or ‘work for nothing’). The success of his project was much more dependent on the strength of his relationships with others in the community, than on the funding for materials he had obtained from the Australian South Pacific Cultures fund. He was vying for a concept that he wanted to be physically actualised: in a special house in a special place. To do this he needed help, he had to convince people that rather than working for ‘free’ or ‘nothing’, they were working for *kastom*.

Longdal’s biggest obstacle was not that people would not labour for an idea or concept, as this is true when building church-houses or *amel*, but rather the viability of the concept itself. Although some did refuse to ‘work free’, more opposed the project on grounds of it being a house of *kastom*, of ‘darkness’. Furthermore, some of the elder men who had been raised in *amel*, observed that this was not their usual understanding of *kastom*. Indeed, only a couple of days before the opening, Ambuas and some of the other older men told Longdal that the museum was ‘just like a big *amel*’, and that therefore women and children should not be allowed to enter.
Longdal countered this by arguing that it was a cultural centre, not an *amel*, and that the point was that people would come to see *kastom*. He insisted that women and children be allowed to enter.

Between the difficulties inspiring people to work for a concept, and those others who accused him of promoting 'darkness', Longdal lamented to me on several occasions that he was not at all certain he would succeed. Indeed, he was caught between several different expectations and understandings: the contesting views within the community, the expectations of the Australian High Commissioner (because of funding), and finally those of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in Port Vila, who were also keen to see the project completed as the first local Cultural Centre in the nation.

An important issue, which had to be established from the start, was where the museum would be located. This was as much about meaning as about ownership or control. People discussed questions of accessibility to cash generating tourists but this did not prevail as the dominant motivation for its situation. Longdal decided to build it on his own land, to the dissatisfaction of those who saw the potential for attracting tourists to the area, and wished it to be more accessible.

Longdal had decided that the potential for tourist money (not very elevated in outer islands at any time) did not outweigh other considerations. Whilst he was not averse to tourism as a means of generating income, he publicly stated that in his opinion too many tourists could be detrimental to *plies*: both the place as it was lived in, and to people's autonomy (and privacy) in the village. In any event, tourists are not common in that area. Longdal stressed that, more importantly, this was a project for *manples*, for the Na'hai community. He decided to build the Cultural Centre, which people also called a museum (*musium* in Bislama) at Leunari, on his own "Oibau-Umaas" land. In doing so he assured the recognition of his own role in the
project, whilst at the same time making it a Na'hai community enterprise. The appearance of national, even international, visitors for the opening of the museum, reinscribed the notion and the value of the Na'hai community, Na'hai culture, Na'hai kastom, as well as Longdal’s own centrality in creating that discourse. The fact that several of the visitors were known to Longdal and others because of their work with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, reinforced his status as Na’hai filwoka (see chapter two).

But there was another very important event associated with the opening day, one which served to make the museum a Na'hai, rather than just Umaas, occasion: the placing of stones by each of the Na'hai amel at the front of the museum.

Please watch film 3

Placing the Stones
Spaces today

In local views, the stones outside constituted by far the most important aspect of the museum. The motivation and implications of this ‘museum’ transcend the realm of aesthetics, or imparting knowledge. As I discussed in chapter seven, stones embody a material manifestation of the politics of being manples. The stones in front of the museum mark the continued existence of contemporary ‘groups’ within the Na’hai area, implicating all the associated claims to identity and land. The placing of the stones, and corresponding pig killings, were of much more serious interest to local participants than the contents, the artefacts within the museum itself. In the footage just seen, Longdal faces the camera saying ‘today is the last day for people to speak’, just before the camera moves to my adopted fathers, Longlel and To’leo, who were carrying the Woron stone to plant. In saying ‘today is the last day to speak’, Longdal was directly referring to the placing of stones as a marker of the current amel in the Na’hai area. As I discussed earlier, the stories that these stones embody can be sources of heated local dispute. Soon after I had returned from Malakula I received a typed inventory of the people who had participated in the event, with a breakdown of each person’s contribution towards the paying of the pig each amel sacrificed for the occasion. Longdal sent me the inventory with the request that I include it in my ‘book’ (see Appendix III). There was no inventory or explanation of what was actually on display inside the cultural centre.

The line of stones also traced an immediate parallel between the museum that had been built, and a traditional amel. When the slit-drums were erected in the large dancing ground in front of the museum, the resemblance to an amel was even more striking.

1 There were also some stones for amel originally from the mainland interior (Nahati and Nahava) but who have long lived in the Na’hai region (see Appendix III).
2 The stone my ‘father’ Longlel placed represented Na’avinveo, the face of the moon with pigs’ tusks (see chapter five).
Figure 8.1: Diagram of the space around the Na’hai Cultural Centre.

Plate 8.1: Slit-drum (tam tam) on the dancing ground in front of the Na’hai Kaljaral Senta.

Plate 8.2: Stones that are amel.
When Longdal was confronted by some of the elders about allowing women and children to enter a space ostentatiously like an *amel*, he pointed out that at the back of the museum was a walled off *tambu* room, a locked room only accessible to certain men. The idea of the *tambu* room had been 'copied' from the National Museum in Port Vila where most of the film and audio archives are kept (see chapter 1). The material stored there can only be accessed by those with customary rights to that specific knowledge, and it is a central and distinctive aspect of the National Museum in the eyes of many ni-Vanuatu (Bolton 1994; Bolton 1999; Bolton 1999; Huffman 1996).

But the *tambu* room is not only an imitation of the Port Vila museum. The placing of the room at the back of the house is significant, and consistent with ideas about *tambu* or *loh* (sacredness) as they were held prior to Christianity, and as they appear so clearly within a Christian practice such as that espoused by Tom (see Film 1). In the traditional men’s house (*amel*) the further one moves to the back, the more sacred becomes the ground and ‘sacred fires’ situated there (chapter three).¹ In Tom’s house it is the back room that is the ‘most tambu’ of all, where no one enters except Tom, and only once and by special acquiescence from God himself, Longdal and I, thanks to my video camera.

Longdal clearly considered it essential that the Na’hai museum have a ‘*tabu rum*’ [sic]² as well; the moment the Na’hai museum opened, when the High Commissioner cut the ribbon and entered the museum, the voices of the spirits arose from the *tambu* room at the back. Some of the men who had objected to women and children entering what was ‘too much like an *amel*’, were also in the back room with the noisy spirits.

² As written on the door. Spelling, like talking, is often fluid in Bislama.
Longdal too, is making a name for himself in what Lindstrom has called the ‘conversational economy’ on Tanna (Lindstrom 1990b). Longdal is acting in the name of ‘community’ but in doing so he is also raising his own stakes in the game of Melanesian village politics. ‘Community’ is thus shaped by individual ambition, just as that same ‘individual’ ambition is shaped by communal aspirations and pressures. Moreover Longdal is doing this with the use of spaces and objects, as well as talk. Just as in an *amel*, or in Tom’s *tambu* house, in the museum too, spacing condenses notions of social status and sacredness, to create a certain power, including representing the past in the present.

Yet what is crucial to Longdal’s museum, and the talk he circulates with it, is more a positioning towards the future. *Kastom*, in this context, is a ‘development project’, a quest for tomorrow. The very point of the museum is the continuation and importance of *kastom*, an aim that is not only expressed by Longdal and his supporters, but is the motivation of the cash donors as well. The Australian High Commissioner’s speech included references to the ‘two wings’ of the ‘bird’ that is Vanuatu. One wing is all that is modern, and the other is *‘kastom’*. In his words, the bird needs both wings to fly straight ahead, in the direction it presumably wishes to go!

**Culture and development, Malakula style**

Of course, ‘cultural development’ was not necessarily the main priority of development funding in Australia, and the High Commissioner’s own enthusiasm for *kastom* was not necessarily shared by his government in Canberra. In the midst of the cuts in public funding instigated by the newly elected Howard government in Australia in 1997, the South Pacific Cultures Fund was one of the first, and least controversial, funds to

---

1 The distinction between ‘person’ and ‘group’, ‘individual’ and ‘society’ is a false one, and more obviously so in Melanesia (Leenhart, 1971). Marilyn Strathern has used the term ‘-dividuals’ to describe the ways by which *(in)dividuals are 'created' in their inter-*

---

relations. (Strathern, 1990, 1999).
disappear. Yet Edwards also did more than just supply the funds. In 1997 he visited the area and went to see how the project was progressing. Although I did not witness that visit, Longdal mentioned it on several occasions when I returned later that year. According to him, the High Commissioner was visibly disappointed, even annoyed, at the lack of progress of the museum. Longdal mentioned that he had tried to ask for more money to pay for some labour, but Edwards refused saying that this was a community project, and that the funding was supposed to cover the cost of materials only. Longdal recounted all of this to me with a tone of voice and a body language, which indicated that he himself was sympathetic to the High Commissioner’s attitude.

Whether he realised it or not, Edwards had touched on some ‘delicate’ points in Melanesian notions of reciprocity. What was at stake was not only the museum, but the relationship, or road, between the Na’hai community and Australian aid money. Combined with the importance of respect in terms of inter village rivalry, the visit had raised the pressure to complete the project. Longdal had received money (a gift?), and for the sake of his own name within the Na’hai community, and that of the community beyond, he had to make sure that he delivered well, better than expected if possible. Even those who feigned disinterest or opposition, or those from neighbouring language groups, would talk about and observe the unfolding of the project. Edwards had provoked local rivalries and increased expectations with his visit. Consciously or not, he had played into local politics, and given Longdal some support, as well as incentive, with which to mobilise labour.

Longdal used notions of indebtedness, respect, and pride, to convince people to get the project moving faster. Overall this resulted in getting his supporters to work more often, rather than significantly increasing the number of supporters. One day a week was put aside for working on the house, with a core group of 4 (to 8) people assisting on a regular basis They
were Longdal, To'leo, Longlel, Teri (Longdal’s brother), and a few others from Bwad-Bang, where Longdal lives. The shame that would be associated with ‘throwing away the money’, and the blocking of ‘road’ between themselves and Australia (or ‘gavman blo Australia’), were mentioned to me by all of the core supporters as important reasons for finishing the project.

For those who opposed Longdal’s *Kaljaral Senta*, usually from a Christian perspective, the museum symbolised ‘heathenness’ or ‘darkness’ a regressive rather than a progressive project. These kind of conflicting local meanings associated with the cultural centre show how the project promoted notions of both development and of *kastom*, and the dialectics between them.

**Global deliberation, local differentiation?**

In Na’hai, and Bislama too, every day we ask our friends “*gu long ambe, ga van ambe?*” Where have you come from, where are you going? We just want to know. But if we think from the big picture, like our history, where do we come from? A yam, the sea, Adam and Eve, a star in the night sky? In every *kalja* in the world, there is its own history, and the history of each *kalja* is different to the other *kalja*. The history of man-Malakula is different to man-Futuna, it is different to man-China, to man-Europe, man-Africa, or man-Australia.

In the world today, many things, nearly everything, is changing. There is only one thing which we cannot change. That is our history.

This small cultural centre stands as a memory and a celebration for all the man Na’hai. I cannot say that life before was better than life today, no. The cultural centre is not something to say which is better: *kastom* or Christianity, no. It is to look after our *kalja*, which our history is a part of, and if *kalja* is totally lost, it is like a man in a canoe, but the canoe is drifting aimlessly in the sea. That man, he cannot answer the question “where are you coming from?”.
Why are there so many strangers who are crazy for our kastom?

I think it is because their own kastom has been lost. Our kalija, kastom, and history, are close to us. I hope that we will not let go of it.

(Extracts of speech made by Longdal Nobel Misingyao at the opening of the Na’hai Cultural Centre, October 24, 1998)

As with all official occasions, the opening of the Na’hai Kaljaral Senta was riddled with speeches, and Longdal had carefully prepared the talk he gave. Clearly he was speaking both to the local Na’hai people around him, as well as the line of foreign visitors who were there for the event. The reference to man-China, man-Europe and man-Africa, as well as to man-Futuna, situates the concept of ‘man-Na’hai’ within that of an island, national and international network.

In chapter two I discussed how Longdal has been trying to ‘solidify’ the notion of a Na’hai community for more than a decade now. The first major event he organised towards this goal was the Na’hai Arts Festival on Tomman Island in 1988, which also marked the end of a seven year reign of a fiercely anti-kastom church on Tomman (see chapter four). Then in 1994 he created the Na’hai Council (see chapter one). The building of the Na’hai Kaljaral Senta can be seen as a direct continuation of his previous efforts at ‘creating community’. There is no doubt that the cultural centre was promoted as an alternative, even competitive, project, which would solidify the ‘community’ of Na’hai speakers, and act as a source of pride in contra-distinction to their Ninde and Nahava-speaking neighbours to the north. The cultural centre is Na’hai as distinct from Mewun, and extolled as the first for any one language group in Vanuatu. It is a national and even global

---

1 Futuna is an island at the south of the archipelago just to the east the larger, and better known, island of Tanna. Futuna is one of Vanuatu’s ‘Polynesian outliers’, a reference to their Polynesian language.
symbol of localised identity. Moreover Longdal is engaged in a process which both imitates and differentiates. He is asserting a very localised, even parochial, identity, yet expressing this in a form and a forum that has become a ‘global’ institution itself: the museum.

In *Routes: travel and translation in the late 20th century*, James Clifford devotes four chapters to museological representations of indigenous history and culture, some of which are indigenous initiatives. After a chapter on the Museum of Mankind’s exhibition on the PNG Highlands, *Paradise* he explores the Kwagiulth Museum and Cultural Centre, Quadra Island; and U’mista Cultural Centre, Albert Bay both near Vancouver Island. Perhaps in an auto-critique of his own previous call for attention to hybridity and inter-cultural exchange, Clifford concludes:

> Postmodern theories, descriptions, ironies, and tastes have entered their moment of public contestation and crisis. Their critiques of authenticity get us somewhere and fall apart. Such theories have been good for displacing purism of all sorts, for bringing contact zones and borders into view, and for appreciating the ruses of cultural agency. But they tend to homogenize hybridities - those produced in different historical situations and relations of power, hybridities imposed from ‘above’ and ‘invented’ from below. And when every cultural agent (especially global capitalism) is mixing and matching forms, we need to be able to recognize strategic claims for localism or authenticity as possible sites of resistance and empowerment rather than of simple nativism (Clifford 1997: 183).

This seems to tilt the hybridity debate in postmodern anthropology on its side. If authenticity is an ‘invention’, or ‘innovation’ as is perhaps more befitting a term, then what we need to look at is who is doing the inventing. Authenticity and cultural ‘insularity’ can also be acts of resistance to those all too apparent, yet somewhat undefinable, ‘processes of globalisation’. Within this context, an objectified hybridity can also be the agent for neocapitalist global expansion. Perhaps an over-enthusiastic attention to ‘hybridity’ has failed to acknowledge that hybridity, like *kastom*, is also subject to processes of objectification. One of the assumptions behind such
enthusiasm seems to be that ‘hybridity’ is in fact the ‘way the world(s) is (are): intermingled, entangled, acculturated. Of course, in a sense this is an historical ‘fact’. However in the context of the trans-global flow of capital, and the ideas associated with that movement (such as ‘development’), hybridised identities are as equally ‘constructed’ as localised ‘traditions’. It is essential to differentiate between the inter-change of ideas and objects through historical entanglement, and the promotion of ‘inter-culturality’ as a contemporary discourse of and for globalisation. In these global contexts ‘hybridity’ is put forward as a mode of being that responds to specific political and economic demands and agendas, and in that respects it is not so different from the ways by which kastom is infused within nation building projects.

Roads between places: kastom as development

The concept of ‘development’ is intimately implicated in both the project of the cultural centre and those objectifications of hybridity associated with the notion of ‘globalisation’. David Gegeo has discussed the different associations between the concept of bisnis and diflopmen among the Kwara’ae of north Malaita. He argues that bisnis is seen as a ‘dead’ or ‘inactive’ mode of production: one which engenders failure after failure, and one which involves laliru ‘anga or ‘continually chasing things’. Development on the other hand is seen positively, as an ‘alive’ mode of production. Gegeo argues that the notion of development has antecedents in the vernacular language. For Gegeo, “(t)he most important distinguishing aspect of diflopmen to the west Kwara’ae is that a project so labelled … ‘emerges out of one’s own hand’ ”(Gegeo 1998: 305).1

In Malakula as well the term ‘man blo bisnis’ (namaratin ti’bisnis in Na’hai)

---

1 Gegeo demonstrates how pidgin words that share semantic and epistemological origins, can “embrace perspectives which are strikingly different from each other and from the English concepts” (1998: 298-299). It goes almost without saying that this applies to the concept of pies as well.
is usually derogatory, and is certainly not like the ‘businessman’ of English expression.\(^1\) Longdal had to walk a tightrope between getting his own recognition established, and making sure that the cultural centre was a ‘community’ project. This was further complicated by the ideological opposition he encountered from certain Christian denominations. Yet on both sides, what was disputed was whether all this was going forward or going backward. Those who moved from opposing to supporting the project, were by and large won over by the argument that this was good for future generations. In this sense the project was both *kastom* and development. Here the holistic view of development in Melanesia, as opposed to the purely economic association it often has in the West, is apparent (Gegeo 1998).

Community may be seen as a ‘false’ concept anthropologically, but it is a concept that has been inserted into administrative, governmental and indigenous practice, with important economic and political consequences. As such it is important to continue questioning the concept, not so much for its utility, or not, as a tool of anthropological analysis (Wagner 1974), but rather for the ways in which the subjects of our ethnographic studies are themselves engaged ‘constructing community’. The example of the *Na’hai Kaljaral Senta* shows that we cannot see ‘community’ as simply ‘local’, since in this context the very ‘concretisation’ of the notion is linked to the attractions and pressures of government projects and foreign aid.\(^2\) In development discourse this positioning of community at the centre of their projects, often with the best of intentions, is also a crucial factor in defining and shaping the targeted ‘beneficiary community’.

And yet it would be somewhat patronising to suggest that Malakulans

---

1 The sign on Tom’s house also alludes to this negative connotation, as it states: “This House belongs to God, Men who get drunk or, chase women, thieves, sorcerers, *businessmen*, smokers, and *rich men*, are not allowed inside” (see chapter four).

2 Both by governments and non governmental organizations.
define themselves in terms of the dictates of small-scale foreign aid. Over the last two hundred years or so, Malakulans have been actively engaging with and integrating the ideas and objects that foreigners have brought. This has not typically been the result of a heavy colonial imposition (although that also occurred). Although in Malakula people may understand themselves as being both imbued with, and as products of, ples, they also place much value on movement, on travel and exchange. However travel is not valued for 'just looking', for 'wandering aimlessly', rather the value of travel is to make roads, to make roads between ples. These rod, as they are called in Bislama, or nahal' in Na'hai, can be maintained by exchanges or by marriages. Women, when they marry out of the village are said to 'make roads', opening a path for future travel. Rod are not only physical structures, paths from one place to another, they traces of human relations: connections between people(s), between ples.

Longdal's museum, as a project, put the notion of community at risk; it stretched the bounds and the tenacity of the concept, as a material manifestation of an idealised notion. Indeed, it was quite literally built on the concept itself. Those who laboured every week, were working for kastom as well as for that equally constructed notion of man-Na'hai. Longdal had been trying to promote a language based sense of community for over a decade. Furthermore Longdal appropriated non-indigenous discourse, that of anthropology and museology, to promote a very localised sense of identity. Yet at the same time he 'indigenised' the concept of a museum so that, for example, the important symbolic aspects are not those that lie inside the walls and on the shelves of the house, but how it all stands in relation to the outside. The line of stones is undoubtedly the most important artefact, the most crucial spatial structure, and the biggest motivation for his supporters and attendees of the opening ceremony. Moreover, the motivation for all of this is less nostalgic reminiscence than energetic concern for the future. Or, as Maas Limbus: 'for the future generations'. Longdal after all is a man who has travelled, who has lived
abroad, and who returned to proclaim a strong sense of localised identity. He is appealing to a *kastom* for tomorrow.
Epilogue

STONING THE FUTURE

In the last chapter we saw how stones were more crucial in the events of the opening of the Na’hai Cultural Centre than any of the artefacts on display inside this indigenous museum. In this context, as in many others, stones play a central role in the ways Malakulans understand knowledge to be a product of place. Stones are both the embodiment of ancestor spirits and manifestations of high-ranking male power. This is a male power that is accumulated in life but reverberates in the afterlife, when the man has become an ancestor spirit himself. Just as stones have always signalled the future in the afterlife, so they here also signal a future in the imagined afterlife of kastom.

The concept of kastom has been zealously discussed in the literatures of Vanuatu and Melanesia more generally. That literature has proved very fertile, especially in the way it has stressed Melanesian self-consciousness about the processes of historical transformations, and how far these have been conceived as continuity or rupture. Yet even in the most nuanced socio-linguistic analyses (for example White 1993), the concept has tended to be construed primarily as about the past, or at most about the dynamics of past-present relations.

As I have tried to show in this thesis kastom is also situated in a discursive context which is not only oriented towards an objectified past (Babadzan 1988; Larcom 1982; Lawson 1997; Thomas 1992), nor just towards the
political contingencies of the present (Facey 1997; Keesing 1989; Keesing & Tonkinson 1982; Linneken 1992; Philibert 1986; Tonkinson 1982), but also very much in terms of an image of the future (Wagner 1975; Weiner 1991). In Malakula, kastom is not so much a nostalgic recuperation of the past, nor even a conservative statement about the power of ‘tradition’ in the present, but a projection of individual and collective power into the future.

Throughout this thesis I have constantly stressed how for Malakulans the language of place is more important than the language of time. My analysis echoes other recent ethnographies in this emphasis, for example Weiner (1991) and some essays in (Feld & Basso 1996) for Papua New Guinea, and Rodman (1993), Jolly (1994), and Bolton (1999b) for Vanuatu. But some authors have also stressed the entanglement of the languages of spatiality and temporality in both Western and Melanesian contexts. So Jolly has pointed to the condensation of the languages of time and place in Vanuatu, both in nationalist narratives and in village conversations in indigenous languages (Jolly 1999). She stresses how tropes of rootedness encode both attachment and persistence, while idioms of rootlessness suggest both spatial and temporal transience. But in construing this condensation of space and time we must also look to the future. Some scholars, insofar as they envisage ni-Vanuatu as ‘moving forward’, tend to imagine the future primarily in terms of Eurocentric visions of modernity, with its temporal and even teleological logic. The language of modernisation, and development, has of course been strenuously criticised in recent time, although certain core philosophical presumptions persist in the more naïve celebrations of globalisation (which seemingly substitute the language of place for the language of time).

As Gegeo (1998) suggested for Malaita, the concept of development in Melanesia has a different inflection from its use in English. Similarly we can see here not just in the talk of the actors, but also in the embodied practices of placing stones, that they are used not just to mark the powerful
connection of people and place, but also to lay claim to a future already imagined as history. As Maas Limbus told us:

And I feel good
We’re doing this for the future of our children.
And one day ....
When all of us here are ...
Me, I'll be dead. Maas Limbus, talking to you now. I'll be dead.
But our kids will be able to say "Our ancestors ...
They made a stone from the Vanhah nasara and came to place it at Leunari ples. They took it from Tomman and brought it here."

(Quote from Film 3: See Appendix p.268)

Stones not only mark the power of place but also that of history, understood as the grounded, and emplaced, connection between past, present and future.
Strange crows?
No cross cousin marriage allowed, despite crow terminology (nor with parallel cousins).
Such a marriage is said to result in infertility or sick children as well as poor garden produce. A general decline in fertility of people and nature, a decline in *ples.*
Even stranger crows? How George calls Alben (his MFBDS) 'brother':

Through a matrilateral link despite patrilineal descent and crow terminology. Also considered endogamous (with same results as for cross cousin or parallel cousin marriage).
## APPENDIX II

**Na’hai kinship terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ego: Female</th>
<th>Ego: Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong></td>
<td>Tata</td>
<td>Tata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
<td>Gi’ai</td>
<td>Gi’ai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FF</strong></td>
<td>Avu-teuteut (tata-timalala)</td>
<td>Avu-teuteut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FB</strong></td>
<td>Tata-lam (<em>1st born</em>) \nTata-timalala(<em>not 1st born</em>)</td>
<td>Tatalam-tatimal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MF</strong></td>
<td>Teuteut</td>
<td>Teuteut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
<td>Nipmwenienian</td>
<td>Niptu anian (<em>1st born</em>) \n<em>other-Nivhalanian or Niptasinian</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Z-1st born)</strong></td>
<td>Niptu-anian</td>
<td>Peuhnen-gina (<em>1st born B</em>) \n<em>others: Yasingin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Z- Other</strong></td>
<td>Niptasinian (tingina)</td>
<td>as above (depending on ego <em>1st born or not</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>S</strong></td>
<td>Nangu-mbunong</td>
<td>Nangu-mbunong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
<td>Nangu-tambalu</td>
<td>Nangu-tambalu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HBD</strong></td>
<td>Nangu-tambalu</td>
<td>Nangu-tambalu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BD</strong></td>
<td>Nangu-tambalu</td>
<td>Nangu-tambalu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HBS</strong></td>
<td>Nangu-tambalu</td>
<td>Nangu-tambalu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BS</strong></td>
<td>Nangu-mbunong</td>
<td>Nangu-mbunong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(WB)(HB)</strong></td>
<td>if <em>B 1st born</em>: Tuang</td>
<td>Nangu-marlo (<em>tambu</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>if <em>H 1st born</em>: (joking relationship)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(W)(H)</strong></td>
<td>Nangu-aivut</td>
<td>Nangu vin aivut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FBS (if B 1st born)</strong></td>
<td>Nipwenienian</td>
<td>Iptu-anyin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FBS</strong></td>
<td>Nipwenienian</td>
<td>Tasung (<em>1st born</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FBD (if B 1st born)</strong></td>
<td>Niptu-anian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FBD (if F 1st born)</strong></td>
<td>Iptasìn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FZS</strong></td>
<td>Tata+name (<em>joking relationship</em>)</td>
<td>Tata+name (<em>joking relationship</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FZD</strong></td>
<td>Wawa+name (<em>joking relationship</em>)</td>
<td>Wawa+name (<em>joking relationship</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FZ</strong></td>
<td>Wawa</td>
<td>Wawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MZ</strong></td>
<td>Gi-ai timalala</td>
<td>Gi-ai timalala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MB</strong></td>
<td>Aphap tingina</td>
<td>Aphap tingina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MBS</strong></td>
<td>Latung-wawa (<em>joking</em>)</td>
<td>Latung-name (<em>joking relationship</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MBD</strong></td>
<td>Latung-wawa (<em>joking</em>)</td>
<td>Latung-name (<em>joking relationship</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MZS</strong></td>
<td><em>brother</em> Mwening-nipwenienian</td>
<td>Tasung nivhalanian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MZD</strong></td>
<td><em>sister</em> Niptuanian (<em>1st born</em>) \nNiptasinian</td>
<td>Puneng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FM</strong></td>
<td>Ka-kap</td>
<td>Ka-kap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FFF</strong></td>
<td>Avu-teuteut</td>
<td>Avu-teuteut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FFM</strong></td>
<td>Avu-kakap</td>
<td>Avu-kakap</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX III

Contributions by Amel and individuals for the opening of the Na'hai Kaljaral Senta

Compiled by Longdal Nobel Masingyao and sent to me for inclusion in the thesis on November 6, 1998

REKOD BLONG DINEUR NAAMEL

Hemia na olgeta nems mo memba blong Dineur Naamel we oli pem pig mo oli givin yams during ofisol opening blong Naahai Kaljorol Senta long Luwanari Bay.

Hemia olgeta nems:

Alick Akarmeli  
(500 - 1 yam)  
Vurobir famili, Yum-Dineur  
Tomman aelan

George Akarmeli  
(1,000 - 2 yams)  
1 mat presen

Repik Akarmeli  
Vurobir famili, Yum-Dineur  
1 mat presen

Sungkran Abue  
Sarvi famili, Yum-Dineur  
500 + 1 yam - 1 manel

Lingal Masinabong  
Rabumal famili, Yum Dineur (200)

Lisan Akarmeli  
Vurobir famili (200 - 1 yam)

Lisikon Abue  
Vin-Sarvi (200)

Vettiri Akarmeli  
Vin-Vurobir (300 - 3 yams - 1 mat presen)

Dalbon Abue  
Man Sarvi (500 - 2 yams)

Donal Abue  
Man-Sarvi (500 - 1 yam)

Mari Rose Abue  
Vin-Sarvi (200 - 1 yam)

Ambonglel Akarmeli  
Man-Vurobir (500)

Johnmel Abue  
Man-Sarvi (1 yam)

Pig blong Charlie Akarmeli blong Yum-Dineur na olgeta famili ia oli pem mo presa blong hemi, hemi 5,800 Vatil.

Man we i katem sor statue blong ol famili Dineur Naamel hemi Mr George Akarmeli blong Vurobir famili. Man we i givin toktok long taem ia hemi Ambonglel Akarmeli mo Donal i kilim pig.

Wan painal i bin go insaed long Naahai Kaljorol Senta olsem wan Donesen blong Dineur Naamel.
FAMILY LOORBATAP

Olgeta ia nao ol pig we ol kilim long Luwanari blong openem Kaljorol Senta.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arop</td>
<td>4,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simo</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agili</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennita</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amark</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisui</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veci</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulin</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listinga</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tialy</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenillin</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motillin</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pascal</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jefferey</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estel</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total mani blong pig ia i kasem: 18,000

*****************************************************************************************************************************************

Pig ia ol famili blong Loorbatap oli go pig blong Witava (White Sand). Pig ia hemi blong Dick. Derek Hillary na o karem pig ia long boat blong hem i go kasem Luwanari. Mani we ol basis long boat ia i kasem 2,000 Vatu.

Ol famili we ol karem ol kakae hemi:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arop</td>
<td>4 yams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liustavu</td>
<td>5 yams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veoki</td>
<td>1 yam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simo</td>
<td>2 yams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>1 yam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roty</td>
<td>1 yam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amark</td>
<td>1 wcta taro</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*****************************************************************************************************************************************

Man we i toktok from ston blong Nakamal blong olgeta hemi Arop. Mo man we i kilim pig blong Nakamal blong olgeta hemi Atip. Tut blong pig ia wetem 2 witnes blong Niluan i stap insaed long Kaljorol Senta.

Ol famili ia ol planti be sam long olgeta ol i no save tek pat long pig kiling seremoni from we jioj we ol stjap long hemi no letem olgeta blong tek pat long hem.
REKOD BLONG LOORBATAP NAAMEL

Hemla olgeta nems mo memba blong Loorbatap famili we oli bin givin yam mo pem pig blong Naahai Kaljorol Senta ofisol opening selebesesen. Ptaes blong pig ia hemi (16,000 Vt). Pig ia hemi blong Mr Andick Aitip long White Sand villi. Mo kos blong transpot hemi 2,000 Vt.

Hemia nac olgeta nems

Arop Masinabuwais (5,000 - 7 yams)
Aicil Masinabuwais (1,000)
Zisul Masinabuwais (1,000 - 1 mat presen)
Simc Masinabuwais (1,000 - 2 yams)
Aemak Masinabuwais (1,000 - 1 wota taro)
Zenita Arop (500)
Paulin Masinabuwais (1,000)
Aitip Masibuwais (1,000)
Veuki Masinabuwais (1,000 - 1 yam)
Lisingnasig Masinabuwais (1,000)
Peter Masinabuwais (1 yam)
Roti Sandi (1 yam) Vin-Nimburi Sennesip
Jenein Masinabuwais (1 mat present)

During dei blong seremoni Mr Arop Masinabuwais nac hemi givim toktok mo Aitip Masinabuwais nac i kiliim pig blong olgeta famili blong Loorbatap.

Man we i bin katem stn statue blong Loorbatap hemi Arop. Kalo Masinabuwais man we i katem fes blong ston ia hemi Masingtana Masiravi, man Nimburi.
REKOD BLONG MELEUT NAAMEL

Hemla na ogeta nems mo memba blong Meleut Naamel we oli bin pem piq mo sapoten Naamel blong ogeta during cisol opening blong Naahai Kaljorol Sentalong Luwaneri Bay. 24/10/98 @ 11'klox.

Hemla ogeta nems
Tom Aimalcil (3,000 + 5 yams)
Litiah Aimalcil (500)
Pepeli Aimalcil (500)
Leiwin Aimalcil (500)
Elton Aimalcil (1,000)
Marie-Joe Aimalcil (500)
Harry Aimalcil (100)
Claud Aimalcil (100)
Longei Aimalcil (3,000 + 5 yams)
Suitlee Aimalcil (500)
Jenneri Aimalcil (500)
Mapera Aimalcil (500)
Marselin Aimalcil (100)
Lucy Aimalcil (100)
Josfins Aimalcil (100)
Lisinvoron Aimalcil (100)
Joswin Aimalcil (1,000)
Wensio Aimalcil (200)
Melin Aimalcil (500)
Tomain Aimalcil (100)
Reitaki Aimalcil (200)
Aising Aimalcil (1,000)
Jack Aimalcil (1,000)
John Aimalcil (1,000)
Tonny Aimalcil (1,000)
Batick Ambuwastokor (1,000)
Bronny Ambuwastokor (500) mo Bensery Ambuwastokor (100)

*****************************************************************************
REKOD BLONG MELEUT NAAMEL

Long namba 23 Oktoba 1998 Longel Aimalcil hemi bin karem ston mo hemi tigim hol mo Suitlee i tigim moa gron long hol wetem Litiah mo Toleu i putum ston i go insaed long ol hol. Nac Litiah wetem Suitlee, Pepeli, Mapera, so mifala nac i berem ston la long dei ia.

*****************************************************************************

Fes blong ston blong Meleut, hemi saen blong Moon o Atvinveu. Longel naa hemi katem fes la long ston blong Meleut.
REKOD BLONG VORVAT MILIP NAAMEL

Hemta nae olgeta propa native blong Yum-Vorvat Milip Naamel we olia laet tedei we olia bin pem mo wan pig mo givim olgeta yams during Naahai Kaljoral Senta ofisol opening long Luwanari Bay long namba 24 Oktoba 1998 @ 11'klock.

Hemta olgeta nema

Ian Tavube: Vorvat famili, Yum-Milip (5,000 + 4 yams + 3 basket presen)
Alongtavu Tavube: Vorvat famili, Yum-Milip (3,200 + 1 yam)
Remon Tavube: Vorvat famili (1,000)
Helian Tavube: Vorvat famili (1,000 + 2 yams + 1 pumpkin)

Olgeta relatives ia nae olia bin helpan Vorvat famili long naam ia

Tommison Moses (3,000 + 1 yam)
Luisbexor Vin-Nimburi (200)
Nell Aisulbatin Vin-Loorlacalat (500)

Praes blong pig ia hemi (16,000). Pig ia hemi blong Terry Matu long Leuravuh Bay. Umaas Naamel.

During long seramoniti, toktok i bin kamaot long Ian Tavube: mo man we i kilm pig hemi Alongtavu Tavube:.

Man we i ktem ston long Vorvat Milip famili hemi Terry Matu. Ian Tavube: nae i bin planem ston statue blong Vorvat Milip, long namba 23 Oktoba @ 11'klock am moning.
**NAAHAI KAJOROL SENTA**

**RIKOD BLONG**

**RANKON NAAMEL HISTRI**

Mifala ol famili blong Rankon Naamel i pem wan man pig blong Erina Nobel long Batchang. Hemi kosem mifala 16,000 Vatu mo mifala i katem wan ston blong ripresentem Rankon Naamel wetem 20 yams - 4 mat.


Hemia naq ol hem blong ol famili we oli help mo oli rili trae had tumas long:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Name</th>
<th>Son in Law Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apal Ailie</td>
<td>Amanloof Ailie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaltoe Abilibiau</td>
<td>Jackson Abilibiau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Ailie</td>
<td>Wasami Ailie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Ailie</td>
<td>Edwyn Ailie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnkeo Ailie</td>
<td>Samwille Ailie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Kenety Kaltoe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewine Ailie</td>
<td>Mariebon Aile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Ailie</td>
<td>Liona Ailie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liel Ailie</td>
<td>Resinet Ailie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hemia olgeta nems blong ol man mo woman we oli bin givim Vatu long pig.

Praes blong pig ia we hemia 16,000 Vatu.

Pig ia hemia blong Erina-Nobel blong Umaas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: Apal</td>
<td>A: Ella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwyn</td>
<td>Jennisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasami</td>
<td>Mari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allul</td>
<td>Resinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makwin</td>
<td>Liyona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>Lewinmi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanlolap</td>
<td>Liyel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samwille</td>
<td>Mari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johnkeo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kepry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kepsen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keply</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaltce</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Kaltoe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgekenety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(500 Vt)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REKOD BLONG UMAAS NAAMEL

Hemla naq olgata sating we ol memba blong Umaas Naameel oli bin givim during long de bloong selebersen blong fas Naahal Kajocril Senta we hemi cisili open long nambe 24 Oktober 1998 long Luwanari Say & lil'kloq.

Cil bin planem wan ston statue, oli givim i ova long 10 yams, oli givim i mats presen mo oli bin pem wan pig bloong Grek George we vatu blong hem i Kase (20,000 Vatu) bloong Leuravuh vill. Man we i bin katem ston statue blong Umaas Heml Mr Terry Nobel mo Longdal Nobel. Ston la bloong riva long Ninimanan Tili.

Hemla naq olgata nems blong ol memba blong Umaas Naameel we oli bin givim vatu blong pig mo oli givin yams wetem tri (3) presen.

******************************************************************************
Mamari Ambongster. Matvolam famili, Yum-Oibaue. (1,000 Vt blong pig, 2 Yams, 6 bundles banana).

Wilfred Namman. Vortesmatlat famili, Yum Vortesmalat (1,000, 2 Yams).
Joe Namman. Vortesmalat famili, (1,000, 1 yam - 2 bundle banana).
Albert Namman. Vortesmalat famili, (500, 1 yam - 1 wild yam).
Ran Namman. Vortesmalat famili, (1,000 - 1 yam).
Eston Namman. Vortesmalat famili, (1,000 - 1 yam).
Johnian Kensen. Vuntortor famili, (1,000).
Terry Matu. Avirom famili, Yum-Oibaue (1,000 - 2 yams).
Longdal Matu. Avirom famili, Yum-Oibaue (1,000 - 4 yams).
Noel Kensen. Yum Vuntortor (1,000).
Viva Matu. Avirom famili (1,000 - 2 yams - 2 mat presen).
Elen Kensen. Yum Vuntortor (500).
Lisatavu Yum-Vortesmalat (1,000 - 2 yams - 3 bundle banana).
Lisatavu Matu Avirom famili (500 - 1 mat presen).
Matha Ambongster Matvolam famili, Yum-Oibaue (1,000).
Brina Ambongster Matvolam famili, Yum-Oibaue (1,000 - 1 yam).
Jenny Namman Yum-Vortesmalat (500 - 1 yam).
Jenny Namman Yum-Vortesmalat (500).
Rapel Matu Avirom famili, Yum-Oibaue (1,000).
Vilu Matu Avirom famili, Yum-Oibaue (1,000).
Jenny Matu Avirom famili, Yum-Oibaue (1,000).
REKOD BLONG UMAAS NAAMEL

Setwin Attipleu  Vunailii famili, Yum-Vorvatu (1,000)
Laisingpenta Attipleu  Vunailii famili, Yum-Vorvatu (1,000)
Ratthen Ammanveu  Vunailii famili, Yum-Vorvatu (300)

During dei blong pig killing seremoni blong wan wan Naamel long dei blong ofisi openi blong Naahai Kaljorol Sena, tokick blong ston statue hemi bin kam long Noel Kensen mo man we i kiling pig hemi Johnsaih Kensen.

Cti bin karem pig ia long boat Antes Tomman mo i go kasem Luwanari Bay. Praes blong boat hemi (700). Man we hemi karem pig hemi Joel Nammar.
REKOD BLONG VORBURI NAAMEL

Hemia nac olgeta samting we ol memba blong Vorburi Naamel oli bin givim during long dei blong selebsen blong fes Naahai Kaljorel Senta we hemi ofisol open long namba 24 Oktobra 1998 long Luwanari Bay & il'klok.

Oli bin kilim wan pig we praes blong hem i kasem 9,000 Vatu long hem. Pig ia hemi blong Peter Talon. Wesem wan laef pig i go long Peter. Vorburi Naamel i bin planem wan ston statue blong hem olsen wan memorial ston blong hem olsen representative no memba blong Naahai Komuniti long taem ia. During ofisol kiling blong wan wan Naamel long dei ia Mr. Amanalbon nac hemi givim toktok mo pikinini blong hem Mr. Numan nac hemi kilim pig blong Vorburi Naamel.

Vorburi Naamel Date: 24/10/98

Olgeta famili we oli nem pig no oli givim yam

Amantalon Roaty Lisingbekor
Peter Joes Reina
Numan Aitiptalon
Zifen Pennins (Evri nems ia oli givim yams)
Rollen Eskele

Nems blong olgeta relatives we oli help blong sanxem famili Vorburi

Joel Namman 500 Vt Kenson (1 yam)
Tommison Tom mekem kopra Longdal Nobel (yam)
Albert Namman 200 Vt
Baron Namman 200 Vt

Olgeta expenses

(3 mats blong presen, 300 Vt long evriwan).
Transport blong pig i go long Luwanari hemi 580 Vt long Milip tu. Mo bak tu Milip. Mifala i pen tu tin met blong ol SDA Vorburi memba from we oli no kakae pig, praes hemi 340 Vatu. (Wan ston statue, 2i yams, 2 banana, 2 pumkin mo 3 presen).
REKOD BLONG YUM-LOOR NAAMEL

Hemia nao storian blong ston blong mifala Yum-Loor Tembetep.
Tokabaot ston ol man Yum-Loor Tembetep we ol stap long Tomman aisan nao oli karem. Long moning blong namba 12 Oktoba 1998, ol man Yum-Loor tembetep nomo i karem long kenu i kam long Luwanari Bay.

Long 21 Oktoba 1998, olfa Tohlis Masingyal nac i digim hol blong ston ia mo olgeta we oli berem long taem ia hemi, Jerry Masing, Noel Masingyal, mo Lelran Estel. Olgeta ia blong Yum-Loor tembetep nomo. Long namba 24 Oktoba 1998 man we i stanap blong presentem ston ia hemi Lelran Estel. Man we i kilim pig long taem ia hemi Jerry Masing man we i katem pig hemi Tohlis Masingyal.

Hemia nao olgeta famili we oli pem pig ia we praes blong hemi (10,000 Vt) pig blong Libon, Vin Yum-Loor tembetep tu we i stap long Malvahal long taem ia.

Nems blong olgeta

Jerry Masing  Teo Masing  Aisal Jack  Remma Jack
Maritha Masing  Lisel  Liyau  Patrick
Katrin  Libon  Lelran  August
Rinni  Annet  Reitas  Lusien
Lesontvora  Lisulianet  Kityon  Dipleu
Tohlis Masingyal  Noel Masingyal

Ol man we oli givim mat long taem ia hemi Roslin mo Lisingwo.

Olgeta ia we oli karem olgeta yams long taem ia hemi olgeta blong yum-Loor Tembetep nomo oli karem yam ia.
FILM 1: Tom's *Tambu* House

My name is Elder Tom Moses

I live a life of prayer which is why I moved out here.

I listened to the Bible which says it's good for a man to live apart from his family, from his wife. To move out and live alone so as to pray. So I left and built this house here.

I built it and moved in here.

I did that because I'm tambu. So I can pray inside.

You see with this house, not anybody can come inside.

Men who drink or smoke or who ...

chase women, also married men and women, can't come inside.

- Married men can't go inside?
- They can't. Married women too.

Because I'm tambu.
I've become tambu so I can pray.

When I came, I made this place first.

But it wasn't my idea.
It came through prayer.
I was praying in my house and He said "Move out, live apart."

"And build a house for Me"
"Build a house that'll be for Me"

"And build a yard around it.
A yard to go around the house."

"And in the house
make 2 rooms."

"One for you to sleep in
and one for Me, for prayer."

"There must be nothing in it.
Just put a lamp and ..."

"a white cloth on the table with
the lamp on top ... in that room."

That back room is off-limits.
But singles may enter this one.

Because I live now as a celibate.
I am single now.

So they can go in, but a married man would have to stay out here.

They couldn't go inside.

For them it's tambu.

And you're saying that God told you this? You speak to Him?

Yes I speak to Him.
I built this house with prayer.

At the time when I ...

we opened this house
for me to come inside.

When I went inside
an angel entered too.

Brother I saw it with my eyes. It wasn't a dream or vision. I saw it.

I bowed down when he came.
He held a book like this.
Holding the book like this
he said "Peace be with you."

"These are the commandments."

"Those who value them
will come to you."

As he spoke I was
staring at him like this.

Then the house began spinning
like in a hurricane.

He didn't speak English
or French or Bislama

He spoke his own language
yet I understood it too.

So this is where you sleep?
Yes and in here is where I pray.

- Should we go in?
- Yes, you can come.

The news should get out. I asked this morning. You can come in.

You'll set up 3 separate stations.
What's the meaning of that?

It was He who told me
to make 3 stations.

One for ...

One for him. One for the Christians and one for the youth.

See here, this one's for Him.
This is His.

But for Christians a church will be built here. A church will go here.

The young ones can
do their thing over there.

If they want to drink kava
then that's their business.

Or to dance.
It's their business.

But I don't want any drunks over here. That's for Christians.

I don't want drunks here so I made that place there.

If I hadn't kids would get drunk here, having no other place for it.

This is part of our own culture too.

This pole is part of our kastom.

The cross belongs to Jesus but it fits with our kastom too.

We call it "nu'umbo timbarap"

"nu'umbo timbarap"

They used to wrap it around with dry banana leaves.

It'd be covered up to there with a flower on top.

Now it's changed. The flower is the flag of Vanuatu.

This is the flag of Jesus.

It's not like it was before. Now Jesus is mixed in with it.

It's not like before.

I've put Jesus with it now ... with our kastom.

This Tam Tam here ... it was He who told me to make it.

It wasn't my idea.

I thought, since I was praying, I shouldn't be making Tam Tams.
Of course, I'd seen them being made for sale.

But I thought "No, I shouldn't make Tam Tam's, they're kastom."

But then it was He who told me "No, you make one."

"Make it so that you can call people together with it."

"And it's your kastom too. If someone is asked ...

'What's your totem plant?'
'What's your Tam Tam rhythm?'

"Then they can come to beat it here."

He said "But if you do make it you must put my Word at the top."

"Don't put a face on it. Put my Word at the top."

"My Law must be at the top."

So you see I've put the 10 commandments up there.

Now this structure protecting the Tam Tam

We here in Vanhah we'd call that a "nakamal".

It's a kind of nakamal. I asked my brother. He said "Yes, that's right".

"It's like a nakamal. Our nakamals in Vanhah".

Well, sacred things are kept in nakamals.

Things possessed by spirits who speak from the nakamal.
If you beat the Tam Tam
you'd hear spirits talk...

They'd say...

They'd speak out.

But now in the Tam Tam's beat
it's not the spirits who speak.

God speaks from it now.
There are the commandments.

This is our church
where we worship and learn.

We put it here first
but later we'll move it to there.

When he spoke to me ...
when I went inside the house ...

God's house. He told me "Don't
you work on the church building."

"Let others do it. If you do it
the whole thing'll become tambu."

But they can build it.
I told the boys "Sorry about that
I can't help you build your church
you'll have to do it yourselves."

I can't even plan it.
If I did make the plans.

A drunk couldn't stand up
at the lectern to read.

A man who ... swears or who is married couldn't stay on his feet.

"Please, you boys do it without me". So they're building it now.

So all can pray.

If I built it
it'd become tambu like that one.

So they'll do it.
So we can all worship inside.

That house is not as tambu
as this one is.

This one is God's
That one's for the Christians.

A place for them to learn.

And for kids too. But this house
here is not for play. It's for God.

If I hadn't asked first, when you went in, you'd have fallen.

But I did ask.
"May this brother come inside?"

But if I hadn't asked, brother I think you'd've collapsed in there.

It's tambu.

I asked "Lord open the way.
Who better to spread Your Word."

I'm glad they've come,
him and Longdal.

"If You make a road for them
they'll make a road for me ..."

as I make a road for them.
Hallelujah and Praise to God."

I used to pray in open places but He said "No, not in open places."

If you want to pray
go in that room ... hidden.

"In fancy places too, you mustn't
pray." In church I don't pray.

I don't pray in church.
I sing. I read.

- But you don't pray.
- I don't pray. I say the words.

But true prayer, no.
Only in private.

If I tried to, my head would spin and I'd collapse. He'd punish me.

When I moved here, an angel came too. An angel came here too.

I saw it with my own eyes.
It was not a dream or a vision.

When I moved here.

I'm not with any church.
I'm in middle.

When I'm with the SDAs
It's only for the Sabbath Group.

If I'm asked, I say "I'm only here
for the Sabbath Group".

I'm with the angels.
I love all people.

I pray for people with faces I've not seen, as well as faces I know.

I pray for people chased away. My prayers bring them back.

But if all I did was pray
nobody would know.

Which is why I'm here. To pull in people, like that man at the coast.

If you chase a man away,
then he's welcome here.

He could come here.

So that's it...
All I had to say.
FILM 2: Opening the *Na'hai Kaljaral Senta*

We'll now have the official opening of our Cultural Centre.

I'm going to call on the Australian High Commissioner... since we don't have a Minister of Government with us today.

I'm very pleased announce...

that this new Na'hai Cultural Centre,

A house of custom and tradition for the community of Na'hai, is officially opened.
FILM 3: Placing the Stones

This is for Vanhah.

Dineur will place one here

Then we have Milip
and Wornbüri and then Rangon.

And then Mitnaal
then Lo'or Batap.

Any stones that are just too big
should be carried by two men.

Just so you get them here.

And tomorrow
you'll make your speeches here.

And tomorrow ...
How do you think it'll go?

Tomorrow will be one last time
for us where ...

our various amel
get a chance to talk out.

They'll speak. Just small speeches where they'll express
their opinions about the day

Sorry, I'd better film them.

I want to tell a story about...

these stones of ours.

The ones that we're ...

doing today...
placing today.

Of course, in Bislama, these stones are just called "ston".

But in our language we have a special term, it's "navat mbarap".

"navat mbarap"
Now this navat mbarap ...
came out of our
dancing ground in Vanhah.

out of our nasara
at Vanhah.

All the old fellas have died so we're taking their place ...

Our old fellas of Vanhah.

As to myself,
the one telling this story ...

My name is
Maas Limbus.

My name's Maas Limbus.

I was born on Tomman Island.
At my nasara at Vanhah.

I'm a real Vanhah man.

I wasn't born somewhere else.

I was born on the small island,
Tomman Island at Vanhah station.

And the navat mbarap
that I placed here today

that came out of my
nasara at Vanhah.

But all our old fellas are dead.

So I'll take over from my ancestors.

So I'm very pleased
with what's happened ...

That Longdal Nobel
has now managed to revive

this small custom
that we're all trying to perform
there at the ...

the nakamal he has been
making today

at Leunari.

Yes, I'm very pleased.

Because ...

When we converted
to the church

I doubted we'd ever
be able to do this again.

And I feel good

We're doing this for the future of our children.

And one day ....
When all of us here are ...

Me, I'll be dead.  Maas Limbus, talking to you now.  I'll be dead.

But our kids will be able to say "Our ancestors ...

They made a stone
from the Vanhah nasara

and came to place it
at Leunari ples.

They took it from Tomman
and brought it here."

We'll all be finished, but this history will stay and stay.

It can never finish.

I think my talk will end here.
Thank you very much.

OK everyone come here.

Please, we need you here,
come close

You see all these stones...
all lined up here
they reflect the belief that each clan has in its particular totem.
whatever that belief may be, so
the stones lined up here ...
they represent each clan...
and each amel or nasara
that exist within the Na'hai area
I give this club to Along Tam
to kill the Worvat pig.
to represent the Cultural Centre here
where we are today.
The nakamal of Meleut
is here represented.
Adams, R.

Allen, M.


Anderson, B.

Asad, T. (ed.)

Ascher, M.

Babadzan, A.

Balandier, G.

Barker, J.


Barnes, J.

Barlow, E.

Barth, F.

Bolton, L.


**Bonnemaison, J.**


**Bourdieu, P.**


**Boutelier, J., Daniel, T. and S. Tiffany** (eds)
Brunton, R.


Bulter, J.

Cabane, J.-P.

Calvet, J., Kindler, W. von, and J. Coll

Charpentier, J.M.


Clifford, J.

Clifford, J. and G. Marcus (eds)

Codrington, R.H.

Coiffier, C.

Comaroff, J. and J. Comaroff.

Crocombe, R. (ed.)

Crowley, T.

Curtis, T.

Deacon, A.B.
Dening, G.

Docker, E.W.

Douglas, B.


Dureau, C.

Fabian, J.

Facey, E.

Feld, S. & K. Basso (eds)

Filer, C.

Foster, R.J. (ed.)

Fox, J.

Freeman, D.

Friedman, J. and J. Carrier (eds)

Funabiki, T.


Gardiner, M.

Geertz, C.


Gegeo, D.

Gewertz, D. and F. Errington.
Godelier, M.

Gregor, T. and D. Tuzin (eds)

Gregory, C.


Gregory, R., and Gregory, J.

Guiart, J.


1952c. "The Co-Operative Called 'the Malekula Native Company': A Borderline Type of Cargo Cult". *South Pacific* 6, 429-32.


1956. "Culture Contact and the 'John Frum' Movement on Tanna". *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 12, 105-16.


**Haberkorn, G.**


**Hanson, A.**


**Harrisson, T.H.**


**Hau'ofa, E.**


**Heimann, J.M.**


**Helliwell, C.**


**Hemelin, C. and E. Wittersheim** (eds)

Herdt, G.


Hill, J.


Hogbin, I. and C. Wedgewood.
1953. "Local Grouping in Melanesia". *Oceania* 23, 241-76.

Holmes, L.
1983. "On the Questioning of as Many as Six Impossible Things About Freeman's Samoa before Breakfast". *Canberra Anthropology* 6, 1-17.

Huffman, K.


1999. "Vanuatu (Flowers for the Ancestors)". In *Arts of the South Seas: Island Southeast Asia, Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia: The..."


1992b. "Ill-Natured Comparisons: Racism and Relativism in European Representations of Ni-Vanuatu from Cook's Second Voyage". History and Anthropology 5, 331-64.


Jolly, M. and M. Macintyre (eds)

Jolly, M. and N. Thomas.

Kaufmann, C.
Keen, I.

Keesing, R.


Kuper, A.

Langham, I.

Larcom, J.


Lawson, S.

Layard, J.


Lederman, R.

Lindstrom, L.


Lindstrom, L. and G. White (eds)
Lini, W. (ed.)
Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.

Linnekin, J.

Linnekin, J. and L. Poyer (eds)

Loizos, P.

Lutkehaus, N., Kaufmann, C., et al. (eds)

MacClancy, J.


MacDougall, D.

Marcus, G.

McGrane, B.

Merlan, F.

Merlan, F. and A. Rumsey.

Meyerhoff, M.

Miles, W.F.S.

Miller, G.


Moore, C.

Murphy, R.F.
Paton, J.
1964. Thirty Years with South Sea Cannibals. Chicago: Moody Bible Institute.

Paton, J.R.

Patterson, M.


Peltier, P.

Philibert, J.-M.

Pratt, M.L.

Rawlings, G.


Regenvanu, R.

Rensel, J. and M. Rodman (eds)
Rodman, M.


Rouch, J.

Rubenstein, R.L.


Rumsey, A. and J. Weiner (eds)


Sahlins, M.


Said, E.

Schneider, D.M.

Shineberg, D.


Sope, B.

Speiser, F.


Stanton, G.

Steel, R.

Stocking, G. (ed.)

Strathern, M.


Suas, J.B.


Tattevin, E.


Taussig, M.

Thomas, N.


**Tonkinson, R.**


**Tryon, D.**

**Valjavec, F.**

**Van Trease, H.**


**Vanuatu, Republic of.**

**Wagner, R.**


**Walter, A.**
Ward, M.

Wedgwood, C.

Weiner, J.

White, G.

Wolf, E.

Worsley, P.

Young, M.


