



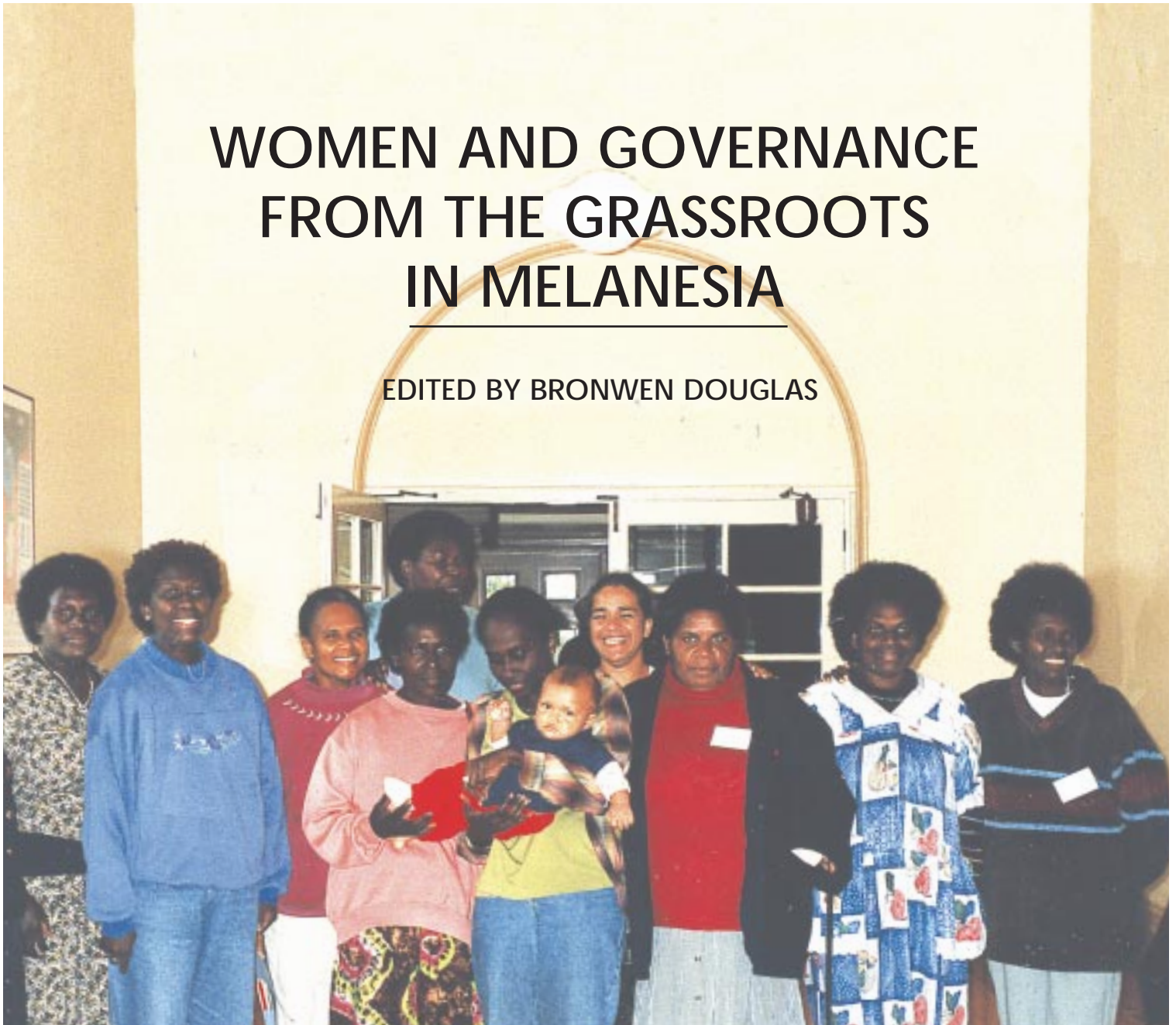
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

State **Society** and **Governance** *in* **Melanesia**

WOMEN AND GOVERNANCE FROM THE GRASSROOTS IN MELANESIA

EDITED BY BRONWEN DOUGLAS



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Discussion Paper 00/2

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The papers in this collection are edited versions of contributions to a State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project Workshop on 'Women, Christians, Citizens: Being Female in Melanesia Today,' held at Sorrento, Victoria, in November 1998. Unusually in a quasi-academic setting, the dominant voices were indigenous and female: two-thirds of the twenty-one presentations made to the workshop were by Melanesian women and six are included here.

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The contribution of AusAID to this series is acknowledged with appreciation.

Cover Picture: Contributors to the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project Workshop on 'Women, Christians, Citizens: Being Female in Melanesia Today,' held at Sorrento, Victoria, in November 1998.

INTRODUCTION: HEARING MELANESIAN WOMEN

Gender and governance in practice

Neither 'gender' nor 'governance' is a word familiarly used by the indigenous contributors to this collection. Their concern is particular local practice rather than universal theory. All but one paper outlines the actual operation of a modest strategy or program to enhance the skills, self-respect and community status and effectiveness of rural women in a Melanesian nation-state. The exception – by Pauline Boseto, a senior nutritionist from Choiseul in Solomon Islands – is general and idealised, yoking local images of sanitised tradition, cultural holism and gender complementarity to Christian nationalist ends. Yet Boseto also lists practical 'challenges' to the realisation of the Christian and constitutional promise of 'equal participation of women and men in church and society'. Several papers propose policy implications of the particular cases discussed, and all make compelling arguments for the civic, social and moral importance of encouraging and tapping the capacities of village women. These papers are edited versions of presentations to a State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project workshop which I convened in November 1998 (Douglas 1999a). My introduction examines the pertinence of the papers to global notions of 'gender' and 'governance' in the light of the workshop theme – Melanesian women as female persons, Christians and citizens in modern states.

Christianity in governance

The motif of Christianity permeates the papers, to the discomfort, perhaps, of the secular sensibilities of western academics and non-church aid workers and donors. The emphasis on Christianity stemmed initially from my intellectual awareness that religion is central to Melanesian individual and collective lives and is attributed practical efficacy as well as spiritual significance. The theme, unusual in an academic setting, was enthusiastically embraced by Melanesian members of the workshop planning committee and by most contributors.

Boseto maintains that Solomon Islanders are beginning to experience Christianity as ownership of and responsibility for "the people's church", rather than in the organisational and denominational terms inherited from missionaries. She points out that Melanesian

theories of natural causation continue to be 'more spiritual ... than scientific'. Ruth Saovana-Spriggs – a Bougainvillean who returned to her island as an adviser on reconciliation and now works with the Bougainville People's Congress – describes Christianity as 'a cultural way of life' in Bougainville and chronicles a growing sense of the power of prayer during the recent ten-year civil war, manifest particularly in women's actions for peace and reconciliation. For Melanesians, prayer can be a pragmatic strategy mobilised to public and private ends. As an example of the widespread Melanesian belief in the practical efficacy of prayer, Rona Nadile, a PhD student from Papua New Guinea (PNG), spoke to the workshop on 'Prayer as practical action'. She argued that Christian prayer was largely a 'custom or tradition' performed routinely by Melanesians in conjunction with daily activities, but that there is 'an increasing growth and awareness in the Word of God. More and more women, and more and more church groups are uniting forces. There are more corporate fellowships and prayer meetings,... imagine how much prayer power can be sent up to heaven at any one time?' (Nadile 1998). It is important that policy-makers take Christianity seriously as a powerful cultural element in Melanesian governance, beyond the institutional frameworks for local administration and aid delivery provided by church organisations, regarded as NGOs.

Christianity, custom and modernity

Josephine Barnes is an Australian adult health educator with long experience as an aid worker in Solomon Islands. The Catholic Women's Program with which she works in Malaita is now largely conducted and controlled by Malaitan women. Barnes writes from an unquestioned Catholic perspective: she assumes the propriety of 'natural family planning' over other means of population control and ignores the indigenous methods, long proscribed by Christian missions, by which women once spaced births – contraception, abortion, lengthy postpartum sexual abstinence, prolonged breast feeding. She also privileges 'Christian ideals' over 'customs that would otherwise constrain women'. Yet to a more critical, feminist stance, present 'customs' like the restriction of women's movement to their natal or marital household, under the surveillance of suspicious, even paranoid men, look like modern products of the interplay over a century, to mainly male advantage, of two male-dominated ideologies: custom and Christianity (Dureau 1998; Keesing 1989).

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On the other hand, Barnes tacitly acknowledges that Christianity meant new constraints for indigenous women and often reinforced local male control by obliterating zones of traditional female autonomy and repose, such as segregated housing and menstrual seclusion. It is important that secular or sectarian distaste at the seemingly partisan tone and politics of her paper should not efface its important story of indigenous women inspired by the Christian premise of equality; finding solace and confidence in Christian values and symbols; taking advantage of the actual plurality of the seemingly monolithic Catholic Church to seek modest, meaningful empowerment for rural women – just as women throughout Melanesia have always exploited Christianity to deflect male domination, Christian as well as customary (Douglas 1999b).

The entanglement of custom and Christianity in modern Melanesian identity politics is an affront to romantic western primitivism and Christian fundamentalism alike, and a paradox requiring explanation for anthropologists. These papers suggest that the relationship of custom and Christianity can also be problematic for indigenous people, not least because Christian practice is a now longstanding ‘custom or tradition’, a ‘cultural way of life’ in much of Melanesia, and because the concepts and content of ‘custom’ or ‘tradition’ are themselves diverse, shifting and contested. Boseto’s general perspective admits no conflict: she insists that in Solomon Islands ‘gospel and culture are intrinsically intertwined’ and draws on the Melanesian nationalist binary image of an idealised custom enshrined in a Christian constitution and opposed to (Western) materialism and individualism.

By contrast, Jean Tarisesei – whose job as coordinator of the Women’s Culture Project of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre is ‘to revive, preserve and promote women’s *kastom* (“custom”)’ – depicts a more mixed, contingent relationship between *kastom*, Christianity and modernity. Focussing on her island of Ambae, she stresses variation in the past and present attitudes to *kastom* of different denominations: the qualified toleration of the long-established Anglicans and Catholics; the gradual rehabilitation of *kastom* in the previously hostile Churches of Christ since the 1960s; the ongoing blanket opposition of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) and Apostolic Churches; the looming threat to revitalised *kastom* from the fundamentalist intolerance of new evangelical and pentecostal churches. For Tarisesei *kastom*

is ‘the way of life which comes from our own place’, the ‘foundation of our identity’, but its practice is dynamic as people add new things ‘to try to make it relevant to life today’. Thus the cost in pigs and mats of bride price is escalating in Ambae and *kastom* knowledge is taught in schools. Similarly, Enikelen Netine, who runs a rural adult literacy program in Vanuatu, describes how Bislama, a non-traditional but national language, provides a stimulus to *kastom*: it ‘opens the way for the preservation of indigenous culture and custom stories’, ensuring their transmission to the young and raising cultural awareness and pride.

For Bougainvilleans, rediscovered custom knowledge was a matter of survival during the blockade of their island in the early 1990s and has since become a nostalgic source of cultural assurance, in apparently seamless relationship with a thoroughly indigenised Christianity: ‘the years of fighting have given the people a more deeply meaningful relationship to their environment and indigenous identity’, writes Saovana-Spriggs. Her account of the revival of customary self-sufficiency and traditional medicine in Bougainville also emphasises the adaptability of custom and its validation in practice as relevant and meaningful in profoundly altered modern settings. She makes a powerful plea that the acknowledged centrality of women in the domestic and local economies, their neglected customary authority as landowners in matrilineal societies, and their recent initiatives as peacemakers during the crisis should be mobilised at the island level of government to enable women to contribute and participate effectively ‘in a world organised and managed by men’ – including the ‘well-meaning’ outsiders currently flocking to Bougainville to assist in reconstruction. Saovana-Spriggs’ case for ‘the need to involve women in matters concerning exploitation of natural resources by external companies’ seems incontrovertible, given the history of mining company involvement in Bougainville and the more recent story of Lihir told by Jacklynne Membup and Martha Macintyre, where once again local ‘men assumed control in the negotiations with the [mining] company’ and women’s custodial rights to manage matrilineage land are ignored by both sides.

Women, modernisation and empowerment

Apart from the consciously secular and apolitical Women’s Culture Project in Vanuatu, all the women’s organisations and programs discussed in these papers have strong church

links, either direct or *de facto* via funding, training and personnel. This is a reminder that in Melanesia church women's wings and village women's groups continue to provide women's main opportunities for training, leadership, solidarity, networking and wider experience beyond the village and even beyond national borders. Barnes' paper looks specifically at a Catholic women's project which provides information, training and support otherwise unavailable to Malaitan women. The literacy program in Vanuatu discussed by Netine was originally an initiative of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union and is now managed by World Vision, with AusAID funding.

Theresia Hopkos, then president of the Ambunti District Council of Women (ADCOW) in the Sepik region of PNG, says that very little government, donor or NGO funding filters down to rural women's groups or actual programs in this vast riverine district, and that 'most of the services for women come from the churches, which provide a dramatic source of education and knowledge'. She herself was trained as a leader and organiser by the SDA Church. Saovana-Spriggs describes how the churches by necessity filled the vacuum in civil government during the Bougainville crisis, altering people's attitudes and expectations about the church-government relationship. Women concentrated their efforts on social services, mediation and reconciliation, working through church organisations like the Catholic women's group formed in north Bougainville by 'Maria', who tells her story in the course of this paper. Men, by contrast, engaged in fighting and politics and now dominate the restored formal level of government.

Membup and Macintyre – respectively a community relations worker for Lihir Gold and an anthropologist studying the social impact of mining – recount how Lihirian women also work from a church organisation base to devise strategies to cope with the speed and immensity of the social change and problems brought by a massive mining project, and to gain some access for women to the equivocal benefits of development. The women's vehicle in Lihir is a novel island-wide organisation called Petztorme, formed with mining company encouragement by the two major pre-existing church women's groups, whose bitter rivalry has since recurred in Petztorme and to an extent dissipated its effectiveness. Like Melanesian women generally, Lihirian women are not averse to modernisation on acceptable terms: they want to participate as much and as profitably as possible in the

employment prospects opened up by mining, but face a double prejudice in the male-dominated culture of the global mining industry, which consigns women to low-paid, menial positions, and in local men's resistance to any employment of women. In alliance with the women's section of the company's Community Relations department, which makes a major social contribution by promoting the value of education, Petztorme has campaigned with some success to increase women's participation in the workforce and to improve their access to training and thus better wages. To this point very few women in Lihir have skilled jobs, but they have earned a reputation as better, more careful and reliable workers than men. Employed women typically donate much of their earnings to church projects and women's groups whereas men drink theirs in beer.

Membup and Macintyre paint an appalling picture of men catapulted into a 'fury of beer drinking' by the sudden availability of cash during the construction phase of the mine, and of the social disruption resulting from the ensuing epidemic of drunkenness and public violence. Petztorme's first project was to encourage women to work out culturally appropriate avenues of protection or refuge against alcohol-induced violence. Violence is a theme in several papers but none depicts women as its helpless victims: instead they propose various pro-active counters to violence, including community accountability, self-help, painstaking mediation, and the assurance and respect women gain from literacy training and collective action.

Hopkos lists awareness programs against domestic violence and sexual harassment as key ADCOW activities. Netine cites fervent testimonies by ni-Vanuatu women on the great benefits they have derived from literacy: access to valuable practical information; confidence, financial competence, business and leadership skills; greater community participation and cooperation. She sees female literacy as an antidote to domestic violence, having observed in some villages that 'before the men used to beat their wives, but today they have family worship together'. Saovana-Spriggs tells the story of 'Anna', who was badly beaten for taking a neutral stance as a health worker during the war in Bougainville but was later reconciled with her assailants in a large ceremony combining Christian and indigenous symbols of reconciliation. Saovana-Spriggs points to the difficult legacy of the culture of violence engendered in successive generations of young

men by a decade of civil war and independence struggle – the lengthy, ongoing campaign of ‘Maria’ and other women to ‘bring back home’ the young Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) men was a spiritual and psychological as well as a physical process. **Gender and governance**

Throughout Melanesia women’s fellowship groups are key elements in effective village governance, while their integration in church and women’s networks helps articulate the local with wider spheres in contexts where the state is locally absent or invisible, as is the case in much of rural Melanesia. Thus programs to develop women’s personal confidence and skills, especially in literacy and numeracy, can have a dramatic impact on general community well-being: the literacy program in Vanuatu is based on the premise that ‘if all the women are literate the whole community will change for the better’ and Netine says that it ‘also led to improvement in community organisations’. She and Barnes stress the importance women place on participatory, cooperative teaching and learning. Both suggest that women’s programs are the best means to disseminate technical information at the grass roots about health, sanitation, nutrition, agriculture and business, using the familiar and the relevant as vehicles to convey new ideas. Barnes found it necessary to frame taboo subjects linked to female sexuality in Christian terms and to use Christian symbols to embolden young women to defy custom by assuming leadership roles. Reciprocally, Netine found that the most effective teaching materials for literacy classes were those providing information on *kastom*, health and other useful topics, since ‘people learn to read better if the material provided is interesting or valuable to them’. In Lihir it is women who promote education and the availability of mining company scholarships to the community at large, and it is women’s organisations that work to ameliorate the problems of drastic social inequality arising from the sudden but uneven injection of large amounts of cash.

In Melanesia, gender includes men in theory as well as practice and gender relations are conceived in complementary rather than oppositional terms. ‘Male and female alike are members of our community family and citizens of our national community’, maintains Boseto, though she also acknowledges ‘male attitudes of domination over females’ as a serious practical challenge to the principle that ‘male and female are equal partners’ before God. To be acceptable and effective, therefore, programs for

women have to take account of men. Barnes commented in discussion at the workshop: ‘you can’t run a women’s program without information for men as well. So I’m running [a men’s program] surreptitiously on the side’. Like Boseto, Netine stresses cooperation and the interdependence of person and community. The literacy program in Vanuatu focusses on women because their need is greatest – women comprised nearly three-quarters of the participants in 1997-98 – but ‘the development of our human resources is a national priority’ and literacy is a human right. There is no conventional feminist agenda in these papers, and yet all in their way are iconoclastic. Tarisesei writes about *kastom* in general and not just women’s *kastom*, but her paper affirms the centrality of women in Ambae *kastom*, because mats, which are women’s products, are fundamental objects in customary exchanges. The acknowledgement of certain women’s activities, such as mat-making in Ambae, as true *kastom* has enhanced the confidence, self-esteem and community reputation of women but there was nothing automatic about the process: for fifteen years the *kastom* promoted and revived by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre was a male preserve (Bolton 1998).

Policy implications

The major implication I draw from these papers and from the workshop to which they were originally presented is of the need to listen to people and provide digestible, relevant information about alternative choices and strategies, rather than lecture them on the basis of universalised yet ethnocentric notions of efficiency and propriety. For example, as Barnes implies, the fact that indigenous women and men alike place great value on producing many children should be correlated with ongoing high infant and child mortality and the relatively recent experience of more or less massive depopulation, rather than be condemned as a tenacious ‘tradition’ at odds with the modern demographic orthodoxy of wealthy donor countries and global agencies. Well-meaning efforts to ameliorate the evident drudgery of rural women in much of Melanesia should not lose sight of the value they place on hard work and fine gardens. Alice Aruheeta Pollard from Malaita, then head of the Women’s Development Division in Solomon Islands, warned the workshop: ‘we see women’s role or the load that women are carrying, we see them as overburdened, or too much load. But again when you look very closely at their attitudes

to their role and their behaviour, actually it is their pride, it is their status, it is for their survival, and also it is ownership'. Similarly, and often to the frustration of well-meaning western feminists, most Melanesian women advocate a gradualist strategy to address the very real disadvantages of women, stressing that it is important not to threaten or alienate men, but to gain their support and cooperation. Angela Mandie-Filer, a PhD student from Ambunti, commented at the workshop on the ADCOW agenda: 'I think it just needed one or two men to come out and support the women and you have the whole lot of them coming out to support, so it's this peer group judgement and peer group pressure on the men ... In that area the men actually are very supportive'.

In practical terms, the major problems faced by the organisations and programs discussed in these papers are those of resources, skills, funding and sustainability. Such problems stem ultimately from the financial exigency afflicting all Melanesian countries, but particularly from the low priority given by governments and most aid donors to non-formal education for adults, especially in the rural sector and especially for women. Even programs which have received external funding, such as the Vanuatu literacy program and Women's Culture Project, are of relatively low priority locally and have no guarantee of ongoing support. Hopkos makes a plea for modest financial backing for local women's groups, associations and leaders, and the grass roots training and awareness programs they seek to implement. She concludes her paper thus: as 'women in Papua New Guinea, especially in the rural remote areas, we see ourselves first, then the churches and then the nation. We get less as citizens and serve more as Christians and citizens, and get served as women the least'. It is in the interests of all parties that this should not continue to be so: better ways are needed to extend effective citizenship to rural Melanesian women and to supplement their home-grown resourcefulness with earmarked funding, training and support.

MELANESIAN WOMEN, MOTHERS OF DEMOCRACY

Being female in Melanesia today

In my local vernacular (the *babatana* language of Choiseul, Solomon Islands) the terms 'woman' and 'female' can be translated as *qolekaji* and *boseqole*. *Qolekaji* refers to 'married woman' and *boseqole* to both the woman and the female's place and function in the family and the wider community. 'Woman' and 'female' are inseparable concepts in our traditional expectation of the woman's place and role in the family and the community. Being a woman cannot be understood in isolation from being female. Our indigenous thinking looks at life and community in their totality; we do not treat them separately in the context of 'human relationships'. I see community as threefold: indigenous community, denominational communities (collectively called Christian community) and national community. This paper explores the independence and interdependence of these communities, and where women-female fit into our modern Melanesian context today.

Women-female in traditional context

In the villages women-female's life and work are confined within the nuclear family. Their main concern is the sustainability of extended family living. 'Sustained community living' is inseparable from the nurturing and feeding of members of the nuclear family by the land, and its interrelationship within the wider circle of the tribal community in each locality and island. The educational roles of women (*qolekaji*) focus on 'sustained community living', on education for living and for the survival of the family and the tribe. Women-female's experience is rooted in human relationships within the sphere of the nuclear family, where their responsibility is to look after their children and family members. Women are trusted to supervise and implement most household duties in relation to the preparation and distribution of food from the gardens, caring for the comfort of every member and visitor, and teaching the young girls on a day to day basis. (Boys are usually under the direct supervision of their fathers.)

Christian community

Missionaries within denominational labels and organisations introduced Christianity. Unfortunately, in the past missionaries promoted a sense of western cultural superiority as much as 'Christianity'. Our ancestors were first attracted to western civilisation prior to

their conversion to Jesus Christ and his Gospel of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. The question of equality, justice and participation arose later through educational awareness. Initially conversion to Jesus was simply a conversion to the missionaries' way of life.

The word 'mission' was connected to expatriate missionaries who came from abroad, especially from Europe. The word 'church', *ecclesia*, was originally understood to mean 'attend church service'. The term in my language is *mata ia lotu* – *lotu* is a Polynesian word that we use to mean both 'church' and 'Christian', as in 'attend a church service' and 'be a Christian': *mata ia lotu* ('let us go to worship') and *boseni lotu* ('a Christian'). The term 'denomination' is also translated as *lotu*: the Methodist Church is *Lotu Metodisi*. Therefore our original understanding of Christianity was more or less related to a church organisation, not to a 'Christian community', and it was men who were at the forefront of running, directing and serving the church. From the pioneering days of the missions until the late 1960s, women were not recognised as capable. Many of our ordinary members maintain an understanding of the 'Christian Church' as more organisationally and denominationally oriented, rather than inclusively responsive as 'the people's church'.

A growing understanding of our culture and Gospel has given Solomon Islands women the opportunity to begin to relate and accept both cultural and Christian aspects of their spirit of sharing, caring and compassion, which has been an integral part of their nature and everyday function. The Gospel message of equal participation of men and women in church and society has opened the eyes of our women to discover their place and role in the Melanesian context today (cf. Galatians 3:28: 'So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free man, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus' [American Bible Society 1976:234]).

National community

Citizenship belongs to the people of a nation. Hence a citizen is a member of a 'National Community'. Solomon Islands became a nation on 7 July 1978, the birthday of our political independence, after more than eighty years under British sovereignty. Although our Island nation became politically independent twenty years ago, economically we are increasingly dependent on loaned and borrowed money from international monetary institutions, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, as well as other countries and international organisations.

As the interrelatedness of the global-local reality grows, the importance of the place and role of women-female as national citizens in the political and economic development of our national Melanesian community today must be recognised, developed and empowered. Yet although I stress the importance of our women-female's role in modern contexts, it should not be forgotten that women-female in Melanesia are also wives, mothers (of sons and daughters) and family members in the various Melanesian localities. According to the Melanesian philosophy of communalism, *zais* ('grandmothers'), *busus* ('ancestors'), wives, mothers, aunts, sisters, daughters and nieces are the root of our social security and the backbone of stability and sustainability within our human community.

The spirituality of an integrated existence

The reason why Melanesians appear to take Christianity for granted in their lives is because of their spirituality. Our existence is rooted in the spirituality of interrelatedness in the wholeness of life. There is a sense of interconnectedness that finds experience of God in the form of succour in time of need. God is health in the form of blessing, medicinal plants, drinks and baths; food that is shared on feast days or with a neighbour in times of need. We learn that God communicates with us in the rhythm of our daily lives, orchestrated by the many instruments of our various Melanesian cultures.

Earlier, I suggested that Melanesians look at life and community in their totality and that we do not therefore compartmentalise or separate the concepts 'woman', 'Christian' and 'citizen' within the context of our human relationships. This is because we believe that the very heart of God's blessing to our family and community depends on our right relationship with and true worship of God, or not. If we do not maintain our loyalty and obedience to his will, then the outcome of the relationship between 'us and our God' is seen as a curse rather than a blessing. For example, if a family's gardens do not yield crops or if family members are continuously sick, then the questions asked will be more spiritual ('What have we been doing in our relationship with our gods/god?') than scientific. This recalls our indigenous religion in the past, when a family's well-being was believed to require the right relationship with the ancestral spirits. In Choiseul, like everywhere in Solomon Islands, gospel and culture are intrinsically intertwined. Therefore it is not difficult for our indigenous people in Melanesia to understand such Old Testament references as Deuteronomy 30:19-20:

I am now giving you the choice between life and death, between God's blessing and God's curse, and I call heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Choose life. Love the LORD your God, obey him and be faithful to him, and then you and your descendants will live long in the land that he promised to give your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (American Bible Society 1976:202). Our ancestors' concept of worship means that God must always be given the best, not the second best or the leftovers.

The architects of our national constitution recognised and acknowledged both the fundamental wisdom and importance of our ancestral culture, and the supreme Lordship of our true God when they formulated the following preamble: 'We, the people of Solomon Islands, proud of the wisdom and the worthy customs of our ancestors, mindful of our common and diverse heritage and conscious of our common destiny, do now, under the guiding hand of God, establish the sovereign democratic State of Solomon Islands' (Institute of Pacific Studies 1983, II:231).

This wording expresses the belief that our indigenous-citizens must be rooted in the knowledge and worthy customs of ancestral spirituality and that our constitution must be under and not above the hand of God.

Melanesian women, mothers of Christian democracy

Traditionally Melanesian reality is a family-based community. In other words, it is simply a community-based democracy. Our first value is community. We Choiseul people living in Honiara do not usually call ourselves Choiseulese, but refer to ourselves as Luru community. In our Luru culture the word 'individual' is used in almost a pejorative sense. An 'individual' is someone who is selfish, egotistical. A 'person', on the other hand, is someone who exists in relation to others, in relation to community. A person knows and understands that her existence is related to others, that we are responsible to others for who we are and what we do.

Gospel elements of caring, sharing, nurturing and compassion are integrated part and parcel with our worthy ancestral customs. Our sustainable community living depends primarily on extended family-based social security and not monetary institutions. Our sustainable community not only includes those alive now, but extends back in history and forward into the future, reaching into time to include both the living and the dead. Community for us embraces

our *zais* ('grandmothers') as well as our children. The land, from which we draw resources for food, fresh water, houses and survival, has always nurtured us like our mother. Land, with all that is in, on and around it, is a place where we encounter our ancestors and our God. Land is our mother for life and our home for our burial. Melanesian sisters need each other in community. Community reaches into the space around us to include nature and all that is in and on it. In this, Melanesian community is respect for the other. Those who take Christianity as equal to western civilisation in their evangelisation of Melanesian communities may not be able to see the gospel elements of our cultural identity, which underwrites Christian principles of sharing, caring, justice and cooperation within and between our family and wider communities.

Both male and female are equal partners in representing the full image of God's community of justice, peace, love and joy in this world. Male and female alike are members of our community family and citizens of our national community. For we are not only a 'national family of nations' but a 'nation of families'. Our philosophy of communalism is rooted in family-based democracy, which adds to people-based democracy the values of caring, sustaining, protecting and depending on life. The phrase 'mothers of Christian democracy' means that in Melanesia indigenous mothers are the life-blood or the living roots of Christian communalism. Our God is a community-creating God.

Challenges to Overcome

In any human society ideal values do not always work out in practice. The following are some of the challenges that need to be tackled and overcome if our Solomon Islands national community is to realise the full human potential of our Christian Melanesian communalism, and the women-female living roots that sustain it.

- women are silent listeners and slaves to domestic duties;
- the burden of gardening, cooking and child-bearing, which are women's primary tasks, must confine them to the home;
- the attitude in Melanesian men that women are 'not as capable, able, equal, etc.' as men;
- women themselves do not trust and have confidence amongst and between themselves, hence in church and government leadership ballots they usually vote for male and not female candidates; confidence-building between and amongst women themselves must therefore be encouraged and promoted;
- early marriages without preparation increasingly lower the quality of the leadership women can exercise within the family, because parents lack the maturity to correct and discipline the children properly;

- measures to enable women to be more creative and participate fully in economic development in the private sector need to be responsibly supported and promoted; forexample, forming a business association more oriented towards empowering the rural areas where the majority of our population lives and where the contributions of women are crucial;
- women must be given equal opportunities for leadership development, such as scholarships for in-service and advanced studies;
- the sacredness of God's image in women-female must be respected so that women are not made mere objects for economic advertisement, commercials and billboards;
- male attitudes of domination over females should be tackled by educational programs promoting partnership and the equal participation of women and men in church and society.

Being female in global contexts in Melanesia today

From a local perspective, the following aims outlined by the United Church Women's Fellowship in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands show how a Melanesian church women's organisation expresses its social purpose in religious terms:

- to experience the fullness of Jesus Christ and to witness Christ in all areas of their lives;
- to express their love for Jesus Christ through Education, Devotion, Recreation and Service;
- to promote the educational standard of women and uphold the dignity of women;
- to help women strive for freedom from all forms of oppression against women and humankind in general.

From a global perspective, in contrast to this local Melanesian vision, the following five areas of mainly social emphasis were identified by the World Council of Churches in its study on the theme 'Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women', conducted worldwide during the last decade through visits, consultations, workshops, conferences and dialogues:

- empowering women to challenge oppressive structures;
- affirming women's contributions to their churches and communities;
- living visibility to their engagement in struggles for justice, peace and the integrity of creation;
- enabling churches to free themselves from racism, sexism, classism and discrimination;
- encouraging church action in Solidarity with Women.

Taken together, such local and global perspectives provide a basis to reflect upon, elaborate and relate to the diverse places and contextual situations in which women live as women-female, Christians and citizens in Melanesia and Australia today.

THE CATHOLIC WOMEN'S GROUP, AUKI, MALAITA: A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

From colony to nation: changing contexts of aid

In 1964 I went as a volunteer to teach at the isolated Catholic mission station of Rokera in Malaita, in the then British protectorate, now independent nation of Solomon Islands. In those days staff had to speak English to the students and had minimal involvement with local people. As a woman I could not move about alone and was mainly confined to the mission stations. After three years I went back to Australia to train as a nurse, intending to return to the Solomons. I could not then see any value in teaching, as most subjects seemed far removed from the reality of people's lives: for instance, lessons on the British rail system to people who had never seen a car, let alone a train. It was probably my youth that blinded me to the benefits of education, since pupils from this school later obtained responsible jobs. Nursing on the other hand showed immediate results. The health of the people was poor and needles and potions sometimes brought rapid cures, but lives were also lost needlessly through lack of equipment and expertise. In 1986, after cyclone Namu, I returned to do relief work in Avu Avu on the weather (south) coast of Guadalcanal. Many changes had occurred. I was greeted warmly and each day the women would talk or 'story' with me about their concerns for their children and their own health. The time seemed ripe for health education. In 1996 Patricia Wale, the coordinator of the Catholic Women's Program in Auki diocese, Malaita, invited me back to work as an adult educator.

Kastom in Malaita

To understand the lives of rural women on Malaita one needs to go back at least a century. I am not an expert on *kastom* ('custom'), but have gained a general idea from the women with whom I work and during my long association with Solomon Islanders. Customs vary between places and islands. The traditional life style was still practised in parts of Malaita in 1964, and is in isolated places to this day. Malaita is a patrilineal society: descent and inheritance ideally follow the male line and men live and cooperate with their patrilineal kinsmen. Settlements were laid out as follows. The priest, the medium of communication with the ancestral spirits whose support was essential to survival, lived removed from the people. He passed information to the

men and boys through selected men. Below them lived the women, girls and young children. The women cooked for the men, but husbands did not share houses with their wives and female children. They visited their wives, while couples also met in the gardens. Women usually gave birth alone, in the bush or in a birth hut. Menstruating women could not go to the gardens but lived in the menstrual hut, *bisi*, a place of rest and socialisation. Traditionally men walked with their hands free to protect women going to and from the gardens. Women carried all the produce and firewood on their backs. Young girls minded the young children in the villages. The women did all the cooking, cleaning, childcare, planting and harvesting. The men cleared the ground for gardens, built the houses and planned village life. They were/are the politicians. Infringements of custom could mean severe punishment: if compensation was not paid in pigs or, in some areas, shell money, death might be the penalty.

Modernity, Christianity and gender relations

With the coming of Europeans in the late nineteenth century, new needs demanded cash: men cut copra for sale or signed as indentured labourers for plantations in Queensland and Fiji. Since custom prohibited sexual relations with breastfeeding women, young fathers happily left their families to work overseas. About a century ago, Catholic and other missionaries began to preach their faith and set up schools and hospitals. Many people moved from their villages to the security of the mission stations, which offered medicines and a firm but loving God who seemed more powerful than the jealous, punitive ancestors. The mission God could also punish in the next life, but that was not immediate. Missionaries preached equality in the sight of God, so that women could now enter the church, the sacred place, and participate in prayer.

Christian villagers were no longer separated by gender but grouped into family villages. These days young boys often still live separately from the family, but fathers are members and heads of households. Yet custom still rules the division of labour and the women's workload has increased – men insist it is customary for them to carry nothing, but women no longer get a break from the gardens each month in the *bisi*. Modern tools mean larger gardens, marketing means potential sale of surplus production, and women are urged to work harder to produce more. School fees are a tremendous burden, especially on women. Infant mortality has declined, though it is still amongst the highest

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in the Pacific Islands. (In 1997 the official infant mortality rate for Malaita was 14.7 deaths per 1000 births, but the Medical Director of Malaita places the figure nearer 30 per 1000.) Yet more children survive, families are bigger and the population is increasing rapidly – half is under fifteen. Arable land is harder to find and located further from the villages, which further increases the routine workload of women.

Family planning, including the 'natural' methods permitted by the Catholic Church, is not well accepted by Malaitans. Medical personnel and educators advocate population control, but seem not to understand the people's need for a strong line to provide for the elderly in the absence of social security. Men expect many children in return for paying bride price. Wives agree and are proud when the arrival of their first child demonstrates their fertility. At a 1998 workshop women and men alike rejected sterilisation: even women with many children did not want to lose the chance for more, while men were appalled by the thought of vasectomy. Most people have lost siblings or children and know that children still die from diarrhoea, malaria, pneumonia, measles and other diseases. My neighbour, one of nine children, had lost a six year old sister and a five year old brother. Most women have similar stories.

Despite the desire for children, there is general concern at the rise in school fees, the number of aimless young people and social problems. Men, in particular, often drink to excess, physically abuse women and children, and get involved in gambling and scam financial schemes. They seem lost, exercising power over women in ridiculous ways: at a church blessing ceremony in one village, the chiefs imposed compensation of S\$250 on any woman who entered wearing shorts or with their hair in a pineapple topknot. Men feel they are losing control over their wives and teenage children, who leave for the capital, Honiara, to go to school or to work for 'Master Liu' ('do nothing').

Sexually transmitted diseases are increasing. Employed men often have sex with teenage girls seeking financial gain. Parents, intimidated because their children have more formal education, are loath to tell them the facts of life. In a group of sixty-one eighteen to twenty-one year olds attending a young women's leadership program in May 1998, only four had received any information about menstruation. Solomon Islanders seem far more aware of changes to their bodies than their European counterparts, but most lack knowledge as to why such changes occur. Because these subjects are taboo, a series of lessons to women and girls was called 'I am a miracle', and began: 'God

made us and it was good'. Phrased in this way, reproductive health, anatomy and physiology could be taught and were eagerly learned.

I became aware of the need to frame these topics in Christian terms during the aforementioned young women's leadership program. I could not get across the concept of friendship with boys as getting to know them and looking for shared interests and values: in Malaitan custom sex was the only conceivable relationship between unrelated males and females, and it is very difficult for girls to refuse to have sex. I tried to explain that women have the right just to say 'No' to unwelcome invitations. Role-plays led by the girls had them saying: 'I will not go with you because I am made in God's image and likeness'; 'God made me to be good', etc. God thus legitimised their right to say 'No', and without that excuse they felt powerless. The churches, so important to Solomon Islanders, need to work with young people to develop guidelines to help them handle the new familiarity between the sexes.

But the churches are struggling. In the past they ran schools and hospitals and had a great deal of influence over the lives of the people. Aid poured in through the overseas church organisations. With Independence in 1978, most schools and hospitals were handed over to the government. Collections for missions fell overseas as congregations declined in the mainstream churches. Aid organisations began to channel income-generating projects through the churches, but such projects often have little relevance to the churches as such, while administration and maintenance of existing structures are unfunded. Foreign aid agencies have their own criteria to meet, but their knowledge of local issues and customs is often not great.

The Catholic Women's Program: empowering village women

This was the environment in which the Catholic Women's Program was set up in Auki diocese in 1990, with two local nuns and an expatriate woman as early facilitators. Initially the group held consultative meetings to assess the needs of village people and discovered that women wanted to share their problems. In the security of their peers, they felt free to acknowledge their difficult lot and cried as they told stories of hardship and helplessness. The measure of a workshop's success was inclusion in the leader's report of the phrase: 'the women cried'. The leaders believed they had struck an empathetic chord. Since normally a woman cannot leave her house without

her husband's permission, 'Husbands' Awareness Programs' had to be held to persuade them to allow their wives to attend women's meetings.

The Catholic Women's Program is overseen by a central diocesan team based in Auki, the Provincial centre of Malaita. With leadership of the Program shifting to local women, Patricia Wale became coordinator of a team of three Malaitans. There are nine parishes covering limited accessible areas. Parish co-ordinators lead zone leaders belonging to villages within their zones. The women's groups obviously met a felt need as they grew far more quickly than envisaged. There are now 135 groups with about two thousand women involved. The other two Catholic dioceses in the Solomons have followed suit.

Initially the teaching was participatory, with sharing of stories, role-plays, dramas, singing, practical demonstrations of gardening skills, sewing, etc. Such activities empowered women, who learned to speak up for themselves. But when topics on the role of women were introduced, leaders could no longer simply share with their listeners the pain of their lot in life, but required training in the concepts to be imparted. Accordingly, leaders' training workshops were held. So-called 'Empowerment Topics' – 'The Role of Women', 'The Ministry of Women', 'Basic Christian Communities' – helped remind women of their importance in the very fabric of their society. Topics on health, hygiene and child development were introduced because the Medical Director of Malaita believed the leaders of the Women's Program to be the best means yet tried to impart health knowledge at the grass roots. Members of other churches could attend workshops and in some cases the 'Hidden' or heathen people came, to learn how to prevent their children from dying of diseases such as diarrhoea and malaria.

A booklet was produced from Facts for Life, a UN/WHO publication. The leaders requested charts to assist in their presentations. The charts were written in English by expatriates. Yet about 85% of Malaita women are illiterate and few speak English. The spoken word is the normal medium for transferring information and even knowledge of Pidgin is confined to areas close to roads and towns. Participatory methods were being overshadowed by print, again disempowering women who said they were 'Rubbish women' because they could not read or write. Pictorial charts to match the health booklet have since been produced for all groups. Drawing and mapping are part of the workshops and are enjoyed by the women. The method is again participatory, with women doing most of the teaching to each other. In 1998 the main

leaders were the zone leaders, rather than those centrally located. They receive training and return to the local villages to follow the same methods, teaching in local languages rather than English or Pidgin. In recent consultations, women expressed a need for further education in social issues. If teaching aids can be developed to enable them to teach each other, the groups will surge ahead. Women are overjoyed when they realise they do not need to be literate to take an active part. Most photographs taken now show women laughing.

Family planning is presented as the 'Strong Line Plan', with 'natural' methods demonstrated in pictorial form. Husbands have been very interested in the workshops on women's and men's anatomy, the miracle of life, and natural family planning. They demanded to be part of a recent workshop, but women will not talk about these matters in front of men, and men completely dominate a group if they join it. So the men had separate sessions. Women want the men to attend: although women are articulate in their own groups they still seem unable individually to communicate their feelings and wishes to their husbands, but believe they can do so collectively. There is a growing emphasis in the Catholic Church on groups such as a 'Family Life Program' and 'Marriage Encounter', which are useful to the literate and are helping to change family relationships, but the women's groups provide the best chance to make a difference to the lives of village women.

Recently the young woman leaders told me they could not lead. It is difficult for a Malaitan woman to be a leader, as she must not put herself out in front of others. I turned to their faith for strength. Christ brought the light of knowledge into the world, and they too can carry his light. If you put a cover over a candle it will go out. So they must take off the shield or cover they are hiding under and carry the light of knowledge to others. They took home a candle to light during their talks to remind them of this and give them courage. Thus Christian ideals and symbols can be used to override customs that would otherwise constrain women.

To be empowered, women need to want to leave the harsh, but secure domain of customary constraints and move along the hard, uncertain road to change. This means applying the skills they have learned to family life. It means standing up for what they believe in a society where they have never had a public voice. Empowerment is about finding the strength to bring about change. If laughter is a gauge of success then the Catholic Women's Program of Auki diocese has so far been a resounding success.

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TODAY IS NOT THE SAME AS YESTERDAY, AND TOMORROW IT WILL BE DIFFERENT AGAIN: KASTOM IN AMBAE, VANUATU

Introduction

I come from the island of Ambae in north Vanuatu, though since 1992 I have lived in Port Vila, the capital, and worked at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, where I am coordinator of the Women's Culture Project. In this paper I discuss *kastom* ('custom') in my island, its importance for women, its relationship to Christianity and politics, and the recent upsurge of interest in women's *kastom* encouraged by the Women's Culture Project. My work as coordinator is to revive, preserve and promote women's *kastom*. In my work I travel to many islands, including Ambae.

Ambae is a volcanic island about forty kilometres long. The people live in villages in a number of districts. They are subsistence farmers who grow their own food in gardens and keep pigs, chickens and cattle. They also have coconut plantations from which they make copra to earn a little money. There are two main languages. Today people travel in and around Ambae on trucks, small boats and aeroplanes. In the north travel is very difficult because a volcano makes the land very steep. Many people from Ambae live in other parts of Vanuatu, especially Port Vila and Santo. There are many primary schools in Ambae and three secondary schools.

Kastom in Ambae

Kastom is a term in the national language of Vanuatu, Bislama, to mean the way of life in which we grew up and still practise. It is the way of life which comes from our own place. So the *kastom* of Ambae is the things we do that come from Ambae. This is hard to explain in English, because the term 'custom' lacks the idea of close association with a place. People today are trying to find ways to fit *kastom* together with the new things that have come into our lives. So the *kastom* that we now practise in Ambae is not the same as it was before. People are changing it and adding new things. One of the most important influences on *kastom* has been the churches.

People in Ambae use the word *kastom* to mean ceremonies, stories, songs, dances, and certain ways of cooking; traditional knowledge and sacred places; family organisation (or kinship) and traditional leaders or chiefs; as well as

Ambae mats, pigs and other such objects.

The main ceremonies practised are welcoming ceremonies for newborn babies, adoptions, marriages, rank ceremonies based on pig-killing, rank ceremonies based on mats, funeral ceremonies. Many take place over a number of days, which we count in groups of five. This is especially so in funeral ceremonies, when for a hundred days after the person's death we mark each fifth day by cooking special food: on the fiftieth day, for example, we cook things we have caught in the sea, such as fish and crabs. Food is a very important part of *kastom*. So is our vernacular language, which has words to describe all the *kastom* things we do that are hard to express in English.

Women and *kastom*

Mats are very important in all these *kastom* ceremonies. Mats are the main work of women in Ambae. Before western influences came, the main things women did was to make mats and take care of pigs and babies. The main work for men was in the gardens, growing food, and protecting the community. Once children grew big enough to walk about, small boys became the responsibility of their fathers, while girls were cared for by their mothers, who started to teach them how to make mats and the other things that girls needed to learn. Today women do most of the work within the family and the community while men are more often also involved in politics and business.

Marriages were arranged when girls were quite small, sometimes even before they were born, and when they reached the age of about twelve years they often went to live with their husband's mother in order to get used to their new family. But they did not marry or live with their husbands until they reached puberty. We Ambaeans divide ourselves into two groups named Tagaro and Merumbuto, which anthropologists call moieties: people must always marry someone from the other group. Parents tried to make sure their daughters married into a family that was close both in terms of place and kinship. It was hard for a married girl to move to a place a long way away from her own parents. Ideally she should marry into her mother's family, in order to keep the family and the land together. Today most young people choose their own partners, and sometimes girls marry to faraway places, and not into their mother's family. This often causes problems with marriages, because they have not followed the correct *kastom* road. In such cases

there are often disputes about land and much talk, gossip and other trouble.

Churches and *kastom*

Virtually all Ambaeans, like most ni-Vanuatu, are members of a Christian church. Historically and still today, the attitudes towards *kastom* of the various denominations have varied widely. The Anglican Church established the first Christian mission in Ambae in the 1870s. The Anglicans did not make too many changes. They stopped some things which were not good, such as murder and cannibalism, and some things that were hurtful, such as the tattooing of young girls. They also tried to change aspects of the men's rank system, *huqe*. Today, *kastom* is still strongly alive in Anglican communities.

The Catholic Church arrived second, after the Anglicans. They settled in only two areas and did not spread beyond them. The impact of the Catholic Church is mainly on language because they mostly use French. They did not oppose *kastom* strongly in other ways, apart from harmful aspects.

The Churches of Christ were the third church to arrive, in about 1900. Although they came third, they became the second largest denomination in the island, spreading into many areas. They stopped almost every traditional practice, such as *kastom* dances and pig-killings. They did allow *kastom* marriage ceremonies to continue, including central aspects such as the bride's pig-killing and the exchanges between the two families. Because pig-killing was an integral part of the marriage exchanges, the Churches of Christ permitted women's participation in the rank system to continue, at the same time that they stopped men's participation in the graded society. During the independence movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the pro-*kastom* Nagriamel movement had a significant impact on the Churches of Christ in Ambae, and as a result they became much more supportive of *kastom*. Nowadays Churches of Christ members in Ambae are trying to bring back men's pig-killings.

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church was the fourth to arrive in Ambae. The SDAs are not widespread, but their effect on *kastom* was worse than that of the Churches of Christ. They banned everything except the weaving of mats. It is good that weaving is permitted, because at least it enables SDAs to continue to participate in ceremonies organised by Ambaeans belonging to other denominations. They can thus be involved in the marriages of family members outside the SDA Church,

because they can still contribute to the exchanges by giving mats.

The next church to come to Ambae was the Apostolic Church, in about 1960. It is mainly limited to one district. Members of the Apostolic Church do not even know how to weave Ambaean mats, although they make floor and sleeping mats in a different style. Women learn how to weave in the women's groups organised by their Church, and they make baskets, mats, table mats and purses in styles not just of other islands in Vanuatu, but also of Fiji and other parts of the Pacific.

After Independence in 1980, and especially since 1990, many small, mostly pentecostal churches have arrived in Ambae, almost all strongly opposed to *kastom*. There have also been splits in the existing denominations, especially the Churches of Christ and the Apostolic Church. Anglicans, by contrast, tend to switch parish affiliations rather than leave the church. As a result, there are many small churches in Ambae today, but the main Churches are the Anglican, the Churches of Christ and the SDA. The Anglican Church achieved its own independence from expatriate control in the 1980s and now all church officials are ni-Vanuatu. The Churches of Christ and the Apostolic Church are also mainly managed by ni-Vanuatu, but are influenced by visitors from outside the country, as is the SDA Church. The Catholic Church now also has local staff, both priests and nuns, but a few European nuns and priests continue to work throughout the country.

Women in island organisation

Vanuatu has six provinces. Ambae is in Penama Province, along with the islands of Maewo and Pentecost. The provincial headquarters are at Saratamata in East Ambae. The Penama Provincial Council has fifteen elected and seven nominated members. The elected members are almost always men, because there are few female candidates in elections and even fewer are successful. The nominated members include one women's and two youth representatives, as well as representatives of the chiefs and the churches. There is a Women's Office and a Youth Office at Saratamata. As well as the Provincial Council, Ambae has an Island Council of Chiefs, the members of which are elected by the chiefs of all the villages around the island. Chiefs are always men.

Women have their own island council called Vavine bulu, meaning 'women together'. Women in all the villages elect representatives

to the council, which meets three or four times per year, according to need. The executive of Vavine bulu meets more regularly, and representatives from Vavine bulu attend the biannual conference of the Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW), a non-government organisation. The VNCW runs various awareness programs to promote women in the villages, and to help them with health, business, sewing, water supply and so on. The VNCW is mostly concerned with women's development, but Ambae women are also interested in their *kastom*. Vavine bulu promotes mat-making and this is important, because as long as you have mats you can take part in ceremonies.

At the village level, women's groups may be organised by the churches or by the women's network, but usually there is only one women's group in each village, and it is that group which sends representatives to Vavine bulu. In Ambae the government works closely with the church organisations, and people do not notice much difference between church and government. They are more interested in what both can achieve.

***Kastom* today**

The character of *kastom* is always the same, but the ways in which we practise it change. For example, in *kastom* marriages in the past, we exchanged women for just a few mats and pigs. But nowadays we pay for women with pigs and up to twenty of the most valuable mats. We also have church ceremonies as part of the marriage so that now we make two feasts, one for *kastom* and one for the church. This makes it hard for some people, because marriage has become very expensive. Since not every woman can make a mat, marriage is sometimes even more expensive because people have to buy mats.

The education of children in *kastom* ways used to take place at home. From an early age children were taught how to do things like weaving and dancing. But now children go to school and lack the opportunity to learn all these skills. Today some schools are trying to introduce *kastom* into the classroom. In one village the teachers have invited some older people to come into the classroom and teach *kastom* to the children. The children are now learning how to weave mats, as well as learning *kastom* stories, songs and dances.

Today in Ambae *kastom* is being revived in many such ways. The effect of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre programs has been to renew

people's interest in *kastom*. The Women's Culture Project program, which Lissant Bolton and I implemented in Ambae in 1991-92 and have since introduced to other islands, has helped legitimate the things women do as true *kastom*, whereas previously *kastom* was regarded as men's business. This has increased the self-esteem and self-confidence of women and in Ambae has encouraged them to revive styles of mats which they had stopped making. Ambae people now recognise the need to use more mats in ceremonies, instead of money, and this in turn enhances the reputation and self-respect of women.

In the future I think there will be more new ways to teach *kastom* to our young people. However, it is hard to know what the effect of the new churches will be. Many of the new denominations are very strongly opposed to *kastom*, and will try to defeat these attempts to stimulate *kastom* in the island if they come to Ambae. If there is no opposition from the churches, *kastom* will continue to be revived, even though it will continue to change. People are changing *kastom* in order to try to make it relevant to life today. *Kastom* has to fit in with church, government, education and development. The work of the Cultural Centre is to try to make sure that *kastom* remains a strong force in the lives of ni-Vanuatu. We believe that *kastom* is a strong foundation of our identity. If we don't have *kastom* we are nobody; we don't know where we come from or where we are going.

A LITERACY PROGRAM FOR WOMEN IN VANUATU

Rita's story

Since 1989 I have been working in a literacy program in Vanuatu. I start my paper by sharing Rita's experience with literacy training in Bislama, the national language. Rita's story shows how literacy can have a powerful effect on a woman, her family and her community. Rita is from a village in northwest Malakula. She is forty years old and married with six children. She grew up in a bush area of Malakula and married a man from the same area. Rita and her husband left their village in the bush to come to a village near the salt water.

When I first met Rita in 1989 she was very shy. She was afraid to talk to me because she couldn't understand or speak Bislama. I went to the village to start a literacy program and Rita joined the course. She learned Bislama and it changed her life. She gained a new, positive feeling about herself and was able to help her children at school and also to help her community. After she learned Bislama we could talk. Her husband also joined the program and became a leader in the community and the Presbyterian church. Rita started a Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union (PWMU) group in the village. People are now working well together in the village and literacy classes are well attended. Health is another area which has seen some very important changes, especially water and sanitation. The women themselves built a water tank in their village.

Rita's family has now started a small business based on their earnings from copra and cocoa. Rita has also started a business in second hand clothes and she sells them in Norsup, which is an hour away by truck from her village. She uses the money to pay for school fees for her children, three of whom are attending secondary school. Rita is now a very confident woman and a community leader.

Background

Vanuatu, formerly the New Hebrides, is an archipelago of some eighty islands with a land area of 12,200 sqkm. Vanuatu is a very young nation with a new national identity, and a small population speaking many languages. Independence was gained in 1980 after more than seventy years' colonisation by France and Britain. Settlement patterns are dispersed, and the small population of about 150,000 people speaks more than one hundred Melanesian dialects. Vanuatu is culturally as well as linguistically diverse. Most societies are patrilineal, but there are matrilineal societies in some northern and central islands, while in

the north hierarchy is based on grade-taking. South Vanuatu is different again. Leadership is often based on personal achievement but some societies are hierarchical, with hereditary leaders.

Mission, colonial and national influence on literacy

Literacy in the early days was a means to evangelise and establish the church. The early missionaries used literacy to teach the people to understand the Bible in their own languages. They trained people to read and write whatever their age group. This system was changed when the French and the British condominium created parallel but separate institutions that affected all aspects of life including education. While the lingua franca is Bislama, English and French continue to be spoken because of the western-style formal education introduced by missionaries and colonial authorities. Even now, French and English schools still exist side by side, although the government has pushed to unify the education system. But there are still two schools systems and access to formal education has been limited despite government efforts to improve participation rates. Today the adult literacy rate in Vanuatu is very low, especially among women. Some islands have a lower rate than others, while overall the estimated figure is lowest in the rural areas where 82% of the population lives.

The development of our human resources is a national priority. Yet although one of the government's objectives is to realise the potential of woman as partners in and beneficiaries of the development process, there is very little Government support or funds for non-formal education for adults, especially women.

In our literacy work we use Bislama as the main language. Although it is not a traditional language, Bislama also opens the way for the preservation of indigenous culture and custom stories.

The Melanesian Literacy program

The Melanesian Literacy program for which I work was designed to address the low literacy rates in rural areas. The program was an offshoot of an initiative of the PWMU in 1989. That initiative was a response to the problem raised by a women's group in northwest Malakula that they could not effectively undertake church work because they could not read, write or understand Bislama. They had indicated their interest in forming a local PWMU, but needed assistance in order to be able to communicate and learn to assume leadership roles. In 1989 the PWMU head office in Port Vila appointed me as Deaconess to teach these women how to speak, read and write in Bislama.

The Literacy program is managed by World Vision and began with assistance from the

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Australian Government, through AIDAB (now AusAID), as part of its commitment to the UN International Year of Literacy (1990). The program has been aimed mainly at women in the rural villages, for it is acknowledged that they most lack opportunities for formal schooling. However, it is also recognised that everyone has the right to become literate.

The program has been conducted in isolated areas on eight islands in Vanuatu: Torres, Santo, Maewo, Pentecost, Malakula and Ambrym, in the north; Epi in central Vanuatu; and Tanna in the south. The program covers and builds skills in the following areas: leading group discussion; small business skills; agriculture; nutrition; handicrafts; cooking; writing stories; appropriate technology; critical literacy; translation.

Goal

The long term goal of the program is to enable illiterate women and youth in isolated areas of Vanuatu to be literate in the national language Bislama, and to be able to use their literacy skills to meet their personal and community goals.

Objectives

The objectives of the program are as follows:

- to select and train village volunteers as literacy trainers;
- to produce and disseminate stories on culture and customs, songs, local history and information on health, nutrition and other topics useful to the villages;
- to integrate literacy work with health, agriculture and other educational areas to increase community understanding and benefits;
- to strengthen community organisation by effective use of meetings;
- to enable documentation of minutes and production of other written materials.

Rationale

The rationale for a Literacy program has been that:

- literacy enhances people's communication skills, quality of life and understanding of their changing world;
- non-literate adults are disadvantaged in communication outside their areas and in economic, social and political developments, especially if they know only the local language;
- literacy training not only enables adults to become literate in Bislama, but the integration of literacy training with information on health and nutrition, agriculture and other interesting and useful topics gives people more confidence in coping with the changes in their world;
- literacy permits more effective liaison with Government staff at national and local levels, especially regarding awareness-raising activities;
- the program involves participants in the production of custom stories, songs and local histories, which raise awareness of and pride in local culture and customs.

Positive outcomes of the Melanesian Literacy program

The program outcomes are very encouraging. The ability to read and write in Bislama has given access to new information, ideas and opportunities. It is generally believed that to learn to read and to write is the key to new knowledge. Women who know how to read and write have discovered for themselves a new way of life. Women have expressed how literacy has had significant effects on their lives in the following ways:

- Economic: literacy has improved women's capacity to do business.
- Community and leadership: communication and cooperation within and among villages has

Table 1: Number of women and men attending classes 1997-98

Island	Men	Women	Total	Classes
Malakula	9	36	45	3
Ambrym	6	15	21	2
Epi	20	30	50	5
Tanna	30	98	128	5
Tanna	1	92	93	5
Santo	12	30	42	5
Santo	15	21	36	5
Maewo	30	40	70	5
Torres	20	40	60	5
Pentecost	20	30	50	5
Total	163	432	595	45

improved, with greater knowledge and skills. Leaders are able to improve the facilitation of community activities with the active participation of community members in group processes.

- Spiritual: literacy has enabled women to assume leadership roles in the church.
- Health: literacy has resulted in improvements in waste disposal, access to safe water, improved food storage and handling, and increased knowledge in child health care.
- Confidence: literacy has given women the confidence to express their views and to speak in public.

Women have also taken leadership roles and have been actively taking part in decision-making.

The project was successful in achieving most of the target objectives set. A total of fifty-three volunteers was recruited and trained. In 1997-98 these trainers were able to conduct forty-five classes attended by six hundred trainees in fifty-six areas – northwest Malakula, south Malakula, Middle Bush of Malakula, north Ambrym, Epi,

north Tanna, west Tanna, south Tanna, south Santo, Big Bay, Maewo, Torres, and north Pentecost. The number of trainees has changed each year, as the women gained what they wanted. Some took up leadership roles in their communities. Some learned to speak Bislama well enough to be able to migrate to the two towns, Port Vila and Santo, for work. Some, like Rita, have gone into small business.

The Maewo experience

In 1996 a member of the World Vision staff surveyed members of the literacy class in Maewo. Table 2 lists their responses.

Literacy makes a difference

In spite of resource limitations, the project was able to produce and disseminate literacy materials on customs, culture, health and nutrition and other topics useful to the villages — working on the basis that people learn to

Table 2: Results of the Literacy Program in Maewo 1996

Individual outcomes	Community Outcomes
1. I can teach little children at pre-school	1. People can follow other speakers well in meetings
2. I can read my bible in church	2. Helps build cooperation among communities
3. I can read with comprehension whereas before I could not understand everything I read	3. Helps share responsibilities and leadership roles
4. I can write about my feelings and express my views	4. Gives a better understanding of health hazards and sanitation issues
5. I can access information on subject matters such as health, agriculture, nutrition, etc.	5. Helps share responsibilities in church activities and enables everyone to participate in community work
6. Literacy helps me to be a leader in the community	6. Enables those who attend meetings to take on responsibilities and leadership roles
7. Literacy helps me manage my family, marriage and income	7. The wife becomes one of those in the home who can write and manage the family's well-being
8. I can read and write which gives me confidence	
9. I am now old and now I can read and write, which helps me record my culture and custom	
10. We can read newspapers and other information materials	
11. We can sing better than before	
12. We can draw better pictures, which surprised our community	
13. We can calculate our own vatu ('money') in stores	
14. I can help my children to start a small business	
15. I have written a letter for the first time to a friend in Canada	

read better if the material provided is interesting or valuable to them. Literacy materials were developed during training sessions. Government agencies and NGOs were also tapped for resource materials on health, agriculture and the environment. Practical material like this was integrated into literacy work whenever possible, and made a difference to the quality of life in participating villages. However, such integration depended on the availability of learning materials and the capacity of trainers to handle a diverse range of subject matters.

Apart from developing personal skills and confidence, especially amongst women, literacy also led to improvement in community organisations by enhancing leaders' skills and encouraging them to be more open to active participation in community affairs by other villagers, including women.

Changes

There are some important changes in the life of the community where literacy classes are operating. I have observed the following changes in several villages:

- before the men let their wives to do all the work in the house, but today they share household responsibilities;
- before the men used to beat their wives, but today they have family worship together.
- before only young boys played sport, but today everyone, old and young men and women, play sport together;
- before only fathers and (male) catechists shared in worship, but today they share the responsibilities with family and community members, including women;
- before, women didn't know how to change vatu ('money'), but today many run small businesses and shops.

Many villages are improved in terms of the number of good houses built. Some women have now learned to make smokeless stove. Some have water tanks for clean water. Many women take part in decision-making in their homes and communities; some have the chance of taking up leadership roles in their communities. They have formed themselves into groups to work together, in order to strengthen themselves spiritually, socially, physically, and mentally. One of the most important changes is that these women want to do outreach in other areas. They know how to read and write and have the confidence to convince others about what they know and what they can do.

Conclusion

We believe that if all the women are literate the whole community will change for the better. When a woman is literate there is a change in the family which enables it to play a more active part in the community development process. Most of all, there is a change in the woman, giving her a feeling of hope and achievement.

THE AMBUNTI DISTRICT COUNCIL OF WOMEN: ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROBLEMS

Introduction

Papua New Guinea is an island nation in the South Pacific which practises Melanesian cultural ways of life. It has more than 700 languages with complicated cultures and customs. Ambunti District, in East Sepik Province, alone has ten different languages. I come from a Kwoma-speaking area. This paper represents Papua New Guinean women from Ambunti District in particular, but more generally represents women in the vast, rural, remote areas, rather than the urban centres.

I am president of the Ambunti District Council of Women (ADCOW), which was formed in 1993 and is affiliated with the East Sepik Council of Women (ESCOW). As part of ESCOW, the Ambunti District Council 'has been built from the bottom up. Leadership plus programme initiatives and directions have emerged from the rural villages' (Nakikus et al. 1991:145). My elected role as president is to coordinate and organise district executive meetings on a quarterly basis and to facilitate the implementation of Awareness programs within the respective area associations to which individual women belong (see Table 1).

Organisational structure of ADCOW

1. District executive:
 - President;
 - Vice-president;
 - Secretary or administrative assistant.
2. Area association executive:
 - President
 - Vice-president
 - Secretary-treasurer
3. The eleven area associations each comprise ten to thirty women's groups and each group consists of between fifty and a hundred individual members. They are all well established and functioning to date.

Awareness programs

Awareness programs are needed because most village women are illiterate. The Awareness programs supported by ADCOW include health education, political education and campaigns of social action, especially against domestic violence.

Health education

The Awareness program in health education teaches:

- good nutrition: that children must be properly fed;
- child care: that children must be properly cared for;
- sanitation: the importance of cleanliness in the home and the village;
- water supply: the importance of providing good drinking water.

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HOPKOS**

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Table 1: Area Associations in the Ambunti District Council of Women 1998

No.	Name	Number of women's groups	Approx. female population (potential membership)
1	Avatip	15	2000
2	Ambunti Rural	15	2500
3	Ambunti Urban	10	1500
4	Black Wara	12	2050
5	Numau	30	3000
6	Wogomus	13	1200
7	Upper Sepik	14	1000
8	Iwam	13	900
9	Wasam	13	800
10	May River	15	900
11	Hunstein Range	16	1100

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PETZSTORME: A WOMEN'S ORGANISATION IN THE CONTEXT OF A PNG MINING PROJECT

Introduction

In this paper we discuss the role of a woman's organisation in developing a community response to the social changes associated with a large gold mining project in Lihir, a group of four islands in New Ireland Province in Papua New Guinea. Martha Macintyre has been working in Lihir since 1994 monitoring the social impact of mining, and Jacklynne Membup has been employed since 1993 in the Community Relations Department of Lihir Gold to coordinate a women's organisation that assists Lihir women to adapt to the changes resulting from the project. Like all such large projects, the Lihir mine is bringing about enormous social and economic changes, to which people have to adapt extremely quickly. From the outset the company encouraged women's organisations, partly because official policy in PNG requires mining companies to build into their projects certain social amelioration programs that will assist people and reduce negative impacts. The island-wide women's organisation formed in Lihir is called Petztorme, a term meaning 'working together' in the local language.

Before the development of the mine, women in Lihir had lived in villages scattered around the coast of the main island and on the three small islands just off the coast of Lihir. The society is organised into matrilineal clans, so that descent is calculated through women and land was managed through women prior to the mining development. As has unfortunately often been the case in PNG, men assumed control in the negotiations with the company and women's rights over land were ignored. This had occurred in Bougainville, and neither the PNG government nor the mining companies learned the hard lessons taught by the exclusion of Bougainvillean women as custodians of the land.

Forming Petztorme

The formation of Petztorme brought together women from different villages who until that time had had very few links except through marriage and kinship relationships. They were therefore not accustomed to working as a single group or even to considering themselves as 'Lihirians'. Indeed, the word 'Lihir' is not the

original local name of the place. The name of the main island is Niolam and 'Lihir' was the name of the language. Now, however, 'Lihir' has taken over and people have become accustomed to thinking of themselves as Lihirians. The impetus for that shift and for forming the women's organisation came from the churches, which provided the only basis for island-wide combination before the beginning of the gold mine project. Accordingly the two major women's groups, the *Katolik Mamas* (Catholic Mothers) and the United Church Women's Fellowship, formed Petztorme, initially to promote awareness about what was happening in connection with the mining development. The aim was to provide a forum for discussing what sort of changes were going to occur and how women might respond to them.

There was fairly deep antagonism between the Catholic and the United Churches in Niolam when Petztorme was formed. The United Church is very small: the total population then was about 6,000 people, of whom approximately 5,000 were Catholic and 1,000 belonged either to the United Church or to one of the small Pentecostal churches. Pentecostal church women have only recently become involved in Petztorme. The Catholic-United Church tension, which has deep historical roots, has unfortunately infected the organisation. Resentment stems partly from the fact that the United Church villages, which identify wholly with that church, are the most distant places from the mine in Lihir, and so their inhabitants receive fewer of the benefits. But tensions worsen when the views of the Protestant woman are not accepted because they are outnumbered.

Problems, agenda, achievements

Petztorme has attempted to function on a wide range of issues. Its basic role initially was to serve as a way to bring women together for information sessions. Attempts to think about what might be the problems people would have to face, and how to be pro-active consumed a lot of attention in the early period of the mining project. The company, recognising that problems would arise, tried to get women to talk about them and devise their own responses. Two problems that became particularly obvious in the first few months after construction began were the enormous increase in beer consumption and the violence and social disruption that accompanied drunkenness. Violence occurred not only against women but between men. Before the project there had been

relatively little beer available on the island. Domestic violence was mostly hidden from view, but the lack of inhibition when drunk meant that men began hitting their wives publicly, a thing that had rarely happened in the past. In a sense, a private and unacknowledged problem that had existed in Niolam before the development of mining was now brought into the open. For many women it was extremely humiliating to be beaten up in public in their village and there was widespread concern.

It therefore became a priority to devise ways of responding to violence — to empower women to see it as a crime and to take issues of violence to the village court. Petztorme encouraged women to develop strategies appropriate to their own communities, both to protect themselves or to have some form of refuge. Some villages decided that going to the house of the catechist was the best measure; in others there is a house where a woman and her husband are prepared to protect battered women. This is a very difficult issue in Melanesian villages, and often men will not allow their wives to take in even a relative. Just such a dilemma was expressed by Solomon Islander Jully Makini (formerly Sipolo) in her poem 'Wife-bashing', read to the 1998 Melanesian Women's Workshop at which this paper was originally presented:

Impossible to go back to Dad
Sis doesn't want to get involved
Can't stand sister-in-law's tongue
The police don't want to pry
I don't like this cruel treatment from hubby
But where can I go?

(Sipolo 1986, 12).

Very early on women decided that they wanted to be a part of the mining project as much as they could, to have access to some of the benefits it brought. Petztorme attempted to deal with these aspirations, but one of the main problems they had to face was the passive opposition of the mining company to employing women in any but very lowly jobs. Mining companies are male dominated in all cultures and very few women work for them. This is especially so in PNG, where even fewer women work in mining than do in Australia. The mostly white men who run the mining company understood the desirable goal of employing local people to mean employment of local men. Equally, there was great resistance on the part of Lihirian men to having women in the paid workforce. Of course, in keeping with ideas of employment that come from a male-dominated industry like the Australian and British mining

industries, the jobs that were made available to women were all very low-paid and menial: cleaning up after and doing laundry for the workers who lived on site in the men's quarters; helping to prepare and serve food. They were the two main areas in which women were employed, and they involved very little training — it is hard to advance your career washing sheets all day.

Men therefore were taken in far greater numbers into the training programs, while women who wanted to train often met resistance from their own families. So there was a kind of double-barrelled gun loaded against women in the matter of employment opportunities. There was particular hostility when women took, or attempted to take jobs that were seen as masculine by both expatriate mine workers and Lihirians, such as driving big trucks, or even small trucks, and working at the mine site in jobs that required women to wear trousers. Women wearing trousers became a symbol of male concern. Even if they were cleaning rooms and did not wear trousers, the idea that they might do so became the major excuse used by men to keep women back in the village.

Many difficulties thus arose from routine opposition to women's involvement in the workforce. Eventually, though, the employers began to notice that the few women who really resisted family pressures and took traditional mining jobs did not drink and so did not crash the vehicles; they were very careful workers and did not turn up late to work with hangovers. In the simple sense that women worked and conducted themselves differently from men, they gained some small advantage in the employment stakes. A few women trained as secretaries and clerks and they get better wages than many untrained men. This has to some extent made life easier for other women, particularly as Petztorme encourages younger ones to apply for positions that are not the most menial and lowly paid, and places pressure from within the company organisation to provide training for women. At the community relations level of the company, the women's section has been particularly active in trying to encourage women to apply for jobs where they can receive training and earn better wages.

Working in Community Relations

In the Community Relations department we conducted a survey in which Petztorme members collected the information. It emerged that not only were women better workers than men when given the opportunity, but that women

did different things with their earnings. The amount of money that men spent on beer varied between fifty and ninety per cent of their weekly earnings. This was during the early construction phase, when there was a kind of fury of beer drinking, which has since levelled off a little. It is very interesting that women, on the other hand, gave about the same amount of money to the church and to Petztorme and other women's organisations that men tended to spend on beer. New church building projects and such like have flourished, mainly financed with the money that quite young women earned as laundrymaids, cleaners, etc. At present, still very few women are employed, but those who are employed are often relatively highly paid in secretarial positions – they are clustered in the usual positions that in an Australian company would be seen as women's work.

The promotion of women's roles in decision-making and employment has been a major concern of Petztorme, but the organisation has also supported a number of money-making projects for women. Women observed that men's furious beer drinking was swamping the island with cans, which quickly filled with water and turned can dumps at the back of villages into mosquito breeding grounds. So Petztorme set up a can-crushing project which generates money with which they hope to buy a truck to facilitate the work of the organisation. It takes a long time, though, to buy a truck out of crushed cans! Women's activities all fall into the 'self help' category and mining company support for men's business ventures has been far greater than for women's. Women also took over management of the market built in the new township as another source of income. Petztorme is currently trying to encourage women to supplement their income by growing produce for regular sale at the market.

The work done by the women's section of the Community Relations department includes a very important educative component. It not only promotes education about social change and adjustment, but education generally, and encourages girls to continue at school, with financial assistance from the mine. It is very important that women are seen to be the ones who throughout the community promote education and encourage people to apply to the company for assistance with scholarships at all levels: from elementary school right through to tertiary education. As the population expands and people recognise the need for qualifications when seeking employment, so more young girls

are choosing to stay on at school.

We want to stress that in spite of Petztorme's many internal conflicts (largely due to the pre-existing splits in the community and the speed with which members of the organisation have had to adjust to working together on issues of common concern), it nonetheless does provide a unifying group to deal with the most serious modern problem — the emergence of dramatic social inequalities. Prior to the arrival of the mining company there were not real inequalities between people in Lihir. Everyone had access to land and sea and most people lived pretty much like their neighbours. The influx of compensation payments and wage labour has altered that balance extraordinarily. It is largely through women's organisations that attempts are being made to ameliorate the conflicts arising from inequality.

CHRISTIANITY AND WOMEN IN BOUGAINVILLE

Introduction

In this paper two Bougainville women share their experiences during the war on their island from 1989-98, and tell how their Christian faith gave them the strength and courage to initiate the successful peace process. My personal concern is that Bougainville women should henceforth participate meaningfully in the decision-making level of government, as they have always done at community level (in churches, village meetings, women's meetings), where their authority rests and where they have always had significant influence on decisions.

Background

During the past two hundred years, Christianity has taken deep root in the lives of Pacific Islanders and it is now an inseparable part of people's existence. In Bougainville Christianity has become a cultural way of life for the vast majority of people. The ten years of civil war/independence struggle between the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Security Forces/ local militia and the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) became a major turning point to God for most Bougainvilleans. During the conflict an estimated 18-20,000 lives were lost, both in direct military confrontations and through the lack of medical supplies after the PNG government withdrew all services from the island in 1990. The government later reestablished a system of military occupation in areas not dominated by the BRA. People were herded into refugee camps ('care centres'), where human rights abuses, intimidation, harassment, rape and killings were frequent, and where movement was strictly controlled, eventually by a pass system.

In the political vacuum of 1990-94, when there was virtually no civil government, the often traumatised people committed themselves strongly to their various churches. The churches have long offered succour and services, but they now by necessity became involved in public affairs, resulting in a general change of attitude and expectation about the respective roles of church and government. The churches played a pivotal role in providing services from their

few stored resources, which soon ran out. The major issue was health. Services delivered with love and Christian fellowship became the most important aspect of people's social life. Many women launched a campaign to 'bring home our children from the jungle' – that is, the young men who took up arms with the BRA to fight for Bougainville's independence. This action by women was the birth of reconciliation, and opened up other areas such as mediation and negotiation between the BRA, the people and the PNG government. It was the beginning of the peace process, culminating in a ceasefire signed in April 1998 by all the warring factions.

Here are two women's stories of their experiences during the most violent period of the war. Both are church members, one a Methodist (United Church) and the other a Catholic. Both are heavily involved in community work to restore a degree of normality to the people's lives. Both testify to the help God gave them during the war in their efforts as women to bring peace to their communities. I refer to them by pseudonyms, since for security reasons they do not want to be identified.

'Anna': a nursing sister-in-charge of a rural health centre

Anna had a Christian upbringing. Her father trained as a Methodist lay preacher and her mother was a nursing aid in the first Methodist hospital. They ran a Methodist boarding school in the 1960s-70s and Anna, like many children of her generation, received a modern education in mission schools. She trained at a Methodist nursing training college and then at a base hospital. She is a highly qualified nurse and midwife and does minor surgical operations. She is highly respected for her work and the love and care she brings to it. Most of her staff are local women trained at various nursing training colleges.

The health centre Anna runs was built in the 1960s by the New Zealand Methodist Mission. It has a maternity ward and an outpatients section, but no surgical ward or doctor – there has been no doctor since the New Zealand medical workers left the island after PNG's independence in 1975. The centre caters for three major language communities and a population of 12-14,000.

From the beginning of the war Anna made a conscious decision to attend to all wounded who

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came to the centre, not favouring one side over the other. She often performed minor operations to remove shotgun pellets or stitched up badly wounded soldiers, BRA men and civilians. For her neutral stance, Anna was misunderstood and she and her family were harassed and threatened. Anna was badly beaten up by members of the local BRA branch, resulting in a dislocated hip, a badly bruised face and lacerated hands. The BRA objected to her attending injured members of the PNG Security Forces and their local militia allies, whom they saw as the enemy, deserving to die. Anna's husband sparingly applied what modern medicine was left to the cuts on her body and her family and church members prayed for her. Her recovery is testimony to God's sovereign power of healing and the power of faith and prayer.

The young BRA men eventually recognised the stupidity of their behaviour. A year or so later they persuaded their chiefs, parents and relatives to organise a big reconciliation ceremony with Anna and her family, involving several villages and including both Christian and traditional forms of reconciliation. The BRA men sought forgiveness from Anna and her family and kin, who joined in prayers for reconciliation. A huge amount of traditional currency and other gifts was given to Anna and her family as compensation, followed by a feast and much handshaking.

Anna's story

It was the most difficult time of my career as a health worker in a rural community. The health centre where I have worked for over fifteen years had very little medicine. Every form of communication and transportation was cut off when the PNG government imposed a complete blockade on Bougainville in 1990. I had heard that the International Red Cross had been supplying some medicine, mainly antimalarial drugs, to the nearest health centre, a Catholic clinic. For love of the people, I risked my life, generally walking alone to this clinic to collect whatever medicine they could spare. On rare occasions, two or three men dared to accompany me. My husband comes from Buka island and it was doubly risky for him to move about because the Buka leaders and chiefs had invited the PNG Security Forces to return. In the eyes of the BRA, this invitation was a betrayal of the BRA cause — independence for Bougainville.

I made a conscious decision to attend to everyone who needed medical attention: Papua

New Guinean and Bougainvillean civilians, Papua New Guinean soldiers and local militia men, and BRA men. It was my duty to save lives, which meant making no distinctions between race or ethnic groups, religion, soldiers or civilians. My commitment and my duty is first to God and to his people. Members of the BRA rejected my neutral stand and commitment. In their minds, I should only attend to them and other Bougainvilleans, and not the Papua New Guinean soldiers. At times, when BRA members learned of the little supply of medicine in the centre, two or three would come and seize it at gun point.

The PNG Security Forces also meted out their share of harassment, intimidation and threats to me, my family and my nurses. The Security Forces inherited the only vehicle the health centre had at gun point and it was never returned. Soldiers came drunk and armed to the health centre, often in the middle of the night, and shouted at nurses to attend to them, or used the only maternity ward as a toilet.

What was most difficult was maintaining a balanced attitude towards these warring factions. When I was so badly beaten, I decided not to work again, but after a while I saw the need of the people. It was my love for them, and their love for me and my family that kept me going. Besides this, God was my support. Nowadays, my family and I are constantly flooded with gifts, even from people we do not know. It is a great blessing and we thank God for that.

'Maria': a trained horticulturalist

Maria is a horticulturalist. Educated and trained through the Catholic mission, she taught at a Catholic agricultural centre in Bougainville before the civil war. When the war began, she and her husband moved to their village in the northeast. As church leaders they took up the task of mediating between members of the BRA and civilians, and negotiating with the BRA to lay down their arms and 'come home' to their families in their communities. They did this in a very quiet and unassuming fashion. Maria also formed a Catholic Women's Group in her community. Apart from social service activities, the group also engaged in negotiations with northern BRA members to abandon fighting and 'come home'. Maria and her small group of negotiators and mediators had to establish 'trust' and 'honesty' between themselves and the BRA. This was a very delicate process.

Maria's story

The most important thing for me and my women was to establish and nurture trust and honesty in the BRA, so that trust and honesty would flow between us. One little move outside the rules of the game could mean the end of our efforts, a futile and devastating outcome for me, the women and my family.

We tracked through mountains and valleys, crossing rivers week after week, month after month. This was the most trying time for us. But we had to show the BRA that we were serious. If we gave up after a few tries, they would have lost trust in us. We had nothing material to offer them and modern medicine was a thing of the past. But like them, we looked to tradition. We learned local traditional medicine from our old people. We saw the jungle with a different eye. It became our source of medical and food supplies. Plants, leaves, roots, fruits, the bark of trees as well as marine life became useful as medicines.

Often our efforts were misunderstood, raising suspicion on both sides — civilians and the BRA. We saw the need to explain our efforts to the people but time was always an important factor. So we often had to leave suspicions hanging and just pray that no major or minor conflict would arise. But gradually, as my Catholic Women's Group and the northern BRA members felt more secure and confident, there was a little opening in the path of negotiation and mediation. Sometimes, a small matter would take over two months to resolve, but we did it wholeheartedly.

The BRA trusted us, the women, but not so much the men. There were complicated dynamics during this 'building trust' process. The young BRA men know we women are important not only as landowners but also as procreators and peace makers. It finally dawned on them that the women are picking up the bits and pieces from what they, the men, have destroyed. The women saw the young men as their children, children of Bougainville whom they must protect and bring back home. These young men are the defenders of our land from external destructive forces. They do not deserve to be killed for defending their land and people, but they do need to learn to live a normal life.

Ruth Saovana-Spriggs: reflections

My particular concern is that women shall participate in the future governing of Bougainville. Women's efforts to create an environment of reconciliation throughout Bougainville must not be lost to the men. Men

have a tendency for power play. In Bougainville some have destroyed and killed. It is the women who have been picking up the pieces left by men's actions. Women from all levels, but especially simple, ordinary village women, showed strength and bravery in venturing into the jungles and the mountains in search of their children, the young BRA men, and bringing them home. The coming home occurred in waves, one by one, in twos or in groups, sometimes after weeks, months or years of women's persistent efforts. It was a great joy to the women when the young men came home.

Women in Bougainville are 'jacks of all trades'. Mothers and mothers-to-be are nurturers of life, leaders, health workers, teachers, fisherwomen, gardeners, cooks, fuel collectors, home carers, accountants in the customary and modern economies. It is highly desirable that women extend these skills from the local community level in order to take a proper share in governing the island. The war has given women fresh, vital strength and command of these customary roles and their roles as landowners in Bougainville's matrilineal societies. The authority exercised over land by Bougainville women is hugely misunderstood by well-meaning outsiders who have come in droves to assist in restoring the society, the infrastructure and the people's sense of security.

The ten year conflict has caused people to reflect on their relationship to and complete dependence on the land and the environment at a time when modern infrastructure, goods and services failed to sustain them. Lost customary practices were revived and became both useful and necessary. They include building bush material houses and carving traditional canoes and paddles for fishing and transportation, when modern forms of travel had been destroyed. Traditional knowledge of healing and the use of traditional medicine became very important and effective.

However, these strategies for coping with the crisis did not just mean a return to tradition, to the past. New forms of relationships were revived, strengthened and extended. For example, a person from the south stranded in the north needed only to announce his or her clan, and he or she would immediately be taken in as a clan and family member by the same clan in the north. Such new relationships, extending kinship and friendship, were emerging before the

crisis, with marriages between men and women from different parts of the island. However, they gained strength and new meanings during the years of conflict. The younger generations growing up in urban areas with Tok Pisin and English as the only languages of communication are now learning and using their local languages, to their parents' great pleasure. It is a time when the land, the jungle, the sea, the marine life, the customs, all have revitalised meanings for the people, who before the crisis were very much drawn to western ideas and influence. One can say that the years of fighting have given the people a more deeply meaningful relationship to their environment and indigenous identity.

Conclusion

Women are as interested in control over their land and resources as are men in contemporary Bougainville. The women's initiative in planting/birthing the peace process should mark a new era in the process of government. Their efforts in this arena have raised a new and strong awareness of the need to involve women in matters concerning exploitation of natural resources by external companies. This is really about women regaining and exercising their traditional authority, not only in the communities and over land, but also in governing modern Bougainville. Women are looking for ways to combine traditional and modern authority in order to find their place in a world organised and managed by men. In other words, women desire to achieve a balance in the political economy of a new Bougainville.

Christianity is fundamental in people's lives. Their faith in God gave them the strength to carry out daring tasks, and their Christian love and commitment for each other gave them strength to rebuild and make sense of their individual lives. It is faith in God through Christian activities and networks that brought change and hope to broken lives. No one who lived through the conflict in Bougainville will not have testimony to share on how God saw them through the difficult times, or on the miracles which occurred, of healing, welfare, and bonding with friends and enemies. The experiences of 'Anna' and 'Maria' tell in microcosm the story of the Bougainville people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most of the papers in this collection were previously published in *Development Bulletin*, 51 (March 2000):39-60, an issue on Gender and Governance. The 'Women, Christians, citizens: Being female in Melanesia today' workshop was funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the Pacific Islands Senior Visiting Fellows program and by the Australian National University through the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project. My particular thanks to all the contributors to the workshop and to Monica Wehner for her support, assistance and enthusiasm. Thanks also to Angela Mandie-Filer, Ruth Saovana-Spriggs, Lissant Bolton and Jean Mitchell for facilitating the attendance of several indigenous women. Kathryn Briggs and Julie Andrews welcomed participants on behalf of the Bunnerong people of the place and Koori people generally. Kirsty Douglas, Irene Mockridge, Michael Morgan and Helen Morton were willing helpers. Kenya Kala from Radio Australia taped papers. Annabelle Leve made a video. Pat Jessen and Mary Dykes of the Overseas Service Bureau (now Australian Volunteers International) provided the venue for the final dinner. Radio Australia made a Web site from the audiovisual material – <http://www.abc.net.au/ra/pacbeat/conf.htm> Thirteen papers are on the SSGM Project's site – <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/papers.htm>

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The State, Society and Governance in Melanesia (SSGM) Project was launched in 1996 in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. Funded by the ANU with financial assistance from the Australian Government through AusAID, it comprises three Fellows (Dr Bronwen Douglas, Mr Anthony Regan and Dr Sinclair Dinnen), a Convenor (Mr David Hegarty, on secondment from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) and an Administrator (Ms Monica Wehner).

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