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Changing Pacific Masculinities

Guest Editor

John P. Taylor

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The address for all correspondence is:

TAA, C/-Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney, NSW, 2006, Australia

Phone: 61+ (0)2 + 9036-9352 Fax: 61+ (0)2 + 9036-9353

E-mail: aas.taja@arts.usyd.edu.au or roselilley@fastmail.fm

URL http://www.aas.asn.au/aas_taja.php

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The Social Life of Rights: 'Gender Antagonism', Modernity and *Raet* in Vanuatu

John P. Taylor

Social Anthropology, University of Manchester

In the northern Vanuatu town of Luganville a small group of men have responded to social and legal changes engendered by women's rights activists by forming a male support group called 'Violence Against Men'. Members of this 'backlash' movement argue that the insidious promotion of Western-style 'women's rights' is leading to discrimination against men in divorce proceedings, child custody battles, and in domestic violence and rape cases. They directly oppose recent and ongoing legal changes aimed at protecting women from domestic violence, such as Domestic Violence Protection Court Orders, and the repeatedly tabled (but long-delayed) 'Family Protection Bill'. Such interventions, they argue, undermine Vanuatu's 'natural' *kastom* and Christian patriarchal gender order and, in doing so, pose a serious threat to the socio-economic productivity of the nation-state. For other men, however, rather than opposing women's rights activism, such challenges have raised questions about how men might successfully negotiate their identities in ways that are sensitive to contemporary issues of gender equality without undermining existing paradigms. Thus, this paper addresses the value accorded to universalism and relativism in gender activism in Vanuatu, and especially in terms of the linked discourses of *kastom*, church and modernity. It therefore explores gender relations in terms of the contemporary entanglement of indigenous and exogenous epistemologies, and in doing so argues that the contextual analysis of 'rights' should consider the specific historical, political and socio-cultural circumstances in which they are put to use.

The last several decades have seen a dramatic increase in the political importance of human rights internationally. This is witnessed in its application within international law, the individual laws and constitutions of nation-states and, correspondingly, in its emergence as a crucial ideological feature of discourse and debate within local communities the world over. Indeed, human rights might be considered one of the most globalised political values of our times (Wilson 1997: 1). For the majority of Pacific nation-states, the inexorable rise in the significance of human rights has coincided with struggles for political independence and with subsequent and ongoing efforts to maintain relative degrees of state legitimacy, autonomy and control. For such states, and as numerous commentators have noted (e.g. Hilsdon *et al.* 2000; Close and Askew 2004), addressing issues of human rights can prove deeply problematic, particularly insofar as it entails negotiating the tense diplomatic and ethical divides of universalism and relativism.

The 'Violence Against Men and Family Protection Centre'

In the northern Vanuatu town of Luganville a small group of men have responded to profound social and legal changes by forming a male support group called the 'Violence Against Men and Family Protection Centre' (VAM). This is a department of an umbrella organisation that they have called the 'Ni-Vanuatu Grassroots Association', which is itself linked to the 'Ni-Vanuatu Grassroots Company Ltd'. Members of this initiative are contesting what they see as the insidious promotion of Western-style 'women's rights' by donor-funded women's organisations and NGOs, and by other mainly female and well-educated ni-Vanuatu activists, especially those resident in the nation's capital, Port Vila. They are insisting that the imposition of such 'rights' (or in Bislama, *raet*) is leading to the reverse discrimination of men, particularly in divorce proceedings, child custody battles, and in domestic violence and rape cases. Such legal interventions, they argue, undermine Vanuatu's 'natural', *kastom* and Christian patriarchal gender order and, in doing so, pose a serious threat to the socio-economic productivity of the nation-state. Hence the empowerment of women in Vanuatu is interpreted as enacting a form of 'Violence Against Men' (as the group is more commonly, and simply known). VAM members also accuse local women's rights activists of being harbingers of neo-colonialism and betrayers of *kastom*, particularly insofar as they maintain linkages to overseas funding sources and international allies as a crucial yet problematic component of their hopes for success (Jolly 2000: 132). Rather than dismiss VAM as an aberration, I choose to problematise their stance and take their resistance seriously, particularly insofar as discourse and debate surrounding the group's activities articulates broader epistemological shifts and processes of identity formation currently taking place across complex transformations in relations of gender and sociality within contemporary Vanuatu.

Based on estimates (from Vanuatu, Statistics Office, 2000), Luganville comprises around 15,000 of Vanuatu's total population of just over 200,000. The town includes a tangle of people, the vast majority of whom base their identity in ties to the land, language, kinship and *kastom* of other places within the archipelago, or elsewhere on the island of Espiritu Santo where Luganville is located. There is a tendency for settlement patterns to reflect these binding linkages of place-based group identity: of *manples* (literally, 'man place'). Thus the main population with whom I have worked are Raga speakers from North Pentecost Island who have a strong presence in the Sarakata and Chapuis areas. At the same time, the mixture of permanent and semi-permanent housing that characterises the residential suburbs reflects not only unequal access to wealth, but also the relative transience of the population. For many ni-Vanuatu, living in town is conceptualised as a short-term prospect and is often linked to strategies that are ultimately aimed at maintaining livelihoods in their rural villages.

The public sector provides one of the few means for ni-Vanuatu (particularly men) to attain relatively high incomes. The town is administered from the offices of the Luganville Municipality, which is located at the Sarakata River end of a wide main street—one of the many legacies of the major allied military base that was situated there during the later stages of World War II. These offices are located next to a market house where local garden produce is sold, mainly by women, and also a number of food stalls that are administered and operated by members of the local Women's Cooking Association. Business houses along the main street reflect the town's immigrant and expatriate presence: 'Chinese stores' dominate the retail market, while the export industry sector (including especially the farming of beef, copra, timber, and kava) is mainly controlled by Australians and New Zealanders, as is tourism. Employment in the export industry and tourism sectors is primarily of men. Men also uniformly dominate the important bus, taxi

and other transport services. By contrast, women—who are considered by many employers to be more reliable than men—visibly dominate both skilled and unskilled positions that are made available to ni-Vanuatu within the town itself, including shop assistant, restaurant and hotel work, the manual processing of export commodities such as kava, and office work.

During the final week of my most recent visit to Luganville (August–September, 2005) one of my classificatory sisters from North Pentecost, Gloria Tarileo, alerted me to the presence of VAM. This group, she told me, directly opposed much of her work as Women's Affairs Department Officer at the Luganville Municipal Council. Indeed, their name, 'Violence Against Men and Family Protection Centre' indicated a direct provocation to the local 'SANMA Women's Counselling Centre' (SANMA is the name of the province in which Luganville is located), which is more commonly known by its former name, 'Violence Against Women'. It also signalled a sardonic response to the 'Family Protection Act' that has over several years and on several occasions been tabled, but not yet passed, by the heavily male-dominated Vanuatu national government. The main stated aims of this act are: 'a) to preserve and promote harmonious family relationships; and b) to prevent domestic violence in all levels of society in Vanuatu', and to do so in ways that are 'based on traditional values of Vanuatu and on Christian principles'. Gloria also informed me that the VAM group had been formed more specifically as a united front against some comparatively successful interim legal measures and other initiatives that had over the last year or more been vigorously promoted in Luganville by the Woman's Affairs Department and the SANMA Women's Counselling Service, initiatives that were the outcome of an AusAID funded project titled, *Awareness Raising on Court Rules Relating to Domestic Violence in Vanuatu* (Randell 2003). In particular, they were concerned about newly introduced Domestic Violence Protection Court Orders, by which victims of domestic violence (typically women) are able to impose spatial restrictions on the movement of perpetrators (typically husbands) for limited periods of time. Noting my interest, Gloria gave me contact details and encouraged me to go and talk to the leaders of this group, which I did. Here is a little of what I learnt of the group's activities over the course of two focus group interviews and several informal conversations with members.

In early June 2005 a minor stir occurred in Luganville—and in Port Vila, via several local newspaper articles—with the opening of the first office of the newly formed 'Violence Against Men and Family Protection Centre' by the town's Lord Mayor, Brown Hill Harry. The ceremony had been announced a week earlier by way of posters that also stated the Centre's aims, as follows (translated from Bislama):

1. Protect married men whose wives don't respect their married lives.
2. Make sure that men are always the head of the family.
3. Make sure that Church-performed marriages are protected and respected.
4. Make sure that custom marriages also have power and are respected in accordance to our custom.
5. Review all broken homes and find solutions and possible justice to repair broken homes.
6. The Centre will always follow the channels and procedures to solve family disputes beginning with the family, church, and chief.
7. The Centre strongly discourages all the separation orders that are promoted by 'Violence against Women' and of which many families are clearly made victims.
8. Following the advice of all Chiefs, any man who breaks or contributes to breaking a marriage is liable to pay compensation of up to 1,000,000vt.
9. All Church leaders and all Chiefs are the main people behind the setting up of this Centre.

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10. To discipline all groups or parties (e.g. Violence against Women office) who contribute to breaking up many homes in Vanuatu today following their Separation Order advice.
11. A temporary office of the Centre is at the house of Mele Ravo at Side River, Luganville. The Centre is open every Monday, Wednesday and Friday of every week from 08:00am. The Centre will open on 13/6/05.

Given the directly threatening implications of their tenth 'aim', but also in deliberate irony, the now former Director of the SANMA Women's Counselling Centre had a Restraining Order issued against VAM secretary and main spokesman, Mele Ravo. Their publication also provoked an immediate response from the Vanuatu Women's Centre in Port Vila, through its Director, Merilyn Tahī, who, according to the *Vanuatu Trading Post*, stated:

While there is a need for a program to address the needs of men—this particular Violence Against Men is not the right response. The VAMFPC is trying to deny women their legal rights by using customary practices—this is against our Constitution, it is against the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), of which our country is a signatory and it is against the Government's Gender Policy. (*Vanuatu Daily Post*, quoted at URL <http://www.fijiwomen.com/index.php?id=1507>)

Tahī, instead, described the male-oriented initiatives of her own organisation, saying:

Our Male Advocacy group looks at the issue of violence against women from the root causes and it is focused on behavioural changes for men; it involves a great deal of commitment and challenges to existing structures which need to change. (*Vanuatu Daily Post*, quoted at URL <http://fijiwomen.com/index.php?id=1507>)

VAM does not operate through a system of membership, and the short length of my research into the organisation precluded my gaining any clear insight into the actual extent of their support base. Anecdotal evidence suggested that many people in Luganville considered the initiative to be counter-productive, and it was often described to me in Bislama as quite simply *kranke* ('crazy'). But I also encountered numerous people, both men and women, who agreed with the sentiments expressed by the group and who supported their position concerning the broader issues pursued by them. This complexity of opinion surrounding VAM reflects the generalised concern for issues surrounding transforming gender relations, and the variously competing struggles to control these, a concern that is apparent across the country as a whole (this is witnessed, for example, in the continuous stream of letters to the editor that are published in the *Vanuatu Daily Post* newspaper, concerning opinion about the actions of the Vanuatu National Council of Women or of the position of the National Council of Chiefs over such issues as women's right to wear trousers in public, female beauty pageants, prostitution, etc., or reactions (positive, negative, or otherwise) to articles, poems, and opinion pieces that appear in the weekly *Sistas Toktok* section). As part of these concerns there is also a broadly felt scepticism of the enlightened vision for a future of 'equal rights' that is pursued by members of the 'women's movement' in Vanuatu, a view that is reinforced by the perceived association of such women with the established urbanised and educated 'elite' and emerging *nouveau riche* of Port Vila. Indeed, the strong link to understandings of Western-style modernity and 'progress' means that, for many people, the achievement of 'women's rights' is seen as unrealistic and unsuited to both the *kastom* and Christian values and life-ways of those 'ordinary' 'ni-Vanuatu grassroots' people and causes that VAM purport to champion.

Although VAM is the first group initiative of its kind in Vanuatu, it clearly resembles those so-called male 'backlash' movements that have become fairly common to Western countries, especially since the 1980s (see Maddison 1999; Flood 2004). Such 'men's rights groups' are also typically concerned with the situation of men as victims and with asserting idealised visions of 'traditional' masculinities (Messner 1997; Clatterbaugh 2000). While it retains a particularly localised twist, VAM reflects both of these. Thus, in its simultaneous appeal to religion and concepts of 'tradition' it resembles the international Christian organisation, the Promise Keepers. Perhaps even more, while not being so manifestly militant, it also resembles the Melbourne-based 'Black Shirts' who—although making no direct appeal to Christianity—call for the reinforcing of hegemonic masculinity in the interests of protecting 'family values' and marriage and, in doing so, focus particularly on legal issues, such as divorce, child custody and child maintenance.

The group is similar to Australian men's rights groups on three further counts. First, the personal situation of the members I spoke to, many of whom had themselves experienced protracted and painful marriage break-ups that included violent episodes and necessitated legal intervention, suggested (ostensibly, at least) the adoption of a collective identity based on the shared belief of having been personally wounded by what they perceive to be a local form of aggressive feminism (cf. Maddison 1999: 42). Second, these personal situations were interpreted as reflective of much larger processes (in this case, broadly conceived as neo-colonial) by which men are themselves becoming increasingly marginalised and subject to discrimination; for example, in education, the labour market, health and in the formulation of government policy. Third, VAM situates itself as a socially conscious and morally indispensable organisation, and implements strategies of service provision and activism to those disadvantaged 'grassroots' people whose interests it seeks to protect. Thus, just like its Australian counterparts (compare Flood 2004: 265), VAM offers self-help meetings, provides support for men undergoing separation, divorce and family law proceedings, lobbies local and national governments to change policy and laws and promotes their views through media campaigns.

However, with the incorporation of a mimetic irony that I discuss further below, it is in fact the very local women's groups that they oppose that presents both the model and reactive cause for VAM, rather than these foreign men's rights groups that they resemble and of whose existence they are probably unaware. Indeed, there are crucial differences between VAM and the foreign men's rights groups described above. One fundamental area of difference is that while Western men's groups tend to forward their arguments in universalist terms—based in 'mythopoetic', fundamentalist Christian or Islamic ideas, or otherwise (see Beasley 2005: 180-81)—VAM appeal simultaneously to biological, cultural and Christian explanations and solutions, and do so within a stridently relativist vision. VAM therefore asserts that patriarchy and male domination is 'natural' in ways that are specific to ni-Vanuatu people, an argument that is framed in contradistinction to stereotyped ideas of white attitudes and behaviour. Patriarchy is likewise understood to be *stret* (correct, appropriate) to the *kastom* and Christianity that uniquely defines Vanuatu as a nation.

Modernity and gender antagonism in human rights discourse in Vanuatu

About this thing called 'Violence Against Men'—plenty of people on the street, or they call on the telephone, say, 'Oh, that's good! This is a good thing. This is the thing that we want! Because now, women provoke us constantly [*ol woman oli makmakem yumi go go*], and we're becoming no good because of them. They only think about one side [*oli gat wan saed tingting noma*]' (Presbyterian Pastor and VAM member, September 2005)

The many conflicts, Vanuatu are increasing (2007: 32). This follows in plantation and other required the reconfiguration (2000; Douglas 2002) arrangements into 'patriarchal' house-centred 'wifely' plantations, was crucial perhaps intensified in response to changes of social structure and replaced identity—through Marilyn Strathern (1999) possession, ownership, unitary subjects and composite identities numerous subtle ways unitary state of indigenous contrasts Melanesian 'male and female, same forms'—with Western permanently subjectivized

Despite their evidence of uncritically reifying engagement with Western course of colonial and simplistically dualistic indigenous beginning of antagonism' that often an implicit subject eventually and inevitably *unproblematically* attached the pre-European past terms of local discourse recognise that the ideas discussed here do not more broadly gendered and exogenous configurations both accommodate and gender relations in Vanuatu relationship between colonial or, as I discuss further

The co-incorporation of activists of women's rights either/or terms by which recent decades: on one thus as inferior and pursue the liberating potential 'Western' ways (Jolly these seemingly dichotomous

The many conflicts, tensions, and challenges faced by people living in contemporary Vanuatu are increasingly comprehended along the divide between the two sexes (Bolton 2007: 32). This follows more than a century of missionisation and ni-Vanuatu involvement in plantation and other labour settings (both within Vanuatu and abroad), both of which required the reconfiguration of gender roles along dualistic sex-based lines (Jolly 1997, 2000; Douglas 2002). As Jolly has noted (1991b), the redefinition of previous socio-spatial arrangements into 'public' and 'private' spheres, and in particular the distinction between house-centred 'wifely domesticity' and the physical labour mainly undertaken by men on plantations, was crucial to this process. Such 'gender antagonism' has continued and perhaps intensified in urban contexts where extended ties of kinship are breaking down due to changes of sociality and economic relations—of family, work and personal and emplaced identity—that are generally coextensive with Western capitalism. Indeed, Marilyn Strathern (1988) has argued the ways in which commodity logic works to locate possession, ownership, control and ideas of power in terms of one-to-one relations between unitary subjects and objects. In this formulation, while people may harbour suppressed composite identities and experience both themselves and each other as 'dividuals' in numerous subtle ways, 'male' or 'female' emerge as key identity categories within the unitary state of individuality (1988: 14-15). Thus, Strathern's heuristic formulation contrasts Melanesian culture, where people are imagined in multiple contrasting modes—'male and female, same-sex and cross-sex, a person always one of a pair of interrelated forms'—with Western culture, which imagines people as 'persons existing in a permanently subjective state' (Strathern 1988: 338).

Despite their evident cogency, through historical sequencing such analyses run the risk of uncritically reifying a particular nostalgic 'master narrative'. In this story, increased engagement with Western culture, Christianity and the workings of capitalism over the course of colonial and post-colonial history is seen to have caused the emergence of a simplistically dualistic gender regime from more complex, multiple, fluid and relational indigenous beginnings. So, across the ostensibly dichotomous terms and apparent 'gender antagonism' that outwardly defines and structures gender relations in Vanuatu there is often an implicit suggestion that a crucial culminating point will be (or has been) eventually and inevitably reached. Now, it is assumed, gender is much more *unproblematically* attached to the biology of male and female sexed bodies than it was in the pre-European past. However, just as Strathern (1988) asks us to consider gender in terms of local discourses of power, agency, personhood and identity, it is important to recognise that the idealisations of male and female that are suggested within the example discussed here do not simply accord to relations between the sexes, but operate within a more broadly gendered field of discourse and power, across an entanglement of indigenous and exogenous configurations of sociality, and in terms of a more generalised struggle to both accommodate and produce difference. Thus, the sense of rupture that characterises gender relations in Vanuatu interacts with other key terms, most crucially with the relationship between conceptualisations of *kastom* and 'the modern' (see Jolly 1997, 2000), or, as I discuss further below, the Janus face of '*kastom* and its Others' (Taylor n.d.).

The co-incorporation of indigenous and exogenous has emerged as a necessary strategy for activists of women's rights and women's empowerment, especially in consideration of the either/or terms by which ni-Vanuatu female subjectivities have been typically defined in recent decades: on one hand, as representatives of the emplaced values of *kastom*—and thus as inferior and publicly deferential to men—or on the other hand, as representative of the liberating potential of the foreign and the 'progressive'—as inauthentic imitators of 'Western' ways (Jolly 1997, 2000). A further set of distinctions might also be attached to these seemingly dichotomous terms: *kastom*, which accords to relativist standpoints,

represents the local containment of women by men; conversely, the modern, which is permeated by understandings of universality, represents the usurpation of male dominance by women, as by forces of globalisation.

The emancipatory discourse of the women's rights movement in Vanuatu has clearly been informed by ideas of universal and inalienable human rights, such as are drawn from those 'global' women's rights projects that were dramatically expanded in the 1990s and realised, for instance, in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW was ratified by the government of Vanuatu in 1995). However, as Margaret Jolly has pointed out, where there is a tendency towards universalism it typically owes more to the language of a shared faith of Christianity than it does the 'good sentiments' of secular humanism (Jolly 2000: 137). At the same time, however, and somewhat paradoxically, through the reinterpretation of local histories—of *kastom*, Christianity and colonialism—and through appeals to nationalism, women at the forefront of this movement are also re-visioning their arguments for gender equality along more relativist lines, much like VAM.

Within this complexly changing analytic context, therefore, the articulation of notions of human rights has become increasingly embroiled across the tensions and oscillations that link a complex set of categories: past/present, local/global, indigenous/exogenous, heterogenisation/homogenisation, universalism/relativism. A good example of how these terms may become subtly intertwined can be found in a Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) funded report that was researched and written by several Port Vila-based ni-Vanuatu women called 'Gender, Kastom and Domestic Violence: a research on the historical trend, extent and impact of domestic violence in Vanuatu':

Vanuatu as a nation, has, through its international obligations, put policies and programs and spent much money achieving equality, but little has changed. The excuse has always been that the fight for equality is women trying to put themselves above men. This in itself is a misunderstanding of the issue. When women talk about equality, it is the desire to be recognized as human beings, someone who can feel, think, has needs and is equally capable of making decisions . . . In the past women were able to do a lot more. However . . . [the] transition from small communities, through blackbirding, the introduction of Christianity, colonialism and independence in a relatively short period of course has inevitable consequences. What is being realized is that women bore the cost of these changes much more than men. In the cultural soup of today's society, the contemporary 'kastoms' and beliefs that have evolved are discriminatory to women and some quite contrary to past practice. (Tor and Toka 2004: 63)

VAM represents a digging-in-of-the-heels against such appeals to a universal 'humanity', but like most women's rights activists, they too argue that indigenous social configurations and gender-relations have been placed under siege by colonialism. Such tensions—between past/present, *kastom*/modern and inside/outside (also see Jolly 2005)—are therefore also amply evident in VAM discourse (see the lengthy quote below). Indeed, what struck me during the conversations I held with members of VAM was that, as a site of resistance, these men are not simply reacting to women's empowerment within the terms of some newly emergent 'gender antagonism'. At a more fundamental level they are struggling to cope with a profound sense of disempowerment and both personal and cultural loss stemming from what they see as large-scale socio-economic, political and ideological changes attached to neo-colonialism. Comparison between the two thus demonstrates how differing interpretations and idealisations of the pre-European past may emerge from divergent attempts to legitimate particular models of sociality. Thus, in

contrast to members of VAM, who are naturally dominant across

In traditional societies of most islands of Vanuatu, women were given most status at a ceremony in the ceremony and women were re

As a part of their opposition to women's rights activists, VAM are being perpetuated through (below). Indeed, in one interview planning to change their traditional Against Culture and Tradition amongst many ni-Vanuatu views and legal processes such as gender-based violence are particularly damaging mechanisms of social control patriarchal gender orders. For these men is also that stripped of their masculine behind. There is an important discourse. This broadly Christian indigenous conceptions in metaphors of relative height recorded interview I had had time of interview, was sepe

One problem in Vanuatu developed something advanced in terms of gone up, up, up, a haven't got anything. They have their own continue. What if it when they promote of movement, they Vanuatu? Men are b is the culture of Van you can't run away and been highly edu we have to follow happened. And this i

It's a little out of women sat down on freedoms; they're co told you—if you att of culture . . . [shrug don't respect it, that penalties associated to court, you have a problem! But respect

contrast to members of VAM for whom the past is imagined as one in which men were naturally dominant across all areas of society, Tor and Toka state:

In traditional society, women were highly regarded, and treated with respect. In most islands of Vanuatu, women had their own grade taking ceremonies that gave them status and recognition. They could organise part of and [sic] event or ceremony in the community, as a chief would . . . In traditional societies, men and women were relatively equal. (Tor and Toka 2004: 15)

As a part of their opposition to the enlightened modernity that is envisaged by many women's rights activists, VAM suggest that oppressive and exploitative colonial processes are being perpetuated through the neo-colonial promotion of 'equal rights' (see quote below). Indeed, in one interview, members of VAM revealed to me that they were planning to change their name to *Vaelens Againstem Kalja mo Tradisen* ('Violence Against Culture and Tradition'). This new name would appeal to a commonly held view amongst many ni-Vanuatu men and women that the promotion of Western-style feminist views and legal processes is itself a major contributing factor to community problems, such as gender-based violence. For VAM, the idea of 'equal rights' and of gender equality are particularly damaging in so far as they are seen to undermine existing hierarchical mechanisms of social control located in Vanuatu's 'natural' *kastom* and Christian patriarchal gender orders. Given the equation of female liberation with modernity, the fear for these men is also that the emancipation of women would entail that men will be stripped of their masculine powers—that in a female-led future, men will be somehow left behind. There is an important temporal dimension, or teleology, underlying VAM discourse. This broadly Christian narrative is also made to articulate with more explicitly indigenous conceptions in which power and authority are understood according to metaphors of relative height (Jolly 1991a). Let me demonstrate by quoting at length from a recorded interview I had held with Mele Ravo, an ex-policeman in his forties who, at the time of interview, was separated from his wife:

One problem in Vanuatu is that men have been late. I mean, they haven't developed something like that [the Family Protection Act]. So women are very advanced in terms of their violence [i.e. their anti-violence campaigns]. They've gone up, up, up, and now they're overtaking us! They're very high, but we haven't got anything yet. So they have an office. They have overseas funding. They have their awareness promotions about human rights, equal rights, and they continue. What if they'd gone for freedom of culture [*kalja*—that's good! But when they promote human rights, equal rights, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, they don't look out for culture. So, us men? We hold culture. Vanuatu? Men are boss, men are right, men are culture. Women are nothing. This is the culture of Vanuatu. And the people of Vanuatu must protect this, because you can't run away from culture. But some *woman Vanuatu* have been to school and been highly educated; been to study in Australia, the US, France. And now we have to follow the ways of these places. This is the problem that has happened. And this is what starts the problems in homes.

It's a little out of control now. Before, women didn't drink kava. Before, women sat down on mats. But these things are being lost now. It's like, all these freedoms; they're coming now—all these fundamental rights of ours. It's like I told you—if you attach them to culture, that's good. But when you think nothing of culture . . . [shrugs]. Culture doesn't have a law. It's about respect only. If you don't respect it, that's it. You lose it! It doesn't have anything binding, or any penalties associated with it. But all these freedoms have penalties. If you take me to court, you have the right to do this and that, and that, and that. That's the problem! But respect should remain with us. When you lose that, its lost forever.

... We men think that everything is continuing fine, but we've also found out that some things are wrong. Women are beginning to forget us now—to forget our culture, and forget our rights. So one pastor told me that, 'Oh, we have to be careful because since the beginning of creation women have made problems for us men. We were good, and then Eve tempted her man and started the problem.' And still today ... we men have to make a move now. If not, women will be smarter than us, and then they will be able to dominate us (*oli save daonem yumi nao*). If for the good, then good, but if for violence against culture, religion and respect—this is a problem. This is a big issue, and a big discussion (*bigfala tingting mo bigfala toktok*). But we're trying to help out. (Mele Ravo, September 2005, translated from Bislama)

This extended quote is incredibly rich, both in the arguments made and in the metaphors that are used to explicate these. By Ravo's reckoning, the ni-Vanuatu women he describes have grasped opportunities of Western education and international mobility to assume something of the elevated male image of 'soaring hawks' that Jolly describes of south Pentecost (1991a). Rising high, in their development industry-fuelled ascent they are leaving men below, forgotten and powerless along with the 'culture' and 'respect' they embody. In his emphatic use of the metaphor of height, Ravo evokes, implicitly, the ranking systems that characterise Northern Vanuatu sociality (for detailed discussions of these so-called 'graded societies' see Layard 1942; Rodman 1973; Allen 1981; Blackwood 1981; Jolly 1991a; Taylor 2008). When people (men, and to a lesser extent women (especially today)) achieve elevated rank within these hierarchical 'systems', they are at the same time accorded with increasing ancestrally-derived power and, as such, may pose an omnipresent danger to others. Furthermore, following the conferment of ranked titles, and perhaps not unlike the Domestic Violence Protection Court Orders described above, men are often able to confer restrictions on particular places or resources for extended periods. It is in association with such metaphors that we can see how, from the perspective of ni-Vanuatu men such as Mele Ravo, the drive to empower women through changes in government policy, legal interventions and awareness campaigns might be perceived as providing a basis for the enactment of complex forms of violence against men.

The teleological structure and epistemological basis of this argument also articulates with a feature of modernity in Vanuatu that I have described elsewhere through the phrase '*kastom* and its Others' (Taylor n.d.). Here, I argue that modernity in Melanesia might be usefully characterised as lived engagement with a sense of rupture. This is particularly so in Vanuatu where terms such as *bifo* and *naoia* (past and present), *kastom* and not-*kastom*, local and foreign provide central categories to the formation and articulation of personal and group identity and to embodied personhood. While women have tended to be defined in either/or terms with regard to the brute terms of this division—progressive and liberated or the 'good *kastom* woman' (Jolly 1997, 2000, see above)—male stereotypes, and particularly hegemonic ones, typically incorporate both of these dimensions. Thus men, especially if they are to be successful as community leaders, are expected to exemplify a composite form of Janus-faced masculinity.

Insofar as modernity involves the uneven and historically emergent entanglement of indigenous and exogenous epistemological schemes, the notion of rupture need not necessarily imply a binary opposition between terms. Rather, categories such as *kastom* and not-*kastom* (Lindstrom 1982; Rousseau 2004) are always-already locked in an uneasy embrace, enfolding each other in a dynamic relationship of hierarchy and encompassment (Taylor n.d.). Both VAM and women's rights discourse clearly show how the articulated terms of a sense of rupture might be grasped in relation to competing strategies of identity, legitimacy and power. In the case of VAM discourse, however, the terms used are not the more familiar *kastom* and not-*kastom*. Instead, and perhaps as a way of overcoming

problems relating to the term, *respek* (social-political rights) that are

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problems relating to the historically uneasy binary of *kastom* and Church, VAM discourse merges the terms *kalja* ('culture') and Christianity through a powerfully mediating third term, *respek* (respect). These merged categories then operate to legitimate the group's socio-political standpoint; a bid to reinforce hegemonic male 'rights' over those 'women's rights' that are figured as an incursive Other (i.e. neo-colonial women's rights discourse).

Humiliation and loss

The discourse of VAM clearly resonates with a palpable sense of resentment, humiliation and loss, one that I would suggest emanates from what is perceived as a growing inability for such men to draw value and power from either field—*kastom* or its Others. Indeed, modernity as 'rupture' for the men of VAM implies a loss of power—and importantly in local idiom, of *respek* (respect)—on two fronts. This fraught situation is explicitly linked with the equation of rural contexts with 'authentic' indigenous *kastom*, while *taon* (town) or urban spaces represent a kind of border-zone between those indigenous 'roots' of *ples* and transforming (whether corrupting or enhancing) exogenous influences. (This is particularly the case for Luganville, which has somewhat more of a frontier, 'Wild West' reputation, whereas Port Vila is seen as ever more emphatically Westernised). Within this view of 'fatal impact' there is also a more generalised knowledge that rupture is most keenly felt in town, where it is associated with material inequalities, of unequal access to wealth, technology and knowledge. These are men who are struggling to maintain dignified masculine lives within the political economy of town life—as family providers and community leaders—but who are at the same time unable to seek upward mobility through *kastom* structures, particularly as they have relinquished their important links of land, language, and kinship with their 'home' island communities through long-term residence in town.

Such an analysis might also account for the self-consciously satirical and ironic elements of their performed group identity, seen for instance in the simultaneous incorporation and rejection of a vision of Western-style hegemonic masculinity. This apparent contradiction is seen most clearly in the incorporation of aspects of corporate masculinities, despite a rhetorical rejection of the possessive individualism that such an identity position more usually exemplifies. Despite the apparent fervour with which they forward their arguments and pursue their cause, there is therefore an unsettling sense of mockery and self-parody at play within VAM's collective discourse and practice. This is not only apparent in their replication of women's groups' activities (especially the community service provision of legal advice and counselling) and their use of media campaigns; perhaps even more important to VAM is the performance of an image of masculinity that is informed by the accoutrements of Western capitalism. So, for instance, my first interview with VAM members, which was organised by their Secretary, and also included the Chairman and Treasurer, took place within the offices of the umbrella organisation 'Ni-Vanuatu Grassroots Company Ltd' and was carried out in the manner of an official business meeting. The group can thus be interpreted in terms of the enactment of an ambivalent mimetic performance (cf. Bhabha 1994: 86), one that through necessity self-consciously incorporates the strategies and accoutrements of those very forms of sociality that they seek to reject. As I have already pointed out, it is in fact the women's groups that VAM members oppose that provide them with a practical and ideological model. The group's name, 'Violence Against Men', likewise appropriates and inverts the name of the local women's organisation, 'Violence Against Women' (see above), while at the same time reversing the Vanuatu National Council of Women's male advocacy program, called 'Men Against Violence'.

It is important to recognise that there is a normalised and quasi-judicial side to the articulation of this sense of loss. While I would not go so far as to suggest that such a sense of humiliation might be *required* to affect broader processes of 'culture change' (c.f. Robbins 2005), what is clear is the degree to which the space-time narratives associated with *kastom* and its Others are consciously activated by VAM members as a central framework through which to produce what they see as legitimate claims to the *position* of humiliation and loss. Thus, just as Mele Ravo figures men as embodiments of a simultaneously 'backward' and nostalgically valorised past of 'culture' and 'respect', one that is being eclipsed by the high-flying futures of 'modern' women, rather than placing themselves in a position of impotency, embracing humiliation and loss becomes a source of power.

Rights, *raet* and relations of power

We are living in modern times, where we are seeing fast changes. We are living in an age where people have become aware of their human rights and are rising up to claim those rights. However, all rights and freedom are subject to the respect for the rights and freedom of others. (Oliver Saksak, Santo Supreme Court Judge. Opening address to a Men's Advocacy training workshop organised by the Vanuatu Women's Centre in conjunction with the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, and funded by NZAID and AUSAID. As quoted in *The Independent*, 11 September 2005)

At the centre of this gender debate lies a struggle to define the concept of 'rights', or in Bislama, *raet*. As the quotes provided throughout this article demonstrate, there are multiple and conflicting definitions at play across the discursive fields of that debate. In particular, and as Lissant Bolton (2007: 31) has also illustrated, the concept of *raet* in Bislama does not easily equate to the apparently naturalised terms of Western notions of liberal democracy and individual equality that are implied in the 'rights' of 'human rights'. Rather, related as it is to privileges of status that are acquired through ritual and other social mechanisms, it is primarily understood to be relational and hierarchical. To have *raet* is to hold the power to '*overem*' ('to go over') others; the power to assert one's dominance and impose one's will over others (for an example concerning women's 'empowerment' in Africa, compare Kaler 2001). Within this schema therefore, *ipso facto*, one group or person's 'freedoms' imply another person's 'penalties' (as stated in both the lengthy quote from a VAM member but noted as a 'misconception' by Tor and Toka (2004: 63) (see quotes above). Put another way, 'rights' are understood as the power to define and assert what is 'right' for others, and through such 'rights' people are able to eclipse the agency of others. Thus, opposition to the empowerment of women through 'women's rights' is not only considered justified in so far as it is seen to undermine the 'traditional' patriarchal gender order, but also because it is understood as granting to women the power to control and dominate men, and to deny men's agency.

This discussion of debate surrounding the ideas and activities of the controversial Violence Against Men and Family Protection Centre has shown some of the complexities of understanding and argument that have emerged through the entanglement of indigenous and exogenous conceptualisations of gender relations and rights (and *raet*) in Vanuatu. While in no way condoning the standpoint and actions of VAM, it is important to recognise the degree to which such counter-discourses may articulate crucial ideological and socio-political issues that animate the social life of rights in local contexts. Indeed, their assertion of a linkage between the 'global human rights regime' and processes of neo-colonialism warrants being taken seriously. Indeed, as with the Bislama term *raet*, all

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conceptualisations of rights should ultimately be recognised as operating within dynamic strategies and relations of power.

Analyses that consider the changing situation of gender relations in terms of a narrative teleology of the 'modern' are far from restricted to VAM discourse: indeed they are pervasive in Vanuatu. Take, for instance, the following opening sentence of a Letter to the Editor that appeared more recently in the *Vanuatu Daily Post*:

I am a male human being on this earth and an indigenous Ni-Vanuatu and even though I appreciate a lot of work done by the VNCW [Vanuatu National Council of Women] and their contributions to our very young civilized society or to be civilized society, I have come to realize that the VNCW opinions printed in *Sistas Toktok* are sometimes very negative, offensive to men and tend to imply that women generally are a better species of human beings than their male counterparts . . . [Is it the right] time to pass the [Family Protection] Bill? You are not the only human being in Vanuatu and the time might be ripe for you but not for the rest of the population of Vanuatu. (*Vanuatu Daily Post*, September 3, 2006)

As the above quote indicates, the link between ideas of universal 'human rights' with visions of an enlightened modernity carries the dangerous connotation that to *not* subscribe to those values means consignment to the alterity of *inhumanity*. While not discounting the fact that men are the main perpetrators of violence in Vanuatu communities, in the current climate of debate, where 'human rights' are apprehended as 'women's rights', it is men who find themselves consigned to that space. Further, given the invidious linkage of gender relations to a sense of rupture (of indigenous and exogenous, *kastom* and modern) and the articulation of these terms with an understanding of rights as *raet* (the ability to eclipse the agency of others), it is unsurprising that many men feel alienated from and therefore unsympathetic towards concepts of human rights, much less women's rights, within contemporary Vanuatu.

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