POLITIK IS POISON:

The politics of memory among the Churches of Christ in northern Vanuatu.

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This thesis represents the results of my own research. Where I have drawn on the work of others, due recognition has been made. The text is not longer than 100,000 words.

Michael G. Morgan
ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the ways in which past and present Churches of Christ worshippers from northern Vanuatu reflect on politik (Bislama: politics, political action but also much more). To comprehend what this term means to local people in Vanuatu, we must be aware of the contexts in which it is used, the events and relationships that are its exemplars and the local political economies of historical knowledge that inflect its meanings. To this end, this thesis explores the origins of politik as described by my interlocutors through oral histories about the interplay between their church, state institutions and Nagriamel, a traditionalist movement which emerged on Santo in 1967 and spread quickly throughout the northern New Hebrides. Through an examination of the content of these spoken histories, this thesis suggests that politik is seen to have corroded the unity of pre-existing social groups, such as the church, which is considered by its adherents to be indigenous. As a contingent state of democracy, politik describes the unwanted aspects of modernity and nationhood based on the perceived emergence of hierarchies between indigenous people in the post-colonial state of Vanuatu. Given that the rise of Nagriamel is considered to have inspired the resurgence of kastom where previously it was proscribed, kastom is often seen by conventional worshippers to be something to endure rather than celebrate. Among Churches of Christ worshippers, the conflict between kastom and church doctrine is considered to constitute part of the conflict inherent in politik.

Given that much of the knowledge on which this thesis was based was collected during interpersonal and group interviews, this thesis also explores the creation of political economies of historical knowledge about politik. Through a review of oral historical methodologies and appropriate anthropological theory, it examines the nature of information collected during participant-observation. As this thesis compares different genres of historical information (local, oral histories, national public histories and colonial archival records) it is also concerned with historical methodology.
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INTRODUCTION

*Long komuniti blong yu long Ostrelia I no gat ol problems long saed long politik. Long Vanuatu hemi poison.*

In your community in Australia, there are not all the problems associated with [long saed] politics [politik]. In Vanuatu it is poison.

*Bifo ol man blong jioj oli talemaot mifala se yufala bae yu no fo lem tumas kastom bambae yufala yu karem nakaimas o wan poison. Oli telem se yuyu stap kilim one another. Yu stap poisenem yufala yet.*

Before, all the churchmen told us that, ‘you must not follow too much kastom or you will get nakaimas [ensorcelled] or poisoned’. They told us, ‘you are killing one another. You are poisoning yourselves’.

When ni-Vanuatu talk about politics, they mostly describe practices and events that are seen to have amplified factionalism as a result of partisan rivalries. As a contingent state of democracy, politics, or politik, as they are voiced in Bislama, are seen to embody the unwanted aspects of modernity and nationhood; they are the distinctive burden of citizenship. But to comprehend what politik means to people in northern Vanuatu, we must be aware of the contexts in which it is used, the events and relationships that are its exemplars and the specific local political economies of historical knowledge that inflect its meanings (see below and Chapter 1).

For the purposes of this thesis, a political economy of historical knowledge is a system of symbols and meanings in which information is exchanged, negotiated and seen to have particular currency. I have appropriated this concept to my analysis of local historical narratives about politik to show the ways in which ideas about politik are not abstract but utilised by local people in strategic and practical ways. Although the concept of the ‘political economy of knowledge’ is similar to the way ‘culture’ is represented in contemporary anthropological terminology – both suggest shared

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1 Abel Vora Kwan, former mission worker, Nduindui Hospital. Interview with the author, Bislama. 2 Nov. 1999, Nanako, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.


3 Following S. Lee Seaton and Henri Claessen I use “politics” to describe the ways in which people interrelate within established structures of governance, whether these structures be state-sanctioned, as part of social movements or within church structures. S. Lee Seaton and Henri J.M. Claessen, *Political Anthropology: The State of the Art* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 12. In short, politics is used objectively in this thesis to describe the means by which power is established and maintained and is thus differentiated from politik, which is the Bislama gloss for politics and political action (and much more).
systems of symbols and meanings\textsuperscript{4} – it is used in this thesis to describe people unified by shared ideologies about history (who might not be from the same community, language group or ethnicity, for example). Moreover, given the incredible ethnic and linguistic diversity of Melanesia, the concept of the political economy of historical knowledge offers apt strategies for exploring Melanesian identities without relying on unproblematic assertions of unified Melanesian culture. Following similar logic, this thesis employs the concept of the ‘historicity’, which often appears to be synonymous with the notion of ‘the political economy of historical knowledge’ but which is without the overt implications of practical engagement. ‘Historicity’ connotes those aspects of stories about the past (histories) that convey a sense of authenticity or truth for their narrators. ‘Historicity’ is therefore closely related to the concept of ‘historicism’, which suggests that the past can be known ‘the way it really was’\textsuperscript{5} Logically, then, ‘a historicity’ is a set of ideas shared by people with similar conceptions about historical authenticity who are presumably involved in the same political economy of historical knowledge.

The oral historical research on which this thesis was based was conducted among past and present Churches of Christ worshippers in northern Vanuatu between 1999-2002. As articulated by my interlocutors and documented in this thesis, politik spans several contexts but it is shaped by specific local and regional church historicities. Encapsulated in the exemplary statements quoted above are the major themes explored in this thesis. Politik was used by my interlocutors to describe the eruption of spiteful social relations occasioned by rivalry between contending political groups and the consequent destruction of exquisite or organic moments of relative social cohesion, spiritual redemption and material progress embodied in adherence to Christianity. As articulated in the second exemplary passage, its meaning was grounded in specific references to missionisation and evangelisation. By drawing the analogy with sorcery and poisoning, which were practices proscribed by the Churches of Christ after its arrival in the northern New Hebrides at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century (see Chapter 2), my interlocutors shed light on the key issue signified by politik: it equated to a form of social poisoning.

Oral narratives about politik unmistakably evoke social division for Churches of Christ narrators. What is depicted in such oral histories is the breaking down of old


boundaries, the destruction of church strength, morality, progress, the consequent eruption of denominational and social fissure and the establishment of the new hierarchies which are seen to typify the post-colonial state. What this thesis seeks to explore through its focus on *politik* is the historical interplay between local people and the colonial and post-colonial state and between contending groups of local people over proposed forms of government and leadership, whether state or non-state.

Highlighting the ironies of local people’s variable engagements with colonialism in Vanuatu seems to be a more productive strategy than simply asserting a commonality of experience (a singular group history) for all Churches of Christ worshippers or a particular political party. Taking this approach suggests another way of viewing the history of decolonisation through the variable lenses of local historicities. In this way, I have sought to make sense of the ‘multi-layered and seemingly contradictory nature of subaltern polities, cultures, and struggles’ as represented in local oral histories of the Churches of Christ. More importantly, it seeks to sample the ways in which these relationships are constructed and reflected on by local people, to explore the emergence of distinct political economies about the ‘state’, ‘democracy’, ‘church’, ‘Christianity’, ‘tradition’ and their interplay.

Because this thesis seeks primarily to explore the ways local people articulate the effects of *politik* on the church’s operation and membership, it informs discourses on church identity. My interlocutors drew on idioms and analogies derived from Christian education and ongoing participation in Christian life and gave me insight into local constructions of identity and the forces that have shaped the nature of the church, as it now exists in Vanuatu. Documenting the history of the Churches of Christ as articulated by its worshippers goes some way to redressing the relative absence of this church in public histories and academic research on Vanuatu (see Chapter 1). This thesis, therefore, contributes to ongoing discussions of the nature of Christianity as it is lived by Pacific peoples.

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To explore these issues, I have employed an oral historical methodology and contextualise local accounts of the events which exemplify *politik* alongside accounts of the political history of the Churches of Christ, as represented in conventional historical sources: predominantly colonial, state and missionary archives but also in the glimpses of the Churches of Christ contained in the existing literature on Vanuatu. Because the personal narratives on which this thesis is based were necessarily derived from the reminiscences of my interlocutors, the thesis also includes an exploration of memory. Specifically, it seeks to explore the extent to which personal narratives (eye witness accounts) can be extrapolated into conceptions of group history and it discusses, through a review of oral historical and appropriate anthropological theory, the nature of information collected during participant-observation (see Chapter 1). Thus, the thesis raises several methodological queries about the uses of oral and written genres of information for historical inquiry.

*The Churches of Christ and *politik*

To understand the potency of oral histories about *politik* recounted by past and present Churches of Christ worshippers, it is crucial to recognise the specific history of that church and the challenges to its cohesion that were unleashed in the lead-up to independence for Vanuatu. Churches of Christ people, like most ni-Vanuatu, periodise the decade before independence as the *taem blong politik* (time of politics) and represent it as an interval of intense, occasionally physical conflict with unquestionably long-lasting consequences. Yet the origins of *politik* are traced to local events and relationships established before the *taem blong politik*.  

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Churches of Christ worshippers trace the beginning of *politik* to two historical moments. They isolate the emergence of the Nagriamel movement in Santo in 1967 and its effect on the Churches of Christ, after the indigenous leader of the Churches of Christ, Abel Bani, advocated for involvement in Nagriamel. They also identify the decentralisation and devolution of colonial assemblies after 1957 in line with the Native Local Administration Joint Regulation promulgated by the Joint Administration of the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides, which challenged local power structures, whether customary in nature or church-oriented. After the enactment of this regulation, ni-Vanuatu were able to take part in the decision-making processes of state on a level not experienced previously. Decolonisation and decentralisation represented attempts by colonial powers throughout Melanesia to bring the state into closer communication with the societies over which they presided, arguably in preparation for independence. However, for ni-Vanuatu Churches of Christ worshippers, the institution of local government does not always mark the start of emancipation from colonialism but the origins of the ongoing internecine friction that characterises nationhood, that is, *politik* (see Chapter 4).

Because I am interested to document local conceptions of *politik* – to establish what aspects of *politik* are included in local political economies of historical knowledge and for what reasons – this thesis has eschewed an institutional approach to politics that focuses on the contending claims of political groups or establishes uniform differences between groups. Explaining the rise of Nagriamel and its remarkable appeal for Churches of Christ people is a valuable end in itself but uncovering the multiple incongruities and the ultimate pathos of these events as people in the Churches of Christ now construct them also contains the promise of insight into contemporary politics in northern Vanuatu. While Nagriamel occupies a central position in oral histories about *politik* recounted by Churches of Christ worshippers, I am interested in the organisational structure and practices of the movement only inasmuch as they intersect with oral histories told by my Churches of Christ interlocutors about *politik*.

Large numbers of Churches of Christ worshippers became involved with Nagriamel, a putatively traditionalist movement that was in part a nationalist party, a millenarian movement and a cargo cult, after its formation in 1967. Entanglement with the anti-missionary, initially anti-Condominium but ultimately pro-French, Nagriamel movement had religious as well as political ramifications for Churches of Christ people.

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After its foundation, Nagriamel benefited from strong links with the Churches of Christ’s indigenous leadership. Nagriamel’s headquarters in Pentecost, Ambae and Maewo were established in Churches of Christ communities. The leaders of Nagriamel, Jimmy Stevens and Chief Tari Buluk were both baptised into the Churches of Christ in about 1967, although Stephens was expelled the following year.

Significant research has been conducted on the origins of Nagriamel and its emergence as an anti-colonial organisation in which the involvement of Churches of Christ worshippers has been noted. Presumably the Canadian anthropologist, A.L. Jackson, who conducted fieldwork in Vanafo around 1977-1978 collected a sizeable corpus of research materials but for various reasons most of his research remains unpublished. Jackson, however, produced a preliminary paper on the emergence of indigenous political consciousnesses in New Hebrides for the *Journal of Pacific History* in 1970.

In it, he illustrated the rise of Nagriamel and contrasted it with the increasing participation of indigenes in the colonial state, despite the continuing dominance of expatriate interests in the Advisory Council, the sole national representative institution in the New Hebrides until 1974. In 1974, the Office de la recherche scientifique et technique outré-mer (ORSTOM) ethnographer, Bernard Hours, undertook field research in Vanafo, the headquarters of Nagriamel. More recently, Nagriamel’s appeals to *kastom* have been analysed as inventions of tradition.

By the early nineteen seventies, Nagriamel’s leadership claimed 10-20,000 adherents spanning from Epi in the central New Hebrides to the Banks and Torres Islands at the archipelago’s northerly extension. Although this figure was almost certainly

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exaggerated, the Nagriamel movement was unquestionably the most influential local association extant in the New Hebrides until the emergence of the New Hebrides National Party (NHNP) in 1971. The NHNP grew quickly into a modern, nationalist political party led by educated, Christian ni-Vanuatu or actual indigenous clerics. In 1977, in line with its increasingly radical calls for national emancipation, the NHNP was renamed the Vanua’aku (our land) Pati (VP). As local political mobilisation escalated in the New Hebrides during the 1970s, Nagriamel came to be seen increasingly as a political organisation, albeit one which eschewed the nationalist and statist imperatives of the Vanua’aku Pati. Thus, Nagriamel’s policy platform and political raison d’être, as articulated by its titular leader, Jimmy Stephens, were included in the compendium review of political thought in New Hebrides, *New Hebrides, the Road to independence* (1977).

While Nagriamel began in response to a specific instance of land alienation in Espiritu Santo, it was quickly yoked to broad anti-colonial sentiments among local people in the northern New Hebrides (see chapters 3 and 4). Yet from the early 1970s onwards, Nagriamel was also increasingly closely linked with French commercial interests in Espiritu Santo and, later, property developers and *agents provocateurs* associated with the American libertarian Phoenix Foundation, based in Nevada. Thus, when Nagriamel was eventually involved in a secessionist rebellion in 1980, further research was conducted which focused on the subversion of Nagriamel’s initial plan to defend local people against the alienation of their land by western, and predominantly French, ranchers in the late 1960s, to one which arguably furthered colonialist (French) or neo-colonialist (Phoenix Foundation) agendas.

The interplay between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ led to strident contestations over church doctrine. Politically, many of the church’s indigenous lay leaders and many of its adherents supported Nagriamel’s initial precepts and they appropriated its message as their own. Specifically, the return of alienated land and resistance to colonial incursions fitted well with the informal canon of the Churches of Christ: involvement with the Anglo-French Condominium always resulted in disaster for local people (see chapters 2 and 4). Consequently, at independence in 1980, many ni-Vanuatu Churches of Christ worshippers became embroiled in the Santo Rebellion.


in which Nagriamel was a key constituent. Although Churches of Christ doctrine prohibited participation in traditional practices because they invoked the heathen past, Nagriamel members often sought self-consciously to reinvigorate *kastom* (actual customary practices presumed to be indigenous).\(^{17}\) Indeed, while involvement with Nagriamel did not necessarily involve the abandonment of Biblical teachings, many conventional Churches of Christ worshippers now consider Nagriamel to have been undeniably Satanic (see Chapter 3). Thus, although the uprising was easily suppressed in 1980, it left lasting political, social and religious legacies for the Churches of Christ (see Chapter 5).

**Antecedent research**

The ideas that inspired this thesis were first expounded in a paper presented by the anthropologist Robert Tonkinson to the 52nd Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) conference, held at Macquarie University, in 1982.\(^{18}\) In it, he hinted at the ambivalent position adopted by his interlocutors – South East Ambrymese Presbyterians – to ‘politics’ across Vanuatu and articulated optimism that ‘policies and plans’ would eventually take the place of ‘conflict and argument’ in popular conceptions of *politik*.\(^{19}\) His paper was never published but it informed his later contributions to discourses on *kastom* and nation and it remains the sole direct attempt to address *politik’s* meaning for ni-Vanuatu.\(^{20}\) However, since 1982 *politik* has been addressed only parenthetically in anthropological research on Vanuatu.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{19}\) Tonkinson, “Politik in Vanuatu”, 10.


Instead, the trajectory of research on nationhood in Melanesia appeared to follow closely the priorities of the newly independent states. For example, contributors to *Reinventing Traditional Culture* focused on the processes by which emergent national elites in Melanesia attempted to engineer novel national consciousnesses for their states, especially their deployment of symbols of traditional authority. Published shortly after independence was won for Vanuatu (1980), Solomon Islands (1978), Papua New Guinea (1975) and Fiji (1970), the collection reflected the contemporary emphasis on national emancipation. In the early eighties, emerging from colonialism was paramount. Mostly, these discussions about statehood and citizenship in Melanesia gravitated towards explorations of kastom and, later, the apparently anomalous fusion between appeals to Christianity and customary practices involved in nation building in the Pacific Islands. Thus, by the 1990s, the apparent weakness of national identities in Melanesia prompted the examination of Christianity as a potential discursive anchor for local conceptions of identity and propelled a further critical contestation of unified nationhood for the emergent Melanesian states. For example, Jeffrey Clark contended that while states generally harness Christianity to the national enterprise, assumptions about the clear alliance between Christianity and nationhood derived from the experience of modern European nations were inappropriate for explaining the emergence of specific historicities in Melanesia; secular nationalisms may not be the best model for understanding Melanesian concepts of group membership. Membership of a Christian denomination opened people to broad international and often highly imaginative networks of membership and support and provided salient identities through which the legitimacy of the nation and the dominance of the state could be challenged, even if such identities did not overtly invalidate conceptions of nationhood completely. Indeed, as Nicholas Thomas and Ton Otto pointed out, people may ‘perceive themselves as members of a nation, and as


24 Jeffrey Clark, “Imagining the State”, 72.

essentially similar to other nationals, without necessarily possessing a loyal or civic consciousness'.26

Since independence was gained for Melanesian states after the 1970s, scholars in diverse disciplines have grappled with the issues of identity, nationalism, tradition and history in Pacific Islands countries, en route to understanding in greater detail the nature of statehood and the particular burdens or privileges of citizenship in the states of Melanesia, now categorised as ‘weak’, ‘unstable’ and more recently, ‘failed’.27

Arguments about the harmony between local and introduced forms of government emerged almost as soon as the question of decolonisation was raised in Melanesia28, and they have not stopped since. In the mid-1980s, Edward Wolfers attached solemn caveats to the probable success of the national project in Papua New Guinea based on its intense cultural diversity.29 Similarly, key local leaders have argued that democratic government is inextricably leading Melanesian people to calamity. For example, a

26 Thomas and Otto, Narratives of Nation, 1.

27 A brief survey of recent anthropological and ethno-historical literature on the state, nation and nationalisms for Melanesia suggests that nationalism is weak, contested or absent. See e.g. Douglas, “Christian Citizens: Women and Negotiations of Modernity in Vanuatu”, 17; Douglas, “Weak States and Other Nationalisms?”; Robbins, “On Reading “World News”; Dan Jorgensen, "Regional History and Ethnic Identity in the Hub of New Guinea: The Emergence of the Min,” in Oceania Special Issue: Regional Histories in the Western Pacific, ed. John Barker and Dan Jorgensen (1996).; Henry J. Rutz, "Occupying the Headwaters of Tradition: Rhetorical Strategies of Nation-Making in Fiji,” in Nation-Making, Emergent Identities in Postcolonial Melanesia, ed. Robert J. Foster (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997). These approaches have in general complemented those of political scientists; see e.g. Peter Larmour, "Migdal in Melanesia," in Weak and Strong States in Asia-Pacific Societies, ed. Joel Migdal and Peter Dauvergne (Canberra: Allen & Unwin; Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, 1998.), 77-92; Sinclair Dinnen, Law and Order in a Weak State: Crime and Politics in Papua New Guinea (Honolulu: Center for Pacific Islands Studies, School of Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Studies, University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001). Larmour and Dinnen have co-opted, adapted and contrasted Joel Migdal’s ideas about weak and strong states in the novel circumstances of Melanesia. cf. Joel S Migdal, Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, c.1988). More recently, policy analysts have conceived of the states of Melanesia as failed. See e.g. Aldo Borgu, "Beyond Bali: Aspi’s Strategic Assessment 2002," (Canberra: Australia Strategic Policy Institute, 2002.), 37, who asserted that Australia “may need to draw on international experience in dealing with failing and failed states elsewhere in the world, to help fashion a new model for our involvement in some countries in our neighbourhood”, to combat the degeneration of Melanesia, “into lawless badlands, ruled more by criminals than by legitimate governments. The problem may already have gone so far that faltering governments and societies are unable to manage their own salvation, even with a lot of outside help.”

28 See e.g. Cyril Belshaw, Island Administration in the South West Pacific: Government and Reconstruction in New Caledonia, the New Hebrides, and the British Solomon Islands (London and New York: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1950)., 76.

former member of the national parliament in Vanuatu and now a regional Non-Government Organisation director, Hilda Lini, attempted to yoke this belief to her calls for the endorsement of a new, more thoroughly indigenous form of governance in Vanuatu: ‘This outdated western system of democracy will continue to corrupt Melanesia, resulting in the continuous uncontrolled crime, violence and poverty [and] ongoing crisis’.30 Thus, given the renewed interest in the operation and suitability of democratic states in Melanesia in light of the recent utter collapse of the state in Solomon Islands, revisiting local conceptions of the circumstances of nationhood in Vanuatu is both timely and apt. The ways that ni-Vanuatu reflect on these issues, glossed in this thesis as politik, however, has received little critical attention.

In its various guises, politik has remained curiously under-explored in anthropological literature. Although anthropologists writing about the New Hebrides/Vanuatu often referred to politik as a generally negative force, they rarely sought to recuperate its broader implications systematically, preferring to represent politik as simply foreign and divisive (see below). For example, Margaret Jolly noted that while the people of Bunlap, south Pentecost, refrained from entering party politics, they saw politik as ‘alien and divisive. They also eschewed the concepts of voting and representative politics, rather than local control by consensus’.31 Bunlap was a special case in Vanuatu/New Hebrides, being a determinedly pagan community situated nearby the majority Anglican, Catholic and Churches of Christ communities that accounted for most Sa speakers in South Pentecost. Jolly’s interlocutors imbued their testimony with an immediate need to justify their defence of kastom from the processes which many of their near neighbours had opted to take part in, which also often involved explicit references to kastom. Indeed, contending interpretations of kastom appeared commonplace.

In drawing the distinction between alien and indigenous modes of social organisation, Jolly situated discussions of politik and kastom within the broad ambit of discussions of Westernisation and modernisation but she threw light on a crucial discursive strategy undertaken by most ni-Vanuatu; they often juxtapose the perceived negative aspects of politik against their ideas about kastom, which convey a sense that kastom furthers consensus and natural order. Thus, politik has been used by academics to connote western-ness, individuality and detachedness from place, in contrast to Melanesian-ness, consensus, community and attachment to place. Hence, the political

30 “Women’s role in the peace process”, Port Vila Presse, 27 Oct. 2001, 1
31 Jolly, Women of the Place, 52.
scientist William Miles, who conducted his research in Vanuatu between 1991-1992, categorised democratic governance – and therefore politik – as negating the ‘natural order’ of control by big-men or chiefs and therefore something to be rejected by local people. Based on field research conducted between 1999 and 2000, the Australian National University anthropologist, John P. (Jack) Taylor, suggested that the moral dichotomy between connectedness to place (a key aspect of kastom) and disconnectedness isanalysed by local people in Atvotvotu, north Pentecost, through architectural features of traditional meetinghouses, or gamali – known more commonly in Bislama as nakamal. Cross supports, gaibulurovo, symbolise men who support their chief and honour local alliances, whereas cross beams that intentionally do not connect, ngaitengelolo (literally ‘support that wrongs within’), characterise disconnectedness to local issues, deceit, embodied as his key interlocutor averred by ‘a rubbish shit man…a politik man…a member of parliament.

In the tendency for academics, most of whom are secular political liberals or radicals, to romanticize kastom while jointly denigrating politics and religion there is a complex interplay between such values and those expressed by local people, including educated indigenous nationalists. Bronwen Douglas has noted that a ‘Radical dichotomy of "Melanesia" and "the West" ... has been a hydra-headed trope in post-Enlightenment discourses from colonialism to anthropology’. This dichotomy, she argued, ‘has also been common currency in modern indigenous public rhetoric, in Vanuatu as elsewhere in the region, but with Christianity naturalized on the "Melanesian" side of the binary divide, to the bemusement of secular romantics’.

Evidently, Christianity was more successful in penetrating interior highlands or exterior islands in Melanesia than were colonial states and was far more thoroughly

32 Miles, Bridging Mental Boundaries, 65.


indigenised (see Chapter 2).\textsuperscript{35} In light of the preponderance of Christian religion in Vanuatu, indigenous members of the Churches of Christ often juxtapose \textit{politik} with the authority of the church and the naturalness and cohesion of indigenous Christianity. Indeed, given that the Churches of Christ are now depicted as indigenous or home grown, \textit{politik} is often portrayed as an external imposition, a practice of white people, whereas ‘Christianity is something universal’, a trans-national association in which ni-Vanuatu can claim membership.\textsuperscript{36}

Ironically, given that the resurgence of \textit{kastom} was so fundamental to the assertion of national identity in the Melanesian states at independence (and therefore crucial to the analyses contained in the \textit{Reinventing Traditional Culture} discourse and its successors), resurgent \textit{kastom} is seen by conventional Churches of Christ worshippers to be a condition of \textit{politik}. That is, those practices thought to be derived from pre-Christian customs and revived by Nagriamel supporters during the 1960s and 1970s are often depicted by indigenous, conservative Churches of Christ worshippers as threatening to the basic tenets of their church doctrine (see chapters 2 and 3) and therefore often something to be endured, rather than celebrated. Thus, one Churches of Christ worshipper suggested that ‘\textit{politik I mekem ol problems insaed long jioj blong mifala. Hemi openem doa long kastom nao fulap samting I kam insaed.}’\textsuperscript{37} [\textit{Politik has made problems in our church. It opened the door to kastom and now many things have ‘come inside’ our communities.}]

Douglas was careful not to adhere to the Melanesia/West dichotomy, a binary she has sought to dislodge in several publications.\textsuperscript{38} The ambiguous positioning of Christianity within the dichotomies she flagged suggests a zone of divergence between scholars and Churches of Christ worshippers. However, \textit{politik} often undermines arbitrary assumptions about the relative importance of Christianity to conceptions of nationhood. As this thesis argues, rather than present stronger claims to identity for

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Ps. James Ngwango, graduate, Banmatmat Bible College (1967), Churches of Christ minister. Interview with the author, English/Bislama. 15 Oct. 1999, Amata, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes. See also Chapter 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Aron Natu, Churches of Christ elder, former Secretary Maewo Local Council. Interview with the author, Bislama. Beterara. 26 Mar. 2000. Tape recording, notes.
\end{itemize}
local people, Christian denominations are seen to be equally subject to corrosion by *politik*. Moreover, because *politik* describes what ni-Vanuatu do to each other, it therefore confounds its demarcation as 'foreign' in terms of the radical opposition of things of 'Melanesia' and those of the 'West'.

While the positioning of *politik* within a West/Melanesia binary is not uniform in anthropological research, the trope of division, conflict and disconnectedness to local concerns is common. For example, Ellen Facey noted in Nguna, Vanuatu, in 1979 that people were generally sceptical of *politik*, although they were open supporters of the majority Vanua‘aku Pati. She posited that *politik* had ultimately negative connotations and involved 'heated argument, efforts to deceive and even incitement to violence of members of one party against another'.39 Facey contended that Ngunese people preferred the prospect of a one-party government under the Vanua‘aku Pati to the entrenched internal antagonism of multi-party representation in Nguna because they feared the consequences of internal community dissent. Similarly, Lamont Lindstrom highlighted cases in which political leaders in Tanna addressed only their own supporters, because opposition supporters wished to ‘avoid hearing rival political statements and participation in distasteful conversational exchange’.40 Naturally enough, the pervasiveness of division as inherent in *politik* has become central to its usage in academic literature. For example, in his *New Bislama Dictionary*, the linguist Terry Crowley construed *politik* implicitly as a harmful force: ‘Projek I no gohed gud long ples ya from politik or ‘the project did not go well there because political divisions are strong’.41

*Thesis summary*

In this thesis, I aim to use the insights gained in these glimpses of local conceptions of *politik* but shift the relative emphasis to allow for the exploration of *politik* in the specific conditions of the Churches of Christ in northern Vanuatu. I seek to show what kinds of divisions were created by *politik*, what pre-existing or imagined communities were corroded and what effect this has had on local conceptions of Christianity, citizenship and modernity. I explore these issues through six substantive chapters, not including the introduction and conclusion.

40 Lindstrom, *Knowledge and Power in a South Pacific Society*, 144.
In Chapter 1, I use the dense mass of oral historical and textual historical methodologies and draw on the insights of anthropology to explore the implications of recuperating what Ranajit Guha termed ‘the small voice of history’ constituted by Churches of Christ worshippers, Nagriamel supporters and so on primarily through an oral historical approach.\footnote{Ranajit Guha, "The Small Voice of History," in Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Bombay, Calcutta, Madras: Oxford University Press, 1996)., 1.} I outline the discourses that informed my methodological approach emerging from conventional history and oral history and outline the actual methodological considerations of oral historical fieldwork, related to authority, representation, subjectivity, reflexivity and transcription.

Chapter 2 introduces the Churches of Christ in northern Vanuatu in contemporary context to allow for my later exploration of oral histories about politik and politik’s origins and effects. In it, I explore the ways in which Christianity has been indigenised and vernacularised by Churches of Christ worshippers by their formation of histories (practised oral traditions, commemorative performances) which foreground the interrelated themes of modernity, indigenous agency and community.

Having established the existence of distinct Churches of Christ oral traditions, I discuss local articulations of the origins of politik.

Chapter 3 charts one of the trajectories of politik articulated by my interlocutors, specifically the damage done to the church based on the fluid interplay between Nagriamel, the indigenous lay leader of the Churches of Christ, Abel Bani, and an emergent cadre of trained Churches of Christ ministers. This chapter begins with an account of the expansion of the influence of the Churches of Christ because of a program of evangelism undertaken under the leadership of Abel Bani, the chapter’s main protagonist. It details his rise and fall, including the emergence of the cadre of trained ministers who still dominate the Churches of Christ.

Chapter 4 contrasts contemporary local oral accounts of the Anglo-French Condominium’s attempts to implement and foster self-government among Churches of Christ adherents in Ambae, Pentecost and Maewo with colonial accounts of the attempts to impose self-government in the New Hebrides. It seeks to reconcile colonial attempts to impose upon local people in the New Hebrides a uniform secular state, in which local people were to take responsibility for their own government, with contemporary reflections by Churches of Christ people on local government, which highlight the damage done to church and community cohesion. It gives special
attention to Abel Bani’s resistance to local councils and the impact of his subsequent decision to support Nagriamel.

Following these discussions, I explore how political economies of knowledge about politik have inflected local oral histories of key events, specifically the Santo Rebellion (Chapter 5) and a series of murders in west Ambae in 1968 which are now recalled as being emblematic of politik (Chapter 6). Necessarily, engaging in discussions about the differences and similarities between local oral histories and national public ones, as I do in Chapter 5, and between local oral histories and colonial archival records, as I do in Chapter 6, raises significant methodological and epistemological questions about the uses and limitations of different genres of historical information. Where these genres are largely compatible, I have positioned them alongside one another to allow for the easy explication of the sequences of events which constitute the beginnings of politik for my interlocutors and show how these events have contributed to the creation of political economies of historical knowledge (Chapters 3 and 4). That is, I use them to contextualise historically local oral narratives about the beginnings of politik and explore the ways in which colonial officers and missionaries reflected on these events and relationships at the time. Where the different genres do not agree, they are juxtaposed to explore their divergent logics of creation, to explore what political economies are at play and to illustrate the ways in which oral histories about politik have been authored and authorised (see Chapters 5 and 6).