

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.

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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.¹

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 folem tumas kastom bambae yufala yu karem nakaimas o wan poison. Oli telem se yuyu stap kilim one another. Yu stap poisenem yufala yet.²

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.³ 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

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

² Chief Cyrus Mue, subversive holder of *kastom*, former Churches of Christ worshipper. Interview with the author, Bislama. 24 February 2000, Lombanga, 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 meanings⁴ – 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’.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

⁴ See e.g. Thomas Barfield, ed., *The Dictionary of Anthropology* (Oxford; Malden, Ma.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997). 98-101.

⁵ cf. Leopold von Ranke cited in John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History, Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (London: Longman, 1984).

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.⁶ 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.⁷

⁶ Florencia E. Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994), 1504.

⁷ See e.g. Bronwen Douglas, "Ritual and Politics in the Inaugural Meeting of High Chiefs from New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands," *Social Analysis*, no. 18 (1985), 60-84; Bronwen Douglas, "Weak States and Other Nationalisms? Emerging Melanesian Paradigms," *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project Discussion Paper*, no. 03 (2000); Bronwen Douglas, "Christian Citizens: Women and Negotiations of Modernity in Vanuatu," *Contemporary Pacific* 14 (2002); Bronwen Douglas, "Christianity, Tradition, and Everyday Modernity: Towards an Anatomy of Women's Groupings in Melanesia," in *Oceania (under Review) (Women's Groups and Everyday Modernity in Melanesia)*, ed. Bronwen Douglas (n.d.); See e.g. Debra McDougall, "Fellowship and Citizenship as Models of National Community: United Church Women's Fellowship in Ranongga, Solomon Islands," in

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*.

Christianity, Tradition, and Everyday Modernity: Towards an Anatomy of Women's Groupings in Melanesia. In Oceania (under Review) (Women's Groups and Everyday Modernity in Melanesia). ed. Bronwen Douglas (n.d.); John Barker, "We Are Ekelesia; Conversion in Uiaku, Papua New Guinea," in *Christian Conversion: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, ed. R. Hefner (Berkeley; Los Angeles; Oxford: University of California Press, 1993); John Barker, "Village Inventions: Historical Variations Upon a Regional Theme in Uiaku, Papua New Guinea," *Oceania* 66, no. 3 (1996); John Barker, "Missionaries, Environmentalists, and the Maisin, Papua New Guinea," *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project Discussion Paper*, no. 3 (2002); Joel Robbins, "On Reading 'World News': Apocalyptic Narrative, Negative Nationalism and Transnational Christianity in a Papua New Guinea Society," *Social Analysis* 2, no. 42 (1998); Joel Robbins, "Secrecy and the Sense of an Ending: Narrative, Time, and Everyday Millenarianism in Papua New Guinea and in Christian Fundamentalism," *Comparative studies in society and history* 43, no. 3 (2001); Joel Robbins, Pamela J. Stewart, and Andrew Strathern., "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Oceania," *Special issue of the Journal of Ritual Studies* 15, no. 3 (2001); Geoffrey M. White, "Symbols of Solidarity in the Christianization of Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands," in *Culture and Christianity: The Dialectics of Transformation*, ed. George R. Saunders (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); Geoffrey White, *Identity through History, Living Stories in Solomon Islands Society* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Michael Young, "Commemorating Missionary Heroes: Local Christianity and Narratives of Nationalism," in *Narratives of Nation in the South Pacific, Studies in Anthropology and History*, ed. Ton Otto and Nicholas Thomas (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 1997)..

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.⁸ 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.

⁸ See Chapter 4; cf. Peter Larmour, "State and Society in Papua New Guinea," in *Modern Papua New Guinea*, ed. Laura Zimmer-Tamakoshi (Kirkville: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1998), 24.

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 1967⁹, although Stephens was expelled the following year.¹⁰

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 1970.¹¹ 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.¹² More recently, Nagriamel's appeals to *kastom* have been analysed as inventions of tradition.¹³

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.¹⁴ Although this figure was almost certainly

⁹ John Beasant, *The Santo Rebellion, an Imperial Reckoning* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984).; Howard van Trease, *The Politics of Land in Vanuatu: From Colony to Independence* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1987)., 159; William F. Miles, *Bridging Mental Boundaries in a Postcolonial Microcosm, Identity and Development in Vanuatu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998)., 107.

¹⁰ Pastor Bill Bulelam, principal Banmatmat Bible College. Interview with the author, Bislama. 4 May 2001. Tape recording, notes.

¹¹ A.L. Jackson, "Current Developments in the Pacific: Towards Political Awareness in the New Hebrides," *Journal of Pacific History* 7 (1972)., 155-162.

¹² Bernard Hours, "Un Mouvement Politico-Religieux Neo-Hebridais Le Nagriamel," *Cah. ORSTOM, Sciences Humaines* XI, no. 314 (1974)., 227-242.

¹³ See Marc Kurt Tabani, *Les Pouvoirs De La Coutume a Vanuatu: Traditionalisme Et Edification Nationale* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002)..

¹⁴ Jackson, "Towards Political Awareness in the New Hebrides", 159; cf. Chris Plant, ed., *New Hebrides, the Road to Independence* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies; South Pacific Social Sciences Association, 1977)..

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).¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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

¹⁵ Plant, *New Hebrides, the Road to Independence*, 35-41, 88-89.

¹⁶ See Jeremy MacClancy, *To Kill a Bird with Two Stones* (Port Vila: Vanuatu Cultural Centre, 1980), 123-139, 140-148; See also Jeremy MacClancy, "Current Developments in the Pacific: From New Hebrides to Vanuatu, 1979-80", *Journal of Pacific History* 16, no. 2 (1981), 25-46; Beasant, *The Santo Rebellion, an Imperial Reckoning.*; van Trease, *The Politics of Land in Vanuatu: From Colony to Independence.*, 127-169, 206-258; cf. Rodman, "Outlaw Memories".

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

¹⁷ Michael R. Allen, "Innovation, Inversion and Revolution as Political Tactics in West Aoba," in *Vanuatu-Politics, Economics and Ritual in Island Melanesia*, ed. Michael Allen (Sydney: Academic Press, 1981), 8fn; See also Paul Monnier, *Histoire De La Mission Catholique Au Vanuatu. Ile Ambae: Nangire-Loné* (Imprimerie de Port Vila, 1987); Chief Cyrus Mue, 24 Feb. 1999.

¹⁸ Robert Tonkinson, "Politik in Vanuatu" (paper presented at the 52 ANZAAS Congress, Macquarie University, Section 25 Symposium: Independence and Politics in the Pacific, 13 May 1982 1982)..

¹⁹ Tonkinson, "Politik in Vanuatu", 10.

²⁰ cf. Robert Tonkinson, "National Identity and the Problem of Kastom in Vanuatu," in *Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia. Special Issue, Mankind*, ed. Roger Keesing and Robert Tonkinson (1982).

²¹ Ron Brunton, *The Abandoned Narcotic: Kava and Cultural Instability in Melanesia* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 157; Lamont Lindstrom, *Knowledge and Power in a South Pacific Society* (Washington; London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 144; Margaret Jolly, *Women of the Place: Kastom, Colonialism and Gender in Vanuatu* (Australia: Harwood academic publishers, 1994), 52; Ellen Facey, "Kastom and Nation-Making," in *Nation-Making, Emergent Identities in Post Colonial Melanesia*, ed.

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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ Indeed, as Nicholas Thomas and Ton Otto pointed out, people may 'perceive themselves as members of a nation, and as

Robert J. Foster (Ann Arbor: the University of Michigan Press, 1995)., 214; Miles, *Bridging Mental Boundaries*, 65.

²² Facey, "Kastom and nation-making"; White, "Symbols of Solidarity in the Christianization of Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands"; White, *Identity through History, Living Stories in Solomon Islands Society*.

²³ See e.g. Ton Otto and Nicholas Thomas, eds., *Narratives of Nation in the South Pacific*, vol. 19, *Studies in Anthropology and History* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997).; esp. Jeffrey Clark, "Imagining the State," in *Narratives of Nation in the South Pacific, Studies in Anthropology and History*, ed. Ton Otto and Nicholas Thomas (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 1997)., 65-90; Young, "Commemorating Missionary Heroes"; cf. Robbins, "On Reading 'World News'".

²⁴ Jeffrey Clark, "Imagining the State", 72.

²⁵ See e.g. Robbins, "On Reading 'World News'", 1.

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.

²⁹ See e.g. Edward P. Wolfers, "Aspects of Political Culture and Institution-Building in Melanesia: Constitutional Planning in Papua New Guinea and the Special Committee on Provincial Government in Solomon Islands," *Pacific Studies* 6, no. 1 (1982)., 85-108.

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.³² 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 is analogised 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, *ngaitegelolo* (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.’³³

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’.³⁴ 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.

³³ John P. Taylor, “Gamali Architectonics”, unpublished ms., 2002, 14; Crucially, *ngaitegelolo* are not errors of construction for people in north Pentecost; they are crucial components in the construction of *gamali*. John P. Taylor, *personal communication*.

³⁴ Douglas, “Christian Citizens: Women and Negotiations of Modernity in Vanuatu.” 8-9. She uses the following works as exemplars: Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (London: Paladin, 1972). Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).; Deborah Gewertz, “The Tchambuli View of Persons: A Critique of Individualism in the Works of Mead and Chodorow,” *American Anthropologist* 86 (1984)., 619; Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington, “On Pepsico and Piety in a Papua New Guinea “Modernity,”” *American Ethnologist* 23 (1996).; Jocelyn Linnekin and Lin Poyer, “Introduction,” in *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific*, ed. Jocelyn Linnekin and Lin Poyer (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990).; Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).; Nicholas Thomas, *Oceanic Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995)., 106.

indigenised (see Chapter 2).³⁵ In light of the preponderance of Christian religion in Vanuatu, indigenous members of the Churches of Christ often juxtapose *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, *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.³⁶

Ironically, given that the resurgence of *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 *Reinventing Traditional Culture* discourse and its successors), resurgent *kastom* is seen by conventional Churches of Christ worshippers to be a condition of *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 '*politik I mekem ol problems insaed long jioj blong mifala. Hemi openem doa long kastom nao fulap samting I kam insaed.*'³⁷ [*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.³⁸ The ambiguous positioning of Christianity within the dichotomies she flagged suggests a zone of divergence between scholars and Churches of Christ worshippers. However, *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

³⁵ John D. Kelly, "Privileges of Citizenship," in *Nation-Making, Emergent Identities in Post Colonial Melanesia*, ed. Robert J. Foster (Ann Arbor: the University of Michigan Press, 1995), 262.

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.

³⁷ Aron Natu, Churches of Christ elder, former Secretary Maewo Local Council. Interview with the author, Bislama. Beterara. 26 Mar. 2000. Tape recording, notes.

³⁸ See e.g. Douglas, "Christian Citizens", 8-9; Douglas, "Weak states and other nationalisms", 7; cf. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 17-18.

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 Ngunes 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.

³⁹ Facey, "Kastom and nation-making", 214.

⁴⁰ Lindstrom, *Knowledge and Power in a South Pacific Society*, 144.

⁴¹ Terry Crowley, *New Bislama Dictionary* (Port Vila and Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1995), 189.

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.⁴² 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*.

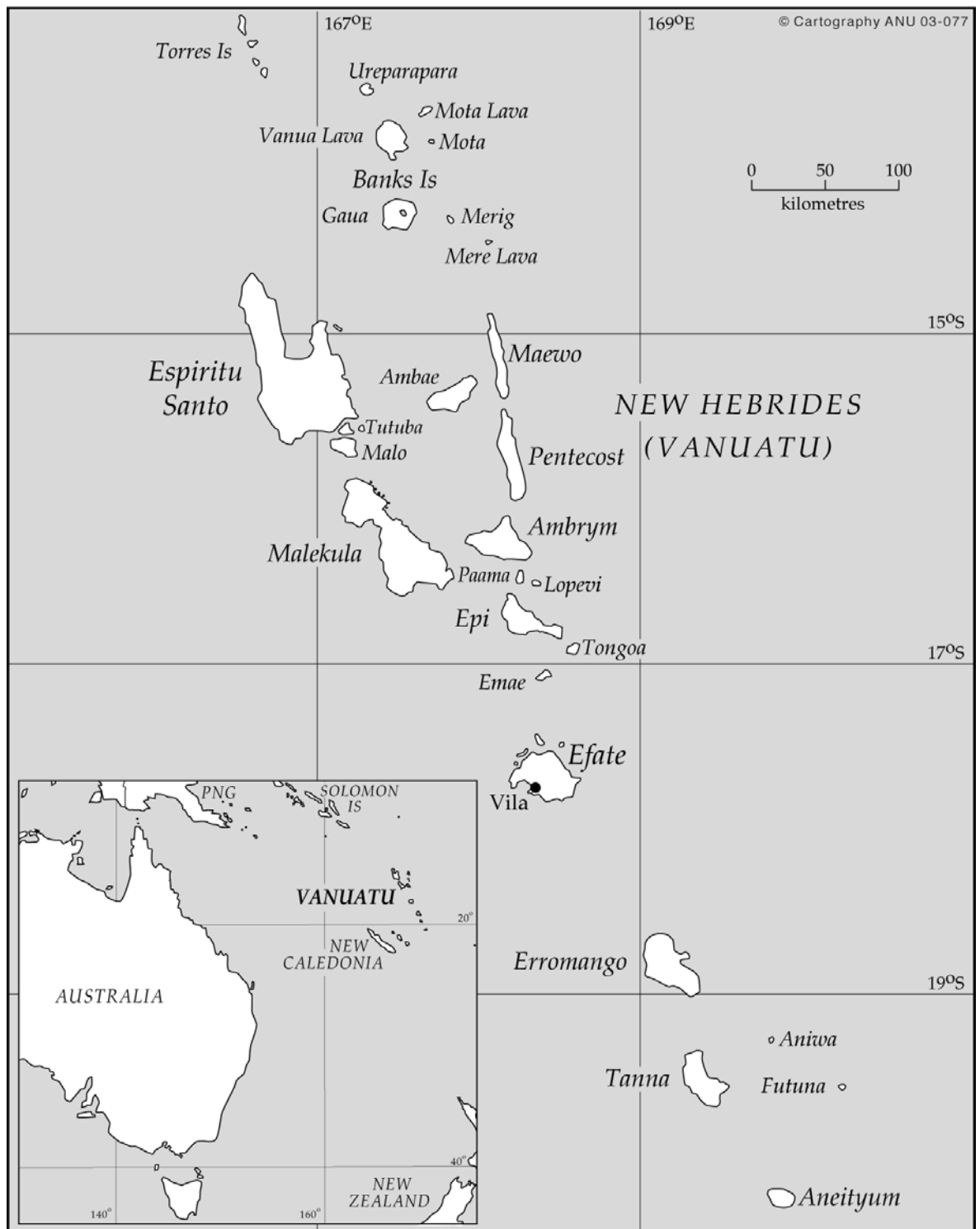
Chapter 3 charts one of the trajectories of *politik* articulated by my interlocutors, specifically the damage done to the church based on the fluid interplay between Nagriamel, the indigenous lay leader of the Churches of Christ, Abel Bani, and an emergent cadre of trained Churches of Christ ministers. 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

⁴² 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.

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).



Map.01 Location Map, Vanuatu.

1.

HEARING THE SMALL VOICE OF HISTORY:**Epistemologies of oral history**

In this chapter, I use oral historical, textual historical and appropriate anthropological methodologies to explore the implications of recuperating 'the small voice of history'.¹ That is, I outline the discourses emerging from subaltern history and oral history that informed my methodological approach and the *actual* methodological considerations of oral historical fieldwork.² This chapter comprises four key sections. First, I discuss the genres of oral testimony recounted to me during fieldwork. Second, I address the issue of the oral history of subalterns in relation to my field research among the Churches of Christ in northern Vanuatu. Third, building on these insights, I address the issues of voice and transcription. Last, I turn to my experiences in the field to discuss subjectivity and reflexivity. Later, in chapters 5 and 6, I discuss the considerations of using oral histories to reconstruct past events further by comparing genres of historical information, that is I compare local oral narratives and national or colonial written ones respectively.

¹ cf Ibid., 1.

² See Lawrence Craig Watson and Maria-Barbara Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, c.1985).; Lewis Langness, *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (Novato, California: Chandler and Sharp Publishers, 1981).; James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American Research Advanced Seminar*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, c.1986).; George E Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1986)., 45-76; Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, eds., *Identity Work: Constructing Pacific Lives* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press by arrangement with the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania, c.2000).; esp. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, "Introduction: Narratives Speak," in *Identity Work: Constructing Pacific Lives*, ed. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press by arrangement with the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania, c.2000).; Geoffrey M. White, "Afterword," in *Identity Work: Constructing Pacific Lives*, ed. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press by arrangement with the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania, c.2000)., eds. See also John Kirkpatrick and Geoffrey M. White, "Exploring Ethnopsychologies," in *Person, Self, and Experience: Exploring Pacific Ethnopsychologies*, ed. Geoffrey M. White and John Kirkpatrick (Berkeley: University of California Press, c.1985)..

Writing the histories of people who have not left their fingerprints directly upon the written colonial record and writing about the histories people recount to each other which are not written down – such as the oral histories narrated to me by Churches of Christ worshippers in northern Vanuatu – have required a pragmatic approach to historical information.³ As a methodology of research, oral history has provided unparalleled access to the reflections of peoples whose experiences remain undocumented. Since the 1960s, this recognition has stimulated oral history projects to document the experiences of women, workers, peasants and queer activists, for example.⁴ Oral history has been harnessed therefore to projections of group experience and has provided a platform from which groups may reaffirm and validate their ways of living.⁵ While recognising the historiographical origins of oral history in projects of emancipation and, equally, recognising its applicability to documenting the experiences of those who have not left detailed written accounts of their own, this thesis is not an attempt to define the Churches of Christ as a subaltern church. Rather, it explores the meanings and implications of local people's accounts of their own lives,

³ Pacific historians at the Australian National University's Research School of Pacific Studies and its successor, the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, and at allied institutions such as the University of Papua New Guinea, have always taken oral testimony seriously as a source of historical information, although their epistemological and methodological styles varied greatly. Initially, the usage of oral testimonies was a pragmatic response to a lack of conventional archival sources and therefore largely conceived of in historicist terms. E.g. Harry Maude suggested that when "the documents are missing; it is only something to be lamented, as the lack of source material would be; it is not a wholly insurmountable obstacle". H.E. Maude, "Pacific History - Past, Present and Future," *Journal of Pacific History* 6 (1971), 7; J.W. Davidson, "Problems of Pacific History," *The Journal of Pacific History* 1 (1966), 5; Michele Stephen, "Continuity and Change in Mekeo Society" (PhD, Australian National University, 1974); Bill Gammage, "The Rabaul Strike, 1929," *The Journal of Pacific History* 10 (1975); Bill Gammage, "Oral and Written Sources," in *Oral Traditions in Melanesia*, ed. Donald Denoon and Roderic Lacey (Port Moresby: The University of Papua New Guinea; The Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1981); Bill Gammage, *The Sky Travellers, Journeys in New Guinea 1938-39* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press; Melbourne University Press, 1998); Roderic Lacey, "Oral Traditions as History: An Exploration of Oral Sources among the Enga of the New Guinea Highlands" (PhD, University of Wisconsin, 1975); Klaus Neumann, *Not the Way It Really Was, Constituting the Tolai Past* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 249. Similar approaches were adopted in African contexts. See e.g. Justin Willis, "The Making of a Tribe: Bondei Identities and Histories," *Journal of African History* 33, no. 2 (1992), 192.

⁴ See e.g. Laurie Mercier and Mary Murphy, "Confronting the Demons of Feminist Public History," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patia (New York: Routledge, 1991); Ann Grodzins Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar, *In the Time of Trees and Sorrows: Nature, Power, and Memory in Rajasthan* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "Telling Tales: Oral History and the Construction of Pre-Stonewall Lesbian History," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁵ See e.g. Lepovsky-Kennedy, "Telling Tales: Oral History and the Construction of Pre-Stonewall Lesbian History"; Joanne Rapaport, *The Politics of Memory, Native Historical Interpretation in the Colombian Andes* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998).

which often included claims to various kinds of subaltern or marginalised status. Moreover, in recognising the influence of 'history from below' on oral history, the thesis seeks to recognise the biases and shortcomings of oral history as a methodology of social research.

Practitioners of oral history have often struggled with the philosophies and epistemologies of authority and representation. They have had to contend with salient critiques mounted by conventional historians that oral histories were simply insufficiently grounded in reality to document the past accurately; the biases and explicit subjectivity of oral narratives appeared repellent to such historians for whom the past could be reconstructed only through archival research.⁶ Ironically, some historians have long acknowledged that history is simply 'an unstable pattern of remembered things redesigned and newly colored to suit the convenience of those who make use of it'.⁷ Each genre of historical information has its own method of creation, its 'own history' and its own conventions that must be considered when evaluating its usage.⁸

Early oral historians sought to demonstrate that oral histories were equal to written archives as sources of historical fact.⁹ More recently, in distancing themselves from positivist epistemologies, oral historians have increasingly explored the subjective and the personal in history, the social contexts in which historical knowledge is created, the

⁶ See e.g. Nancie Gonzalez, *Sojourners of the Caribbean - Ethnogenesis and Ethnohistory of the Garifuna* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 42, 73.

⁷ Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *the American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1932), 235; Carl (President of the American Historical Association) Becker, "Annual Address of the President: Everyman His Own Historian" (paper presented at the American Historical Association, Minneapolis, 29 December 1931).; David Paul Nord, "The Uses of Memory: An Introduction," *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (1998), 409; Bronwen Douglas, "Introduction to the Working Session", "Gender Histories: Reading Pacific Colonial Experience Between the Lines", ASAO Annual Meeting, Auckland, New Zealand, 23 Feb. 2002, personal copy. Douglas argued that histories, or stories about the past, are always comprised of texts, "written or spoken words, memories, performances, objects - which are vehicles for representations of the past, even if the past is one's personal experience recalled in memory". Douglas made these comments as a critique of "atheoretical empiricists" who claim to let history speak for itself as if it were the same thing as the past.

⁸ Ronald J. Grele, "On Using Oral History Collections: An Introduction (in Oral History)," *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 2 (1987), 1.

⁹ See e.g. Jan Vansina, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba-I. Methods," *The Journal of African History* 1, no. 1 (1960), 46-51; Indeed, oral historians continue to debate the relative merits and uses of oral testimonies. cf. Donald A. Ritchie et al., "Interviews as Historical Evidence: A Discussion of New Standards of Documentation and Access," *The History Teacher* 24, no. 2 (1991).

various genres of history and the cultural logics involved in remembering the past.¹⁰ Like allied scholars in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, political science and history generally, oral historians have increasingly recognised that narrative is an important cultural site at which identities are articulated, constructed and deployed relative to one another.¹¹ Clearly, the content of oral narratives is mediated via norms and expectations of what constitutes an appropriate and legitimate story; their topics are ultimately framed by social relevance.¹² Eyewitness accounts always articulate how the teller wishes the listener to conceive of them through the story they recount. They contain images, emblems and metaphors of how the author conceives of others.¹³ They offer fertile information for exploring the nature, characteristics and parameters of individual and collective identities.¹⁴ But taking research interviews to be dialogues with active participants rather than scientific experiments, oral historians, like all scholars involved in participant-observation, have increasingly recognised their own agency in influencing the kinds of histories told. Thus, if the historian recognises that in using oral testimonies, memory has become a major site of investigation, wherever oral histories are narrated, heard, recorded and transcribed, he or she must answer several questions: Who told the stories? In what context were their stories recounted? To what agendas did their testimonies speak?¹⁵

¹⁰ See e.g. Alistair Thompson, "Fifty Years On: An International Perspective on Oral History," *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (1998), 584; Luise White, "Telling More: Lies, Secrets and History," in *'Not Telling': Secrecy, Lies and History, History and Theory Special Issue*, ed. Garry Minkley and Martin Leggasick (2000); Luise White, "They Could Make Their Victims Dull: Genders and Genres, Fantasies and Cures in Colonial Southern Uganda," *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 5 (1995)..

¹¹ Antoinette Errante, "But Sometimes You're Not Part of the Story: Oral Histories and Ways of Remembering and Telling," *American Educational Research Association*. 29:2, no. 2000 (2000), 1; Thompson, "Fifty Years On: An International Perspective on Oral History.", 581; Robbins, "On Reading 'World News': Apocalyptic Narrative, Negative Nationalism and Transnational Christianity in a Papua New Guinea Society.", 1-2.

¹² See White, "Telling more", 19.

¹³ Errante, "But sometimes you're not part of the story", 1; cf. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories, Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), vii.

¹⁴ cf. Watson and Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories: An Anthropological Inquiry*, 135.

¹⁵ See Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 1 (1994), 5; Ronald J Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, 2nd ed. ed. (Chicago: Precedent Publications, 1985)..

Genres of oral history: eyewitness accounts and oral traditions.

Whether oral or written, history is necessarily a group project. In his discussion of culture contact narratives in Hawaii, Marshall Sahlins suggested that history may exist only in a 'community of speakers...[only] in a collective dimension'.¹⁶ Because the major focus of this thesis is to illustrate local oral histories of *politik* among the Churches of Christ – to establish its local historicities – it is crucial to establish the narrative frameworks into which local conceptions of *politik* fit. I seek to illuminate the nexus between the institutional, cultural and personal aspects of remembering the past. That is, I seek to establish what in personal recollections reflects group memory or is constitutive of group history. As discussed in Chapter 6, certain elements in eyewitness accounts reflect local historicities and thus reveal political economies of historical knowledge. However, while questions about the relative merits of eyewitness accounts and oral traditions as sources of historical information have been raised since Vansina's earliest research, little consideration appears to have been given to the nature of the transition from eyewitness account to oral tradition.¹⁷ What elements are maintained between events witnessed and those recounted? In addition, for what reasons do certain themes or elements survive the conversion, while others are dispensed with?

Collectively, personal narratives (eyewitness accounts) about *politik* emphasise social dislocation. They suggest that political conflict has not so much been entrenched between groups in Vanuatu as within them. Taken individually, eyewitness accounts of the events and relationships that exemplify *politik* differ about the nature and effect of that division. However, taking the heterogeneity of eyewitness accounts seriously often challenges us to decentre or dislodge notional group narratives, such as those contained in the oral traditions of the Churches of Christ. The differences between eyewitness accounts of the past emphasise the effect of distortions of memory because two accounts of the same event may differ markedly in form, content and ascribed meaning, although they share key characteristics and basically describe the same 'events'. The collective theme of these eyewitness accounts is that *politik* has corroded pre-existing communities and counteracted the meaning and message of the oral traditions of the Churches of Christ. In short, personal accounts of the emergence and ramifications of *politik* often appear to challenge collective histories.

¹⁶ Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*, Asao Special Publications No.1 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981), 5.

¹⁷ cf. Ballard, "Making History", 2.

Recognising that there is no best way to collect oral historical material,¹⁸ my research focused on oral traditions and eyewitness accounts, although I also refer to speeches and sermons made in Churches of Christ rituals, services and commemorations. While there is a great degree of slippage between these categories of oral history, each also has several basically discernible characteristics.

Eyewitness accounts

The majority of the oral histories used in this thesis were personal narratives of experience recounted in the ninety interpersonal and seven focus group interviews about politics and history among Churches of Christ congregations between 1999 and 2002. I conducted oral historical field research in Penama Province (Pentecost, Ambae, Maewo) and Sanma Province (Santo, Malo) between June 1999 and April 2000 and then on shorter trips in 2001 (Feb.-May) and 2002 (Aug.-Sep.) Most of these interviews were conversations with friends and interlocutors, including seven group discussions (focus group interviews including women and young people), in which participants shared meanings, explored difficult concepts conjointly and sought mutual clarification. These intensely personal accounts of the past brought forth as memories are analogous to what anthropologists have called 'life history' and/or 'life-cycle' narratives.¹⁹

Following the Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli, I adopted an adaptable interview methodology: the techniques and other aspects of oral history varied with the type of person I interviewed.²⁰ Although I entered the 'field' with a basic questionnaire, over the course of my initial fieldwork in 1999-2000, the focuses and ultimate topic were altered in line with local historicities. Thematically, the initial research questionnaire focused broadly on the history of the Churches of Christ. How had it come to the New Hebrides? What differentiated it from the other denominations? What had relations been like with the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides? Knowing that the Churches of Christ had been heavily involved in the rebellion, I also sought to explore the relations between state agencies and communities in light of the attempted rebellion in 1980 and the consequences this had for the communities involved. What changed based on people's reactions were the

¹⁸ cf. Stewart, "Introduction: Narratives Speak", 3.

¹⁹ James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory", 106; Stewart and Strathern, eds. *Identity Work: Constructing Pacific Lives*, *passim*; cf. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, *Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life* (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 1980)..

²⁰ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 582.

relative emphases of my research. For example, the historical span of chapter 4, in which I document and explore the ways local people articulate the origins of *politik*, was defined in line with local historicities, in which the first moves towards decolonisation and devolution mark not emancipation from colonial control, as they can appear in colonial reminiscences, but as the beginning of the ongoing conflict that now characterises nationhood, that is, *politik*. Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate most clearly the potential disjunctures between local memories and national, public histories (Chapter 5) and local memories and accounts of past occurrences contained in colonial archives (Chapter 6). In general, oral historical field research conducted in Penama Province provided the guide for the major archival research conducted at the Nasonel Arkaev in Port Vila, Vanuatu, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Record Division, Hanslope Park, Buckinghamshire (hereinafter FCORD), in the United Kingdom. The conventional archival historical research was often guided by the need to contextualise local memories; to mine the colonial archives for information about the living histories I was told in the field.

Eyewitness accounts have long been criticised as unreliable as historical evidence, even by oral historians. The pioneer oral historian in Africa, Jan Vansina, for example, was vaguely dismissive of eyewitness accounts because their content, he believed, was derived as much from emotion as perception.²¹ Memory, he suggested, could select certain features of events and interpret them according to expectation, previous knowledge or the logic of what must (or should) have happened. He lamented that ‘even the best of witnesses never give a movie-like account of what happened’. Arguably, his critique could have been applied equally to written colonial accounts.

Oral historians have increasingly investigated the imaginative qualities of oral testimonies. As Portelli suggested, in oral testimonies ‘factual recollection merges with symbolic imagination to an extent unequalled by other sources’.²² In certain circumstances, eyewitness accounts offer privileged information about the past: they are uniformly more intimate than written colonial archival sources, they are informed by local aetiologies, cultural assumptions, textured detail, knowledge of personalities, contexts and landscapes. But dealing with eyewitness accounts necessarily raises questions about the limitations of and influences on memory. Peter G. Coleman, a clinical psychologist, described memory as ‘much more than recall of past stimuli. It

²¹ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 5.

²² Alessandro Portelli, *The Text and the Voice, Writing, Speaking, and Democracy in American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 53.

involves emotion, will and creativity in the reconstruction of the past to serve present needs'.²³ Coleman suggested that where memories are represented as being constituted by personal experience and appear atomised, they are still forged through shared patterns of culture and language.

Memories are also dependent on the agendas of their narrators. Slippages in detail contained in eyewitness accounts are often the result of narrative strategies. In the decisions of what to omit, what to emphasise and what meaning to ascribe to certain events, highly personalised themes emerge from eyewitness accounts. Oral histories are often remarkable for the startling claims to personal agency contained within them. I take agency to mean 'the capacity of human beings to affect their own life chances and those of others and to play a role in the formation of the social realities in which they participate'.²⁴ In explaining the nature and effect of *politik*, my interlocutors frequently ascribed causation and responsibility for certain historical events and relationships by deferring to the effects of religious and political doctrine or to the effects of tradition or culture. In Chapter 2, I address the oral traditions of the Churches of Christ beginning with an analysis of the commemoration in October 1999 of the first baptisms in west Ambae during which my interlocutors suggested that conversion came about both through Christian agency (that is, most west Ambae people I spoke to suggest God planned for their ancestors to become Christians) and human agency (Christianity was a strategy they adopted to throw off the oppressive mantle of heathenism and oppose Western imperialism). In Chapter 5, I compare two sets of accounts of an event (a triple homicide) in west Ambae to explore the different logics which inform accounts of the past: one set was contained in the colonial archives and was constituted by investigation and legal reports about the murders; the other was constituted by eyewitness accounts narrated to me during my field research in Vanuatu. One of my interlocutors ascribed causation and responsibility for the Nduindui Murders not to the murderer, Joseph Paul Kokovi, a Christian teacher, but to his estranged 'sweetheart'/fiancée whose alleged betrothal to the polygynist Jimmy Stephens fuelled the murderer's rage. Kokovi was represented as having upheld church principles implicitly while his fiancée is represented as having caused the murders by siding with an agent of apostasy. When describing the actions of members of Nagriamel, Christian ni-Vanuatu often explained their behaviour as the result of apostasy or possibly heathenism. That is, they acted without either Christian or human

²³ Peter G. Coleman, *Ageing and the Reminiscence Process, Social and Clinical Implications* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1986), 2.

²⁴ Barfield, ed., *The Dictionary of Anthropology*, 4.

agency (see Chapter 2). Thus, when ascribing agency or causation my interlocutors often depicted the subjects of their narratives as instruments, rather than agents. I am therefore careful to establish what are my ascriptions of agency and what are my interlocutors’.

Oral traditions

The second genre of oral history recounted to me comprised oral traditions that described events beyond the memory of the narrator which were broadcast widely ‘from one person to another through the medium of language’.²⁵ In this thesis, this genre is constituted primarily by the origin narratives of the Churches of Christ in Vanuatu, especially in the form of conversion narratives. The oral traditions of the Churches of Christ represent crucial claims to (church) community cohesion via an uninterrupted history of shared religious denomination and they depict indigenous agency as fundamental to establishing and maintaining the strength of the church (see Chapter 2). In communities in Ambae, Pentecost and Maewo, church autonomy and community and regional identity are often claimed to be synonymous, discrepancies between narrations of the same tradition notwithstanding.

Because oral traditions require dissemination, Vansina often treated them as the closest correlates to written histories had by oral cultures and, more generally, people who do not document their pasts; they represented the experiences of a group of people and suggested political economies of knowledge.²⁶ Indeed, he sought to investigate the effect of culture on what stories were told, how they were narrated and the extent to which certain narratives were disseminated within a given ‘cultural’ setting. This has provided a major point of differentiation between eyewitness accounts and oral traditions. For example, Vansina suggested that eyewitness accounts ‘do not come within the sphere of tradition because they are *not reported statements* (my emphasis)’.²⁷ They had presumably not entered the collective realm as histories of the group.

²⁵ Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 19; cf. Neumann, *Not the Way It Really Was*, 38, 115.

²⁶ Vansina equated oral traditions with written colonial documents because each contained the biases of the originating authority. Vansina, “Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba-I”, 50.

²⁷ Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, 19.

Persons, cultures and historicities

In his recent examination of the cultural influences on Huli recollections of culture contact in the western highlands of Papua New Guinea, Chris Ballard asked: 'If culture is composed of systems of shared meaning, how and by whom and how widely is that meaning shared? How are fractured, individual memories and experiences rendered first as testimonies and then further formalized as historical narratives? How is history both authored and authorized?'²⁸

Research on the oral histories of colonised peoples originated from the study of oral traditions. Although by no means the first historian to take oral testimony seriously, Jan Vansina was the progenitor of the sub-discipline of oral history for Africa and was arguably responsible for making oral history an acknowledged and legitimate sub-discipline of history.²⁹ His influential *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (1961) based on field experience with the Kuba in the former Belgian Congo set the stage for oral historical analysis by establishing methods for acknowledging a form of historical information in oral traditions.³⁰ Vansina generally sought out oral traditions that fulfilled certain criteria, most notably those that acted as '*magistra rerum*, as a *laudator temporis acti*, or more often still as a legal argument'.³¹ Vansina presumably referred to the Latin phrase, *Magister rerum usus; magistra rerum experientia* or 'Usage (settled traditions) is the master of things; experience the mistress thereof'. By *laudator temporis acti*, Vansina presumably meant conservative

²⁸ Ballard, Chris. "Making History: Event, Memory and Narrative in The New Guinea Highlands", published as "La Barbeque De L'histoire, Evenement, Memoire et Recit Dans les Hautes Terres de Nouvelle Guinee", in *Les Rivages Du Temps: Histoire et Anthropologie du Pacifique*, edited by Isabelle Merle and Michel Naepels, 111-34. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003, 112-3.

²⁹ Oral testimony has been used openly as historical evidence since the nineteenth century. See Paul Richard Thompson, 1935-, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford [Eng.]; New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 40; Thompson's exemplars are Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution*. Translated by Charles Cooks. Edited by Gordon Wright. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1967]); and Baron Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1800-1859, *The History of England: From the Accession of James the Second* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, & Dyer, 1871).. American oral historians name as the founder of their discipline the Pulitzer prize-winning historian Allan Nevins who founded Columbia University's Oral History Research Office in 1948, arguably the oldest and largest organised oral history program in the world. See <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/oral/about.html>. Significantly, each of these approaches to oral history initially treated oral accounts as evidence, that is, as a source of 'facts'.

³⁰ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H.M. Wright (Chicago and London: Aldine and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 19-20; Neumann, *Not the Way It Really Was*, 38, 115.

³¹ Vansina, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba-I", 46.

or traditionalist rather than simply 'praiser of past things'. (His intention was unclear and he did not seek to explicate his meanings further.)

Principally, Vansina was concerned to establish the extent of a particular tradition's hegemony and understand the transition from 'historical event' to 'produced history'.³² He sought to situate oral traditions within cultural context, to establish their origins and evaluate their pervasiveness:

[O]ne has to study the phenomenon of oral tradition first as an aspect of culture. It is necessary to realise the organic bonds which link oral tradition with the rest of the culture in order to assess the influence of culture on every testimony and consequently to judge the real value of the sources.³³

In his analysis of Tolai histories in Papua New Guinea, Klaus Neumann followed a similar methodology because he sought to situate oral traditions within their appropriate cultural contexts. He also explored the historical processes that influenced the content of oral traditions. Building on Vansina's theories and those of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, Neumann suggested that memory is called forth through social frames – the fluid, permeable scaffolding of cultural influences – and he used these frames to analyse the contemporary valence of the remembered past for Tolai people in New Britain.³⁴

Halbwachs posited that memory frames and is framed by membership of social groups: 'institutions, customs and interactions of ideas and especially of language'.³⁵ The various groups in society, he suggested, are capable of revising their histories at every moment; there 'are surely many facts and many details of certain facts, that the

³² Neumann, *Not the Way It Really Was*, 110; cf. Vansina, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba-I", 51. Vansina was aware of the importance of the contexts and contingencies contained in oral history research, albeit occasionally in ambivalent tones. He stated, "a fake can be useful for the history of ideas, but not for the facts it pretends to report. In the end every source can teach us something about the past."

³³ Vansina, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba-I. Methods.", 46.

³⁴ Neumann, *Not the Way it Really Was*, 238.

³⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, "Individual Consciousness and Collective Mind," *American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 6 (1939), 812. Halbwachs specifically challenged the notion of his former tutor, Henri Bergson, that memory was subjective and personal. See Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, eds., *Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory*, vol. 26, *Representations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 4; Cathy Caruth, *Trauma, Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995). The comparative importance of group memory (or collective consciousness) versus personal memory is still contested in several disciplines, not least psychoanalysis. See German E. Berrios and John R. Hodges, *Memory Disorders in Psychiatric Practice* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12.

individual would forget if others did not keep their memory alive for him'.³⁶ The most pervasive and important social frames for Halbwachs were the conventions of language.³⁷

Neumann, therefore, suggested that as those frames changed so too would collective memory.³⁸ He sought to document a distinct Tolai historicity that differed from its antecedents; he was thus not interested in exploring the personal qualities of the oral traditions he investigated. Rather he asserted that Tolai corporate identity was denoted by its attachment to land and the deployment of "traditional" Tolai customs; 'the ideology of *kastom* [is used] to unite a Tolai "nation" often divided by internal rivalries'.³⁹ Neumann assumed that all Tolai speakers would necessarily share the same traditions.

Without recognition of the social contexts from which oral testimonies— whatever their genre – are narrated, the historian might not be able to gauge the valence of the remembered past for the narrator. Cultural factors often determine what events are remembered. Halbwachs and Neumann privileged the importance of cultural norms in determining what is remembered. I return to this point below.

Clearly, their linkages to powerful institutions such as tribes, churches, families or states have extended the hegemonies of certain 'histories'.⁴⁰ Following more closely an institutional model of history and its valence for those who used it, Geoffrey White focused on symbols of solidarity – narratives, objects and performances – in Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands, that he traced to the formation of a unified Anglican Melanesian Mission presence across the island and to the acknowledgement that Christianity had ended entrenched head hunting, warfare and raiding.⁴¹ White noted that while 'such constructions are fragile and open to subversion[,...] their relative success in Santa Isabel is underwritten by the many regional histories of Christian

³⁶ Maurice Halbwachs cited in German E. Berrios, "Historical Aspects of Memory and Its Disorders," in *Memory Disorders in Psychiatric Practice*, ed. German E. Berrios and John R. Hodges. (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13.

³⁷ Halbwachs cited in Neumann, *Not the Way it Really Was*, 238.

³⁸ Neumann, *Not the Way it Really Was*, 239.

³⁹ Neumann, *Not the Way it Really Was*, 99, 199-200, 220-221.

⁴⁰ White, "Afterword", 178.

⁴¹ See White, *Identity through History, Living Stories in Solomon Islands Society*. 6-7; White, "Symbols of Solidarity in the Christianization of Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands."

conversion that valorise emergent island wide identities in localised context'.⁴² Santa Isabel constituted an uncommonly coherent site for historical investigation for White: it was an administrative unit both during colonial times and after Solomon Islands gained independence in 1978. Religious homogeneity and administrative unity were straightforwardly recast as a coherent island identity. These conditions have not been easily replicated in other Melanesian settings and nor, arguably, have they emerged in coherent fashion across the region, as White assumed they would. Both White and Neumann suggested an implicit acceptance of the hegemony of the group histories they explored. White made convincing claims that the coalescence of several factors, including administrative structure and religious homogeneity, amounted to a coherent Santa Isabel identity and there is little reason to doubt his analysis. Undoubtedly, even in Santa Isabel, the dominant discourse of history is subject to constant challenges, the abovementioned administrative and political coherence of the island notwithstanding. Indeed, a shared history need not mean the absence of struggles to gain power over resource allocation and development. And, in the course of such contestations, it is likely that history will be made and unmade in line with these struggles; the unity that White documented so ably might also be open to contestation.

Without acknowledgement of the complex means by which collective histories are interrogated by people, documented oral histories run the risk of being overtly reductionist.⁴³ People structure their worlds not just culturally through shared stories but personally through their own experiences and interpretations of experience. Plausibly, eyewitness accounts allow us to explore how group and personal histories are interrogated; to ask, what are the relationships between personalised eyewitness accounts and group narratives presented as oral traditions? According to Ballard, primary accounts of Huli disputes offered by eyewitnesses and participants provide descriptions of the exchange contexts of warfare

as these structured their personal roles and experiences; and the secondary accounts told by non-participants...recast these events within a conventional *wai tene* narrative format, taking up the analyses of attribution offered in the primary accounts but omitting almost all reference to the conduct of the war.⁴⁴

He suggested, further, that the extant social relevance of *wai tene* ('fight source') narratives defined their structure and made them transactable: 'Great care is taken to

⁴² White, *Identity through History*, 245.

⁴³ See Daniel James, "Meatpackers, Peronists, and Collective Memory: A View from the South," *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (1997), 1404.

⁴⁴ Ballard, "Making History", 15.

name [instigators of conflict] and to place them correctly within appropriate kinship and social contexts, as the ability to attribute responsibility is a pre-requisite for the successful management of post-conflict exchange'.⁴⁵ Like Vansina's earlier mission to place oral traditions within cultural context, Ballard differentiated between narratives that were culturally transactable:

Two important features of the process of rendering particular events more generally transactable emerge from this example. First, the formalization of narratives within the format of a conventional genre is undertaken in the course of communication either with non-participants or over time. Second, the elements of the primary, personalized narratives that are deemed by Huli to be culturally meaningful are those that relate to issues of compensation and exchange.

Certainly, cultural factors determine what constitutes an 'event' and the significance of key events is often culturally contextual. Both drawing on and critiquing Marshall Sahlins' examination of culture contact between indigenous Hawaiians and Captain Cook, Ballard sought to investigate the ways in 'which "happenings" [events witnessed] are continuously reinterpreted over time [and to investigate the] political economies of knowledge that inform those processes of interpretation'.⁴⁶ Using the example of one genre of Huli oral tradition – dispute narratives or *wai tene*– Ballard sought to demonstrate that events gain significance by their emplotment within narrative contexts. Following Deborah Gewertz and Edward Schieffelin, he suggested that cultural narrative norms: 'mould oral accounts...[T]he ways in which people of other cultures typify events and categorize their experiences represent fundamental modes of ordering reality that do not distort the facts so much as define what they are and what they mean... there are no culture-free facts'.⁴⁷ Seeking to dislodge Sahlins' apparently ahistorical approach to narratives of culture contact in Hawaii, Ballard noted that events 'have no existential reality; they are not somehow immanent in the past. Rather events acquire valence and meaning through their position in a relative sequence of other events, their emplotment within a narrative context'.⁴⁸ Taking James Clifford's position that 'culture' is a relational concept, 'an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, *between* subjects in relations of power'⁴⁹, what

⁴⁵ Ballard, "Making History", 15.

⁴⁶ cf. Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom*.

⁴⁷ Gewertz and Schieffelin cited in Ballard, "Making History", 2.

⁴⁸ Ballard, "Making History", 2.

⁴⁹ James Clifford, "Introduction," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus. (Berkeley: University of California Press, c.1986)., 15.

determines these events and what constitutes 'culture' also changes over time. Thus, the process of narrative emplotment is also historically contingent.

These processes can be charted in eyewitness accounts of *politik*. Participants in political economies of historical knowledge formulate and share ideas about the nature and significance of events. Local historicities often revolve around nodes of experience, events or relationships dissimilar to those of, for example, national elites or the authors of colonial records. These points shall be addressed in detail in chapters 5 and 6 through comparisons of accounts of historical events, giving special attention to how and why events or relationships are granted significance, illustrating why some events are de-emphasised and exploring the reasons for their elision or the ascription of apparent historical insignificance to certain other events.

While their narrative forms are, like oral traditions, bounded by the conventions of language, personal testimonies are inherently more individuated. As I shall argue in Chapter 6, slippages often occur in the memories of the narrators of eyewitness accounts: events are telescoped to allow their incorporation into assumedly more compelling or locally credible narratives, into distinct local historicities. In his research on local memories of industrial action in Italy, Alessandro Portelli sought to foreground individual voices in his analysis of the death of the worker Luigi Trastulli who had been shot by police during riots in Terni.⁵⁰ Trastulli, who had actually been killed during relatively small riots against Italy's membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949, was often remembered as having been martyred in catastrophic riots in 1953 that marked the end of union organisation in the town and the end of job security.⁵¹ The significance of the killing was collapsed with the gravity of the surrounding events to make the tragedy locally and historically credible. Contained in the memories of Trastulli's comrades were great slippages in detail, context and meaning: his interlocutors often altered details (possibly subconsciously) of their histories in line with local historicities *and* in line with personal agenda.

Part of this process is a function of the time that elapses between events taking place and events being narrated. Events that were inexplicable or apparently anomalous at the time, when recalled from the present make historical sense as part of a larger whole, even if in the process of remembering certain slippages in detail or timing have taken place to elide or smooth over discrepant or anomalous details. With the benefit of

⁵⁰ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories, Form and Meaning in Oral History*., 1-26.

⁵¹ Thompson, "Oral history", 585.

hindsight, my interlocutors were able to see broad patterns emerging. The events and relationships represented in eyewitness accounts about *politik* gained significance because they fell within the ambit of local expectations of importance, because they were seen to cause or inflect other significant events and relationships or because they fitted within an established structure for the narrator, even if that structure was bounded by the experiences of his or her life.⁵²

For whom the history speaks: Subaltern history and the history of subalterns

Interest in oral history in Western countries burgeoned after the 1960s because of the insight it could provide into the stories of marginalised people, generic categories of subaltern such as women, workers, and queer activists.⁵³ Characteristically, oral historians have been allied closely to particular ideological positions. The development of oral history in the UK was linked to the growing trend in writing “history from below”, inspired by E.P. Thompson’s, *The Making of English Working Class*, in which Thompson sought to free the working class from the “enormous condescension of posterity”.⁵⁴ Indeed, in the United Kingdom, the oral history movement was dominated by social historians whose professional commitments were paralleled by their socialist ideologies.⁵⁵

By following an oral historical methodology that privileged eyewitness accounts of *politik* among regional ni-Vanuatu Churches of Christ worshippers, this thesis seeks to recuperate what Ranajit Guha termed ‘the small voice of history’, to explore how marginal people might articulate their histories and what difference there might be between local histories, national histories and colonial ones.⁵⁶ According to Guha, history’s ‘small voice’ belongs to ‘subalterns’; that is, people silenced by the state (colonial and post-colonial) and its instruments. Taking this broad definition, most ni-

⁵² For examples of the anthropological examinations of the interplay between culture, events and significance see Marilyn Strathern, “The Decomposition of an Event,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 2 (1992).; Edward Schieffelin, “Performance and the Cultural Construction of Reality,” *American Ethnologist* 12, no. 4 (1985)..

⁵³ Neumann, *Not the Way It Really Was, Constituting the Tolai Past.*, 108.

⁵⁴ Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1968)., 13; see also Eric Hobsbawm, “History from Below - Some Reflections,” in *History from Below: Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology in Honour of George Rudé*, ed. Frederick Kantz (Montreal: Concordia University, 1985)..

⁵⁵ See e.g. Christopher Storm-Clark, “The Miners, 1870-1970: A Test-Case for Oral History,” *Oral history* 1, no. 4 (1971)., 72-92.

⁵⁶ Guha, “The small voice of history”, 1.

Vanuatu could be considered subaltern from certain perspectives. However, ascribing subaltern status requires the smoothing over of all internal stratifications other than class. As Jocelyn Linnekin argued, 'Pacific scholars have been reluctant to address stratification and other forms of inequality within Island societies'.⁵⁷

There is no clear emancipatory or political agenda at the heart of this research other than to explore themes in Vanuatu's history that have been elided or ignored in previous research projects. Collectively, the Churches of Christ have not featured largely in historical or ethnographic accounts of Vanuatu by virtue of their relative small size, although they have been mentioned in the corpus of ethnographic information collated by anthropologists working in Vanuatu/New Hebrides.⁵⁸ The anthropologist Michael Allen conducted ethnographic research in Churches of Christ areas in Nduindui in 1959-1961. Allen devoted one article to the ethno-history of the west Ambae Churches of Christ as distinct from the underlying cultural factors, kinship, exchange, rank and political leadership which he detailed elsewhere.⁵⁹ In 1961, he presented a report to the British Residency in the New Hebrides portraying political developments among the Churches of Christ, with special reference to the foundations of elder Abel Bani's resistance to colonial influence in west Ambae.⁶⁰ Margaret Jolly has contrasted Churches of Christ worshippers with their near *kastom*, Anglican and Catholic neighbours among the Sa speakers in south Pentecost.⁶¹ During their research in Longana District of east Ambae, Margaret Rodman and William Rodman

⁵⁷ Jocelyn Linnekin, "Contending Approaches." In *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islanders*, edited by Donald Denoon, Stewart Firth, Jocelyn Linnekin, Malama Meleisea and Karen Nero, 3-36. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 31.

⁵⁸ See also Miles, *Bridging Mental Boundaries in a Postcolonial Microcosm, Identity and Development in Vanuatu.*, 76, 100, 107; van van Trease, *The Politics of Land in Vanuatu: From Colony to Independence.* 156-157.

⁵⁹ Michael Allen, "The Establishment of Christianity and Cash-Cropping in a New Hebridean Community," *The Journal of Pacific History* 3 (1968). Allen sought primarily to document rank, leadership, exchange, among the Nduindui speakers of west Ambae. See e.g. Michael Allen, "The Nduindui: A Study in the Social Structure of a New Hebridean Community" (PhD, Australian National University, 1964).; Allen, "Innovation, Inversion and Revolution as Political Tactics in West Aoba."; Michael R Allen, *Ritual, Power and Gender: Explorations in the Ethnography of Vanuatu, Nepal and Ireland, Sydney Studies in Society and Culture* (New Delhi: 1998)..

⁶⁰ Michael Allen, "Report on Aoba," (Port Vila: British Residency, 1961).

⁶¹ Margaret Jolly, "Sacred Spaces: Churches, Men's Houses and Households in South Pentecost, Vanuatu," in *Family and Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and the Colonial Impact*, ed. Margaret Jolly and Martha Macintyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)., 230; Jolly, *Women of the Place: Kastom, Colonialism and Gender in Vanuatu.*, 37-39, 49-52.

observed and documented certain actions and processes in the Churches of Christ communities there.⁶² William Rodman has latterly published on the revolutionary narratives of 'Nicodemus Wai', one of his long-term interlocutors and a former member of the Churches of Christ.⁶³ Two official histories of the Conference of Churches of Christ in Australia's missionary activities have been published, both of which address the history of Churches of Christ mission work in Vanuatu.⁶⁴ Furthermore, three ni-Vanuatu Churches of Christ ministers have produced theses for admission to Bachelors of Divinity at the Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji, which document theological and historical perspectives on the Churches of Christ in Vanuatu.⁶⁵ An Ambae woman, Nellie Sese, prepared a short pamphlet for the Churches of Christ's Christian Women's Fellowship on the history of women's work in the New Hebrides.⁶⁶

This thesis seeks to investigate the ways in which ni-Vanuatu articulate *politik*, the transitions required by colonisation and decolonisation and the tensions that arose between different local strategies conceived and enacted to deal with these forces.⁶⁷ Many of the Churches of Christ people I interviewed during research for this thesis, were technically without voice and could be considered a kind of subaltern. However, I attach significant caveats to the usage of concepts like the 'small voice of history' and

⁶² See Margaret Critchlow Rodman, *Masters of Tradition: Consequences of Customary Land Tenure in Longana, Vanuatu* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987).; William Rodman, "The Law of the State and the State of the Law," in *Contemporary Pacific Societies, Studies in Development and Change*, ed. Victoria S. Lockwood, Thomas G. Harding, and Ben J. Wallace (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993)..

⁶³ Rodman, "Outlaw Memories". I address Rodman's revolutionary narrative of the Santo rebellion in detail in Chapter 6.

⁶⁴ Keith Bowes, *Partners, One Hundred Years of Mission Overseas by Churches of Christ in Australia 1891-1991* (Melbourne: Vital Publications, 1990).; Graeme Chapman, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism: A History of Churches of Christ in Australia* (Melbourne: Vital Publications; Federal Literature Department of Churches of Christ in Australia, 1979).., 84, 110-111, 162.

⁶⁵ For example, John Liu, "Mission Imperatives for the Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides" (Bachelor of Divinity, Pacific Theological College, 1976)..

⁶⁶ Nellie Sese, "History of the Women's Work in the Churches of Christ in Vanuatu," (Port Vila: CDC, 1993)..

⁶⁷ Cf. Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994).., 1544.

‘subaltern’. Arguably, the most powerless people – the actual subalterns - in Vanuatu are young people and women but neither were the major focuses of my research.⁶⁸

Because subaltern histories have been co-opted to certain agendas and formerly subjugated peoples have been emancipated, subaltern status is not historically immutable but, rather, highly contextual and malleable. Taking ‘subaltern’ broadly to mean those who are marginalised from the regimes of power or without voice, the Churches of Christ cannot be considered unproblematically as a subaltern church - whatever the claims of parishioners in north Vanuatu - because they include a number of powerful and high profile men, including government ministers, heads of government departments, pastors, policemen and so on. While many Churches of Christ people claim a *de facto* kind of subaltern status, the numbers of national elite members within the church makes any such definition of the Churches of Christ as a subaltern denomination highly problematic. Throughout this thesis, the claims to kinds of subaltern status made by my interlocutors are treated cautiously, not least because many were made by relatively powerful local leaders, including national and provincial politicians, whose agendas were to mobilise support for such events as national elections or to chide national leaders for their inaction. Moreover, a common refrain among the Churches of Christ is that the denomination has been disadvantaged compared to other protestant denominations because of the involvement of many of their worshippers in Nagriamel. In these instances, ascribing or claiming subaltern status revolved around questions of calculated demarcation, the establishment of ‘them-us’ oppositions.

It is not the intention of this thesis to adopt the authority to define Vanuatu’s true subalterns. Rather, it is to explore the kinds of representations of power, influence and voice contained in local oral accounts of the history of the Churches of Christ. Many of the people interviewed for this thesis were relatively wealthy, influential or powerful people whose eloquent comments have been included in the text of this thesis. Numerically, however, most of my interlocutors – people with whom I shared ideas in focus group discussions (see Appendix), interpersonal interviews or observed and interacted with using less formalised research techniques (participant-observation) – were otherwise ordinary local men and women who would appear to fulfil Guha’s requirements of subaltern status more explicitly. Certainly, great care was taken to

⁶⁸ Subsequent to my principal doctoral research, I was involved in working with young people. See e.g. Report on the *Governing for the Future: Young People and Vanuatu’s Governance Agenda Workshop*, online at <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/PDF/vanuatuconferencereport.pdf>.

speak to men, women and young people who were not locally powerful. Thus, even if their testimony was not included in the final version of the text, it invariably influenced my thinking about 'history' and specific 'histories' and ultimately influenced my thinking as significantly as the cited narrators' testimonies did.

Moreover, given that this thesis documents contestations of 'history' between individuals, groups and/or institutions, power relationships are carefully mapped in the course of contextualising particular sets of reminiscences. Individual voices within such groups offered diverse, even subversive, accounts of the past. Many women, for example, expressed concern at their treatment by men within the communities in which I worked. Because of this, women may constitute a category of subaltern in Vanuatu, within the sub-sets of particular communities or the Churches of Christ in Vanuatu, for example, because they are marginalised from decision-making on gender terms. However, many women self-consciously aligned themselves with male dominated church elites. Given that women within the Churches of Christ have now attained relatively high office (there are now women graduate-ministers of Banmatmat Bible College), compared with former-Nagriamel members who are politically and religiously marginalised, women are also involved in the marginalisation and disempowerment of men (see below). However, while crucial to any understanding of the nature of Melanesian societies, gender is not the principal focus of this research.

The Subaltern Studies collective was founded to challenge the inability of neo-colonialist, nationalist and traditional Marxist approaches 'to see and hear subaltern insurgents in India as they really were'.⁶⁹ Although it emerged from a historically specific set of circumstances, Guha's conception of subaltern status was rather broad. Following Guha, I also take 'subaltern' broadly to mean people marginalised from the regimes of power: the subaltern is a person or persons subordinated 'in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office *or in any other way* (my emphasis)'.⁷⁰ This ambiguity has allowed the categorisation of peoples or groups as subaltern in numerous historical, anthropological and sociological milieux,⁷¹ although not without contestation.

⁶⁹ Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies", 1496; Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), 37-44.

⁷⁰ Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", 35.

⁷¹ For example, during the 1990s several collected works emerged which appropriated and built on the theoretical frameworks of subaltern studies, allowing "subaltern status" to be applied to myriad categories of politically marginal people. See e.g. Stanley Chojnacki, "Subaltern Patriarchs: Patrician Bachelors in Renaissance Venice," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding*

For example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), an ambivalent ally of the collective, defined the subaltern not simply as a gloss for the oppressed but for those who were outside the dominant discourse of cultural imperialism; those who had no voice. Spivak suggested that a major flaw in the attempts of western academics – she used as exemplars Foucault (who hardly wrote about non-western people) and Deleuze – to address the ideas and experiences of third world peoples was their ascription of homogeneity to the subalterns about whom they wrote. Her contention was that to give collective voice to subalterns, as Foucault and Deleuze did, was to mask local heterogeneity. She maintained further that if subalterns take up the invitation to speak, they become complicit in an imperialistic enterprise.⁷² Allowing western intellectuals to ‘give voice’ to subalterns rather than allowing them to speak for themselves merely reinscribed their subordinate and subaltern status by emphasising the power disparity between western (probably male) intellectuals and the arguable subalterns about whom they wrote. Spivak championed the cause of distinguishing between centralised, elite, statist historical narratives and amorphous, oral, local ones as contained in colonial archival sources. Spivak chose radical, postcolonial, individualistic feminist textual critique. Guha was as much a target of Spivak’s critique of homogenisation as Foucault and Deleuze but both Spivak and Guha sought to find some space for subaltern voices.⁷³ Guha and the main contributors to the Subaltern Studies group shared much of her theoretical and political toolset to different ends; Guha also later sought to problematise the ‘singularity of purpose’ attributed to statist discourses.⁷⁴ Acknowledging that the very term ‘subaltern’ is problematic because it was conceived by Antonio Gramsci and employed by Ranajit Guha and other members of the Subaltern Studies Collective to describe the status of historically specific peoples for specific political ends, I attach caveats to its usage.⁷⁵

Men in the Middle Ages, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).; Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999)..

⁷² Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 280, 292-4

⁷³ Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 284.

⁷⁴ See e.g. Guha’s treatment of P. Sundaraya, *Telangana People’s Struggle and Its Lessons* (Calcutta: Communist Party of India-Marxist, 1972). in Guha, “The Small Voice of History.”, 8-12.

⁷⁵ See Guha, “The Small Voice of History.”; Antonio Gramsci noted “subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a ‘State’“. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 52. Gramsci described the subaltern classes as those subordinated by hegemony and thus excluded from any meaningful role in a regime of power. He sought to explore the interplay between

What unified Guha and Spivak was their mission to recuperate the practices, beliefs and actions of the marginalised and voiceless from colonial archives, necessitating the use of new texts and new methods of reading old texts to drag history away from the articulate and rich towards a more inclusive people's history.

I take up this issue in the next section using anthropological and oral historical methodologies, acknowledging the influences of my argument on the way I have presented oral testimony and the implications of my status as a participant-observer. However, I am sceptical of Spivak and Guha's intentions, not least for their own implicit marginalisation of actual, spoken subaltern voices from the intellectual frameworks within which they discuss subaltern actions and agency. Even for these scholars, who held as their central unifying objective the mission to reclaim history from the colonial and postcolonial elite, the actual *voices* of ordinary people remained peculiarly quiet. While they offered invaluable insights into the mechanics of colonialism and nationalism in India and into certain categories of subaltern actions discernible by reading colonial texts against the grain, the Subaltern Studies collective – and scholars such as Spivak – nonetheless obscured the views and rationales of the subalterns they presumed to free from silencing by illiteracy and by the domination of statist, elite, written discourse(s).

Sharing similar logic but none of Spivak and Guha's reticence regarding speaking to actual people, Alessandro Portelli inverted and recast the opposition between state and local discourses to illustrate the distinction between the emotion and expression of working class idioms versus the middle class voices that had been trained 'to imitate in speech the monotone of writing'.⁷⁶ Portelli often situated himself self-effacingly among the monotone of the middle class. His mission was to set the disparate voices of workers – comrades of Luigi Trastulli – against putatively government-oriented and

subaltern groups and political elites in the formation of autonomous organisations and the attempts of elites to co-opt subaltern groups to their agendas. Gramsci cited in Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies", 1494. Gramsci's project was also central to the mission of the Subaltern Studies Collective, which sought to "demonstrate how in political transformations occurring in colonial and post-colonial Indian society, subalterns not only developed their own strategies of resistance but actually helped define and refine elite options." Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies", 1494. Both these scholars had empowering agenda at heart; they sought to explore the failures of the Indian colonial and bourgeois state (Guha) and the Italian bourgeois state (Gramsci), respectively (albeit at different times) in order to assert the dominance of the state without concomitant hegemony; dictatorship without leadership. Thus, their agendas were political as well as empirical. That is, they sought to explore the possibilities of forming broad class allegiances, which would radicalise bourgeois, proletarian, and peasant equally, and augur large-scale national political transformations. Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies", 1494-1496. The fertile tension between activism and analysis underscored much of the work of the subaltern studies collective and is too complex to detail here.

⁷⁶ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 48

anti-union voices contained in the written record of newspapers, court records and political rhetoric in order to demonstrate how they recollected and mythologised Trastulli's death to personal and political ends.⁷⁷

While Guha and Spivak's conceptions of subaltern status and Portelli's idea of class were historically and politically specific, many of their insights are transferable to the context of Churches of Christ people in Vanuatu. This thesis investigates the experience of arguably subaltern peoples bounded by their shared membership in the Churches of Christ, the smallest of Vanuatu's 'mother churches' whose worshippers often define their denomination as the church of the poor (a claim to *de facto* subaltern status), in contradistinction to the majority Anglican Church of Melanesia (formerly the Melanesian Mission) and Presbyterian Church (see Chapter 2). Many of my interlocutors also situated themselves in contradistinction to statist discourses and the state. I take up some of the issues embedded in the dynamic of state versus local discourses in Chapter 5, in which I address the discrepancies between written national narratives (public histories) and oral local/personal narratives of the Santo Rebellion. Furthering this discussion, in Chapter 6, I contrast accounts of a triple homicide committed in west Ambae in 1968 contained in colonial archives and those recalled as memories by people who were in west Ambae at the time of the murders. However, by contrasting and contextualising personal and public representations of the history of this church, this thesis comments on local conceptions of voice, empowerment, dominance, hegemony and subordination, each of which constitutes a key characteristic when defining subaltern status. Thus, it addresses local claims (collective and personal) to certain kinds of subaltern status and defines actual marginalised people who are without voice in the post-colonial state of Vanuatu; who are some of its actual subalterns (see Conclusions).

Oral to written: transcription and voice

Recognising that in the process of transcription, collation and presentation, oral histories have been altered from their narrated form, structure and context, it is necessary to distinguish between my voice and my interlocutors'. As editor and arbiter of these narratives, I have truncated, overlapped and juxtaposed them to fit my own agenda; that is, to sample the multiple voices which reflect the themes of local discourses about *politik* among Churches of Christ people in northern Vanuatu. To ensure that my translations are accountable, I have included as part of each quote the original Bislama narration. Although much of the tension and texture of narrated lives

⁷⁷ See Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 1-26.

is lost in the process of committing spoken words to written text, as far as practicable I have attempted to capture the cadence of Bislama when translating interviews to English.

It would be insufficient to transcribe oral narratives without meditating on the dilemmas of translating spoken words to written words. Taking local priorities as a guide offers the initial promise of placing subaltern voices at the centre of history. Exploring the ways in which people make sense of their pasts offers insight into the complex means by which they have negotiated individual and collective identities and illustrates the discrepancies between what is emphasised in local historicities and what is emphasised in differently informed and presented reflections on the past, such as written public histories.

The ethical and methodological considerations of transcription and voice have been highlighted in several recent debates within oral historiography and anthropology to suggest that scholars recognise the limitations of representing their research subject's voice.⁷⁸ Like other scholars, historians are empowered by writing (literally, *authorised*) to include one voice over another.⁷⁹ Acknowledging disparity in authority, James Clifford argued that it has become possible (indeed, desirable) to represent research data as the 'interplay of voices, of positioned utterances'.⁸⁰ Thus: 'The writer's "voice" pervades and situates the analysis, and objective distancing rhetoric is renounced'. Where appropriate when mediating the polyphony of voices (including my own) upon which this thesis is based, I have attempted to ensure that the ultimate meanings of oral narratives are not subverted or subdued by smoothing the discrepancies in the personal testimonies of my interlocutors into a more-or-less coherent narrative.⁸¹

Transcription presents other predicaments for historians. By writing down words spoken in contingent interview encounters, they are accorded the artificial authority of texts. According to Klaus Neumann, oral traditions such as those documented and transcribed by Jan Vansina assumed the gravity of scientific fact and were co-opted to

⁷⁸ See e.g. Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elisabeth Vibert, eds., *Reading Beyond Words, Contexts for Native History* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996), xvii; Frieda Esau Klippenstein, "The Challenge of James Douglas and Carrier Chief Kwah," in *Reading Beyond Words, Contexts for Native History*, ed. Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elisabeth Vibert (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996).

⁷⁹ William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992), 13.

⁸⁰ Clifford, "Introduction", 12.

⁸¹ Roger M. Keesing, "Anthropology as Interpretive Quest," *Current Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (1987), 161-76.

emergent nationalist hegemonies in Africa. Vansina aspired to claim for the Congolese ‘a pre-colonial history (for) those whose history had supposedly begun with European colonisation and...the beginning of written records’.⁸² Knowledge thus created was tied to state-formation and used to justify the forcible imposition of often ethnically oriented elites over wider socialities that were themselves colonial constructs.⁸³

The fixity of written texts belies the transience of narratives recounted in oral history interviews. Archival historians have relished that collections of detailed reports, letters and correspondences, for example, allow them to investigate change over time, to investigate the *longue durée*. In the absence of ongoing field research, oral histories may offer only snapshots of historically and contextually specific ideas. They create the illusion of the durability of ideas and emotions, rather than allow for their transition or dissipation.

The corrosion of the unity of the Churches of Christ by increasing, arguably political, factionalisation is foregrounded as a theme in eyewitness accounts of *politik* (see chapters 3-6). Indeed, for many people in northern Vanuatu, the tragic events, internecine conflict and social disintegration characteristic of *politik* occasionally appear more salient than church oral traditions that celebrate the strength of the church and foreground the benefits it has brought. Those oral traditions seldom appear sufficiently cogent to overcome the litanies of disadvantage visited upon the Churches of Christ since the groundswell of *politik*. In transcribing the oral histories used here, I recognise that the overtly negative themes contained in narratives about *politik* do not necessarily reflect transparent nostalgia for the colonial period or the sanctity of nostalgic reminiscences about the nature and effect of missionary activity before independence.

The trope of ‘loss’ is common in oral and written histories, irrespective of the area of study. Comparing writers, rather than oral history narrators, James Clifford has argued that this tendency reflects an ongoing revision of a Judaeo-Christian narrative tradition: ‘Each time one finds a writer looking back to a happier place, to a lost “organic” moment, one finds another writer of that earlier period lamenting a similar, previous disappearance. The ultimate referent is, of course, Eden’.⁸⁴ Yet taking the theme of loss to be evidence of widespread despair about modernity in Vanuatu may

⁸² Neumann, *Not the Way it Really Was*, 107-108.

⁸³ Neumann, *Not the Way it Really Was*, 108.

⁸⁴ Clifford, “On ethnographic allegory”, 113.

obscure the initial rationale for narrating these experiences. For example, Antoinette Errante, an oral historian who worked in Mozambique, suggested that in constructing nostalgic reminiscences about the past, her interlocutors sought to forget some of the present they could do without: the hyper-individualism, inequality, child prostitution, corruption, cynicism, and despair. Their reminiscences, she suggested, possibly marked friendship or other social bonds: 'In the historical context of this present, and among friends, it felt good to remember a time when hope sprang eternal, the future was so bright, and there was a sense of purpose and unity'.⁸⁵

To explicate this point, I shall briefly summarise a life history recounted to me over several days by Pastor Samuel Vusi, who was, at the time of interview, the principal of Banmatmat Bible College, south Pentecost. During one interview, Vusi recounted the importance of the Churches of Christ's training institutions, especially its technical colleges and hospitals, and emphasised that his education in Churches of Christ schools had allowed him uncommon access to further education: Vusi is one of three ni-Vanuatu ministers of the Churches of Christ who have attained a Bachelor of Divinity at the Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji. When I interviewed him in 1999, his confidence in Westminster-style democracy had evaporated. While his qualified support for independence in 1980 obscured the complex grievances he had with his own family, his optimism with respect to national politicians – and ultimately independence – had faded. The burdens of citizenship had brought for him a profound sense of loss. Churches of Christ institutions such as Nduindui Hospital in west Ambae had been downgraded. Community cohesion had been corroded by the eruption of poisonous social relations occasioned by political rivalry. In addition, the most visible progeny of independence were profligate and opportunistic politicians: 'We elected these people to free us', he told me, 'and all they do is oppress us'.⁸⁶

Vusi constructed a clear distinction between past and present. After the later 1960s, in contrast to his six brothers, he had refused to join the putatively traditionalist Nagriamel movement and had also baulked at political partisanship, considering it incompatible with his position as clergyman. Despite the deep community divisions and recriminations which beleaguered the Churches of Christ, he welcomed independence in 1980 as the natural fulfilment of the local struggle against colonial ambivalence and the right of independent, indigenous Christians to choose their own

⁸⁵ Errante, "But Sometimes You're Not Part of the Story", 14.

⁸⁶ Samuel Vusi, Principal, Banmatmat Bible College. Interview with the author, English. 16 Aug. 1999, Banmatmat Bible College, south Pentecost. Tape recording, notes.

path. Thus, on 30 July 1980, he had read the dedication prayer at the opening Vanuatu's national parliament. Nonetheless, he articulated some nostalgia for the colonial period. After all, there were better educational opportunities for local people and strong, responsive local church institutions.

Focusing on the parlous condition of *politik* in the present while simultaneously emphasising the positive aspects of the mission-led past draws parallels to Jeffrey Clark's reflections on Wiru people, Papua New Guinea. In many of the oral histories I was narrated, my interlocutors contrasted the negative aspects of the present with the positive aspects of the past to signify the existence of an earlier period in which possibilities were infinite.⁸⁷ Clark suggested that when his Koliri interlocutors evinced melancholy for the lost colonial period it was not because of a love of Australian control but longing for general equality between 'Blacks' and a return to the 'infinite possibility' of being saved (by Christianity) and still have 'time and future' to look forward to.⁸⁸ These dynamics underscored many of the nostalgic reflections narrated to me on the past of the Churches of Christ in which the strength of its institutions and the cohesion of its communities in shared Christian faith is emphasised. While many of the achievements of the Churches of Christ, such as the hydroelectric scheme in Nasawa, Maewo, were indeed remarkable, the production of local oral histories which depict an organic, exquisite past often speaks to the local belief in the establishment of new hierarchies in post-colonial Vanuatu between ni-Vanuatu (see Conclusions). Ironically, in making subalterns of all (or most) ni-Vanuatu, colonialism allowed the construction of ideas of relative equality between local people. In this respect, positive accounts of the colonial or mission past amount to implicit critiques of the modern state of Vanuatu. References to the virtue of colonial rule (such as that documented by Jeffrey

⁸⁷ While their narratives were not the major focus of the present research, young ni-Vanuatu articulate similar reservations about *politik*: they consider it a divisive force and those who practise *politik* are reputed for the ease with which they deceive. See e.g. Michael Morgan, 'Disentangling kastom law and social justice', *Development Bulletin (Young People and Development)*, No. 56, October 2001, 58-62; *Report on the Governing for the Future: Young People and Vanuatu's Governance Agenda Workshop*, online at <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/melanesia/PDF/vanuatuconferencereport.pdf>. Yet, without knowledge of the pre-independence era, young people – another component category of the 'small voice of history' – do not commonly talk about lost opportunity, about the loss of innocence, that independence has entailed. Rather, their testimonies are dominated by questions about the applicability of Westminster democracy to Vanuatu, about the role of *kastom* and the dominance of newer categories of colonialists or neo-colonialists, such as Australian 'governance' advisors, without reference to the memory of possible emancipation from colonialism. Having never experienced the fight for independence, young ni-Vanuatu cannot comment on the opportunities squandered since 1980.

⁸⁸ Clark, "Imagining the State.", 79.

Clark), church or traditional leadership are underpinned by a pragmatic understanding of the failure of the governments elected since independence in 1980.

Moreover, as I shall argue in the next section, negative stories about *politik* are often conceived as local and personal strategies of empowerment.

The frame of intimacy: Oral history, subjectivity and reflexivity

Oral history is differentiated from archival historical disciplines because information is shared in dynamic exchange, in which both parties to interviews might harbour distinct agendas. Collecting oral histories in the field invariably enmeshes the historian in the complications and contradictions of ‘participant-observation’.⁸⁹

My introduction to the Churches of Christ in Vanuatu was provided during preliminary interviews among former Australian missionaries of the Churches of Christ to the New Hebrides whom I had contacted through family connections. Despite a research project which foregrounds Christianity as a central organising principle in Melanesia and in particular foregrounds the experiences of people aggregated around Churches of Christ in northern Vanuatu, I am agnostic. However, my family genealogy includes a paternal grandfather who ministered Melbourne’s Preston Church of Christ and a paternal grandmother who held several positions within the Churches of Christ’s Christian Women’s Fellowship and served as a Christian women’s representative on Australia’s National Council of Women. An entangled family history, therefore, gave me my first insights to local politics in Christian communities in Vanuatu and, more importantly, provided three possible field sites in Penama Province in northern Vanuatu where the Churches of Christ’s main mission centres are located, viz. west Ambae, south Pentecost and central Maewo.

Initially my focus on church and politics, my cursory knowledge of the Churches of Christ in Australia and my family history fuelled the misconception that I was an officer of the Conference of Churches of Christ in Australia whose agenda was to evaluate the performance of local Christians. However, even after explaining that I was a student of history and politics at the Australian National University, local people sought to contribute their largely negative experiences of *politik* to the ‘memory pool’ I was in the process of collating. Partly, having a story signalled group membership.⁹⁰ The negative impact of *politik* was an experience many people considered that they shared

⁸⁹ cf. White, “Afterword”, 175.

⁹⁰ cf. Errante, “But Sometimes you’re not part of the story”, 8-9.

with all members of the Churches of Christ and possibly, presumably being endemic to Vanuatu, signified a nascent sense of negative or banal nationalism.⁹¹

Yet narrating the exemplary events and relationships of *politik* amounted to a remedial strategy for those who spoke about them. Talking about recent political history resulted in framing and reframing those histories' relevancies for an external audience (me). For almost all my interlocutors, contained in the project of recalling the uncomfortable past of political and social dislocation in my presence was the possibility of overcoming the perceived damage done to the church or to individual villages over the past few decades. In a sense, many of my interlocutors stated that it was good to talk such things over because insights (*toksave*) could thus be gained. Theirs was a mission to compensate for social division by 'setting the record straight'. For most Churches of Christ people, then, this project involved the expectation that I would contribute to strategies to reinvigorate the church. Paul Ren Tari, a former politician and church elder, initially summarised his desire to speak to me as a means of developing a stratagem for strengthening his demoralised church, still beset by internal disputes: '*Mebe yu save putum ol findings blong yu insaed wan plan blong mifala ... Long Churches of Christ blong mifala it comes to a question: Hao nao bae yu revivem? Nagriamel i kilim jioj. Hao bae yu revivem*'.⁹² [Maybe you can put all your findings into a plan for us...In our Churches of Christ it comes to a question: How will you revive it [the church] now? Nagriamel has killed [hit] the church. How will you revive it?] According to Graham Tabi, a member of the Churches of Christ congregation in Port Vila, from Baravet, central Pentecost: 'It is important to tell these stories so that we can move on'.⁹³ For Tabi, dealing frankly with the divisions unleashed by and characterised as *politik* was a principled stance aimed at amending internal dislocation within the church. Having taken part in these discussions, therefore, on the understanding that some good could be derived by the people whose stories these were, I am committed to providing both copies of the thesis to relevant institutions and providing transcripts of the original interviews in Bislama to their narrators and whatever photographs were taken to their subjects.

⁹¹ cf. Robbins, "On Reading 'World News': Apocalyptic Narrative, Negative Nationalism and Transnational Christianity in a Papua New Guinea Society."

⁹² Paul Ren Tari, former speaker of Parliament. Interview with the author, Bislama. 18 Aug. 2002, Port Vila. Mini Disc recording, notes.

⁹³ Graham Tabi, Churches of Christ worshipper, medical professional. Interview with the author, Bislama. 11 Aug. 2002, Port Vila. Notes.

As a participant in an ongoing series of contingent encounters, the oral historian must be attuned to the potential motives for giving oral testimony and the relative influences on the testimony given. Underscoring my own approach to oral history was the question: Are the priorities I ascribed to certain pieces of information complementary with the priorities ascribed by the people whose stories they were? Fieldwork in all its genres involves a great deal of negotiation between interlocutor and researcher about relative priorities, about relevant locations and about who is the appropriate interlocutor. The dynamism of sharing information in this way underscores the importance of the context of the interview for the types of information shared. Geoffrey White, for example, has noted that when educated women researchers interview uneducated local women in developing countries, education might become a major theme because it ‘very likely embodies some aspect of [the interlocutors’] valued or desired identity’.⁹⁴ He suggests that the ‘presence’ and friendships made between interlocutors created what amounts to a powerful frame for memory.

As my research project gravitated towards documenting local conceptions of *politik* – to the narrations of the events that constitute *politik* – among the Churches of Christ my interlocutors often drew comparisons with my experiences and understandings of politics (*politik*) in Australia. What similarities and comparisons did they draw from these encounters? In several instances, they sought meaning, stories and factual clarification from me; they drew comparisons between their experiences of *politik* and their assumptions about the effect of *politik* in Australia. For example, my friend Abel Vora Kwan stated, ‘*Long komuniti blong yu long Ostrelia I no gat ol problems long saed long politik. Long Vanuatu hemi poison*’.⁹⁵ [In your community in Australia, there are not all the problems associated with [*long saed*] politics [*politik*]. In Vanuatu it is poison.] His comments have been used as the general organising principle for this thesis because, taken from the perspective of a Christian ni-Vanuatu steeped in the history of his church and Christian education, they encapsulate the nature of *politik* (see introduction) but the way in which that information was conveyed also speaks to the dynamism of the interview process.

To develop this point I will briefly compare the research findings about *politik* of the anthropologist Ron Brunton with my own. Brunton noted that pagan people in the Irakik area of Tanna greeted the formation of political parties in the 1970s (the

⁹⁴ White, “Afterword”, 183.

⁹⁵ Abel Vora Kwan, former mission worker, Nduindui Hospital. Interview with the author, Bislama. 2 Nov. 1999, Nanako, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.

beginning of a kind of *politik*) sceptically: 'parties are okay for you white people. You can deal with them. You do not always disagree amongst yourselves'.⁹⁶ He interpreted the negative connotations of *politik* as founded on Tannese people's envy of western social organisation, harmony and capacity to work in unison. What they reflected more, I suspect, was a reflexive lament for ongoing local political conflict. As Brunton assumed, at face value *politik* contained elements of reflexive and negative self-assessment for many ni-Vanuatu. For example, a former Nagriamel man and defector from the Churches of Christ stated:

*Taem ol blakman i tek pat long politik ia i no gud. Mi ting se yufala ol waetman taem we yu folem wan pati olsem mo brata hem tu i folem wan pati blong hem wan. Yufala i brata yet. I no [olsem long] mifala. Sipos mifala [ol blakman] go long wan pati yumi evriwan mas go nao. Naoia i luk olsem se ating ol man i realisem se wanem nao politik.*⁹⁷

When black men take part in politics it is no good. I think [it seems] that when white men follow political parties and their brothers follow a different party you are still brothers. It is not the same for us. If we [black men] go into a political party, we all must go now. Now it looks as if all men realise what *politik* is.

Clearly, ni-Vanuatu often categorize *politik* as something foreign, probably of European origin, and socially destructive. Yet Vora Kwan invoked more than solely the negative consequences of political animus for ni-Vanuatu when he drew comparisons between the state of *politik* in Australia and Vanuatu. From the perspective of rural Vanuatu, Australia is a country where democracy operates at a relatively high level of efficiency. Vora Kwan assumed that in Australia, politics are not associated with the destructive forces that were unleashed in Vanuatu by electoral politics. Indeed, Australia is characterised by many ni-Vanuatu as a cohesive society and a wealthy and powerful nation-state, which, presumably, Vanuatu might become if it were not humbled by its fractious politics. The visible number of Australian 'experts' and 'advisors required for good governance' in Vanuatu reinforces Australia's affluence relative to Pacific Island states.⁹⁸ No doubt, in this instance, Vora Kwan's comments were mediated by his categorisation of me as an Australian researcher, interested in *politik*: Australia was important as a mutually recognisable discursive anchor, rather than simply representing an emblem of the superiority of Western modes of social organisation, as Brunton assumed.

⁹⁶ Brunton, *The Abandoned Narcotic: Kava and Cultural Instability in Melanesia.*, 157.

⁹⁷ Jacob Tanga, former Nagriamel member. Interview with the author, Bislama. Vinangwangwe, west Ambae. 1 Nov. 1999. Tape recording, notes.

⁹⁸ Vanuatu is currently undergoing a structural reform program sponsored by the Asian Development Bank and bilateral donors. See ADB, "Annual Report 1997," (Singapore: Asian Development Bank, 1998).

The intimacy of the interview situation is such that metaphors, analogies, symbols and emblems were constantly searched for by both parties to find shared meanings and mutual intelligibility. Indeed, this mutuality provided a powerful frame for calling forth memories of the past albeit mediated by the ‘social frames’ in which Halbwachs and Neumann were interested. Vora Kwan’s comments highlighted a key consideration for collecting oral testimony in local settings: it is done in dynamic exchange with interlocutors who often alter their testimony in line with their expectations of what will be comprehensible to the listener, in this instance an Australian researcher interested in *politik*.

Interlocutors also harbour agendas that do not directly implicate the researcher. In their guide to oral history for lay development workers, Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson characterised oral history interviews as potentially ‘dangerously intimate encounters’.⁹⁹ Their intention was to advise caution to development workers using oral testimony to gauge the local valence of their projects: the ‘interviewer’ should allow their interlocutors to speak on their own culturally acceptable terms; the one-on-one interview would possibly subvert the strategic interests of the locally powerful by foregrounding subaltern opinions and thereby offset broader development initiatives. Underlying Slim and Thompson’s salutary warning to fieldworkers were the acute ethical considerations involved in collecting potentially inflammatory testimonies in local settings. Slim and Thompson advised caution in personal interviews to avoid upsetting local elites.

In several instances during fieldwork, I was implicated in local disputes over assertions of ‘history’ when people endeavoured to assert more factually correct accounts of the past during group discussions and then sought out personal interviews to validate or affirm the ‘true version’ of events. The intimacy of personal interviews clearly offered certain people an avenue for articulating their opinions, memories and experiences away from the gaze of the locally powerful. Indeed, the ‘intimacy’ of one-on-one interviews often involved being told determinedly subaltern narratives by people who felt that *their* version (both group and personal) of events had been suppressed or ignored.

To explicate this issue, I will briefly recount an instance where, in the course of a focus group interview, the local minister (an educated local woman) attempted to assert a version of the local history of involvement with Nagriamel. Stories about the rebellion

⁹⁹ Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, *Listening for a Change, Oral Testimony and Development* (London: Panos Publishing, 1993), 5; see also Thompson, “Fifty Years On: An International Perspective on Oral History”, 582.

still provoke heated arguments within the Churches of Christ, primarily because involvement with Nagriamel yielded, according to continuing Churches of Christ worshippers, ongoing negative consequences. Among Churches of Christ worshippers, local contestations of the effect of *politik* are often articulated in terms of the implications and effects of the resurgence of *kastom*, primarily traditional religious rituals such as spirit worship and traditional medicines, which are explicitly proscribed by Churches of Christ doctrine as evidence of apostasy. The characterisation of Nagriamel as satanic by the local pastor provoked one former Nagriamel supporter to denounce this position; he argued that Nagriamel was a Christian organisation, which he later reiterated in detail during a personal interview. In instances where interlocutors seek to clarify what was discussed during group interviews, especially those dealing with tragic actions or those in which actors' motives are still in question, compelling personalised accounts of 'what really happened' challenged the projected group narrative, as recounted by history's arguable victors (in this restricted example, a Churches of Christ minister over a former Nagriamel member). Oral historical accounts of events within living memory can be stridently political and in documenting people's stories acknowledgement must be made of the power relations involved.

Conclusions

Oral histories about *politik* are often laden with critiques of independence, politics and the state and for this reason represent important, if under-utilised and often ignored, resources for throwing light on past political actions in Melanesia. Such narratives can act as forceful ideological weapons but those that claim to speak for groups have the potential to elide or obscure localised hegemonies or local power tussles. The presupposition that the history of small groups will necessarily enshrine and reflect a collection of shared interests or be agreed upon by all those who participated is not always borne out in practice, especially bearing in mind the passage of time and the absence of an institution willing to further a coherent counter-hegemonic history; they do not amount to transparent records of past events. Recognising the heterogeneity of people's memories emphasised the variety of means by which people authored and authorised accounts of the past.

Taking Guha's broad categorisation of subaltern status as a guide and utilising Alessandro Portelli's methodology of situating personal recollections within historical and political context, I have sought to document the voices of past and present Churches of Christ worshippers. In the processes of ordering, structuring, omitting and explaining pivotal to people's reconstructions of the past (their memories), discrepancies between their accounts and those recounted by other people will always appear as to what actually happened and why. Because I have taken seriously personal

accounts of the recent past – personal constructions of ‘history’ – I emphasise the differences between people’s recollections. In seeking to explore the relationship between personal and collective memory about *politik* I have not presupposed assertions of collective experiences, whether these be demarcated by acknowledgment of a specific subaltern class in Vanuatu or, indeed, by a specific Churches of Christ experience, seeking rather to situate all accounts of the past in historical and ethnographic context.

2.

THE SPEARHEAD AND THE HANDLE:**Modernity, indigenous agency and community in oral histories of the Churches of Christ**

This chapter introduces the Churches of Christ in northern Vanuatu in contemporary context and provides a background to my later exploration of oral histories about *politik* and *politik's* origins and effects. To this end, I investigate the interrelated themes of modernity, indigenous agency and community as represented in the oral traditions and eyewitness accounts of the church. By the time of my primary fieldwork in 1999-2000, Christianity had been indigenised and vernacularised for Churches of Christ people by their formation of histories (practised oral traditions, commemorative performances) which unequivocally foregrounded local agency when explaining their ancestors' conversion.¹ More commonly, the conversion narratives in Melanesia represented in anthropological literature have privileged the agency of foreign missionaries – principally Europeans, Australians or other Pacific Islanders, mostly Polynesians – in revealing 'the light' of the Gospel to local people and therefore local people have mythologised them rather than Melanesians as cultural heroes.² Since the 1980s, anthropologists and historians have documented indigenous claims to agency in explaining the arrival of 'the Light' to Melanesia. However, relatively few have focused on local people's agency in introducing Christianity. Rather, they have sought to show how local people furthered the spread of Christianity or adopted the religion and

¹ See also John D. Kelly, "Privileges of Citizenship," in *Nation-Making, Emergent Identities in Post Colonial Melanesia*, edited by Robert J. Foster (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 262.

² See Frederick Errington and Deborah Gewertz, "From Darkness to Light in the George Brown Jubilee: The Invention of Nontradition and the Inscription of a National History in East New Britain," *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 1 (1994).; Neumann, *Not the Way It Really Was, Constituting the Tolai Past*. 82-105; White, *Identity through History, Living Stories in Solomon Islands Society*.; Young, "Commemorating Missionary Heroes: Local Christianity and Narratives of Nationalism."; see also Douglas, "Ritual and Politics in the Inaugural Meeting of High Chiefs from New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands.", 62-63.

practices sponsored by resident missionaries.³ Rather than conceive of conversion as the imposition of practices introduced by foreign missionaries, however, ni-Vanuatu Churches of Christ worshippers principally mythologise their own (relatively recent) ancestors – local people who converted to Christianity in the Queensland cane fields in the late nineteenth century – as Christianity’s carriers and therefore the central agents of change to the new moral order.

The arrival of Christianity signifies ‘a beginning’ in local narratives: it marks a shift in local practices, making available new technologies and transforming the spaces of the islands. Inasmuch as they reflect on the origins of the Churches of Christ, these narratives are also contemporary: they reflect the beginning of practices – the foundation of core principles – that share a continuous connection with the present. They depict the junctures and disjunctures between the pagan past and the Christian present and they contain the ‘powerful promise of future community’ in the form of the post-colonial, predominantly Christian ‘nation’ (-state) of Vanuatu and the ultimate Christian community, the Kingdom of Heaven.⁴ Yet significantly, they also reflect certain continuities, especially because west Ambae Churches of Christ people, for example, structure their conversion narratives so as to highlight the choices taken by their pre-Christian ancestors: as I argue below, contemporary Christians see themselves as redeemed versions of their former, pre-Christian selves. Furthermore, because they name specific local people (the ancestors of living members of the Churches of Christ), oral narratives of conversion are grounded in specific local settings

³ Ni-Vanuatu from many denominations venerate their Christian ancestors as foundation missionaries. For example, while noting the labours of the resident Presbyterian missionary Rev. Maurice Frater, Gerald Haberkorn attributes the evangelisation of Paama to indigenous Presbyterian catechists who began missionary work at the request of local chiefs, who had converted to Christianity in Queensland. Gerald Haberkorn, *Port Vila, Transit Station or Final Stop? Recent Developments in Ni-Vanuatu Population Mobility* (Canberra: National Centre for Development Studies; Australian National University, 1989), 46. Geoffrey White argued that in Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands, “[a]lthough Christian teaching is often portrayed in these stories originating outside [Santa Isabel] communities, the agents of transformation are for the most part Christian chiefs, teachers and priests who are the ancestors of those recalling the history.” White, *Identity through History*, 179-180, 253, ch. 8, en6. The conversion narratives of the South Sea Evangelical Church (SSEC) also honour Melanesians, such as Peter Amboufa, as the principal missionaries (the ultimate carriers of the Gospel). See e.g. Ian Frazer, “Walkabout and Urban Movement: A Melanesian Case Study”, *Mobility and Identity in the Pacific Islands Special Issue of Pacific Viewpoint* 26, no. 1 (1985), 228; Clive Moore, *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay* (Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies and University of Papua New Guinea, 1985), 54; cf. “The Kanakas”, *Australian Christian*, Feb 1893: 41-2.

⁴ cf. Douglas, “Christian Citizens: Women and Negotiations of Modernity in Vanuatu.”, 9; White, *Identity through History, Living Stories in Solomon Islands Society*. 133-156. The “kingdom of heaven” as referred to in the New Testament refers to the Church that Christ would build (Matthew 16:16-19). It is the promise of a Christian community constituted by all those who accept the Gospel.

but they celebrate also the shared principles of adherence to the Churches of Christ. As Geoffrey White argued for the Anglican Melanesian Mission of Santa Isabel, such histories 'reaffirm the distinctiveness and importance of regional heritage, at the same time as they represent the common, unifying themes' of the church history.⁵

Given that they depict the transition to a new moral order, conversion narratives and the other Churches of Christ histories that I document here are ostensibly also narratives of modernisation. I use the term 'modernity' here advisedly: I do not imply that it describes the end-point of an (imaginary) inexorable transition from non-'West'/primitive/communal/traditional to 'West'/civilised/individual/modern but use it as a referent for the things that Melanesians – like other people – do and aspire to do in the present. Following Bronwen Douglas, I suggest that Western and non-Western peoples are coeval and both arguably modern, the relative discrepancies in material wealth and technological sophistication between (and within) the categories of 'Western' and 'non-Western' notwithstanding.⁶ Yet in their own narratives, local people often utilise these stark distinctions (heathen/Christian, primitive/modern) to contrast their own transformations. Crucially, they stress their own agency in explaining these transitions.

The transition from pagan 'darkness' to Christian 'light' is commonly represented in the post-colonial context as the transition from pagan tribalism, with its attendant implications of savagery and violence, to the 'civilised' state of modern Christianity, the future Christian community of Vanuatu (see below). Moreover, the representation of the willing abandonment of pagan practices by early Christian converts in oral accounts of these transitions, the furtherance of anti-tradition agendas by contemporary Churches of Christ worshippers (and the construction of anti-*kastom* narratives about them), the depiction of sophisticated systems of government in the form of church councils and the celebration of mission-led programs of modernisation and civilisation (specifically schools and hospitals) as collaborative projects between missionaries and local people, all speak to local conceptions of 'modernity' and, more importantly, the local importance thereof.

To address these issues, I present in this chapter five glimpses of local, contemporary articulations of the value and meaning of the Churches of Christ in northern Vanuatu.

⁵ White, *Identity through History*, 137.

⁶ cf. Bronwen Douglas, "Christianity, Tradition, and Everyday Modernity: Towards an Anatomy of Women's Groupings in Melanesia", in special issue of *Oceania: Women's Groups and Everyday Modernity in Melanesia* (under review), edited by Bronwen Douglas, n.d., 6-7.

In the first section of the chapter, I document a commemorative festival held in west Ambae in October 1999 in which the theme of conversion was harnessed to a mutedly nationalistic discourse, marking a transition of sorts among west Ambae's Christian leaders from pre-independence resistance to the colonial state to post-colonial acceptance of the hegemony of the nation-state. In the second section, I seek to document the wider conceptions of local agency among Churches of Christ worshippers and the centrality of conversion narratives which privilege indigenous agency in bringing 'the Light' of the Gospel and in particular the Churches of Christ, to the islands that now constitute Vanuatu. In the third and fourth sections, I further my discussions of modernity and local agency by looking at the implications of the Churches of Christ's proscription of customary practices, especially disentangling the implications such proscription had for relations with other Christian denominations (especially the Catholic Marist mission) and the implications that the adoption of this stance by local Christians had on relations with the colonial state. In the fourth section, I seek to show how church councils, begun as a regulatory bodies over local Churches of Christ worshippers, were harnessed to anti-tradition agendas shared by local Christians and foreign missionaries but how they eventually became forums in which local Christians countermanded the imperatives of foreign missionaries whose religion they shared but whose secular agendas they did not. In the final section, I document local reflections on foreign missionary-led programs of civilisation and modernisation *en route* to suggesting that they *both* further nationalist agendas and offer potent symbols of the damage done to mission projects since independence, a theme on which I expound throughout this thesis.

From Savage to Christian Citizen: Harnessing Conversion Narratives to Citizenship in west Ambae

Today, the Churches of Christ is the smallest of Vanuatu's 'Mother Churches', which are the Christian denominations venerated as the carriers of 'the Light' of the Gospel.⁷

⁷ According to the 1999 national census, the Churches of Christ constitute about four percent of Vanuatu's population, scattered primarily throughout Penama Province and Sanma Province in northern Vanuatu but including growing urban populations in Port Vila and Luganville. Republic of Vanuatu, "The 1999 Vanuatu National Population and Housing Census", Port Vila: National Statistics Office, 1999, 20. In Penama Province—where Pentecost, Ambae and Maewo people began to convert to the Churches of Christ between the late 1890s and early 1900s—it constitutes a sizeable minority: the Churches of Christ account for 16.7% of Penama Province's adult population. Results of the 1999 Census: Religion by Village, Penama Province, personal copy. My thanks go to Aleks Collingwood-Bakeo for drawing these statistics to my attention. The communities within which I worked were divided between the islands of Pentecost, Maewo and Ambae (which constitute Penama Province), in Luganville and nearby communities in Santo, and in the capital Port Vila, on Efate. At the time of the 1999 Census, Churches of Christ worshippers were scattered throughout west Ambae, south and central Pentecost, central

They are also privileged by permanent representation on the Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC)⁸, the ecumenical organisation that acts as a national government advisory body on religious matters. While the VCC has often disagreed with national governments over policy issues – particularly the continuation of provisions in the Constitution that enshrine religious freedoms⁹ – its existence owes much to the sponsorship of the state and it enjoys privileged access to the office of the Prime Minister.¹⁰ The Conference of Churches of Christ in Vanuatu has been involved in national ecumenical activities since the early 1960s, prompted by increasing support from the Anglo-French Condominium (particularly the British Administration) for the Conference of Churches of Christ-run educational and medical institutions, such as Nasawa Technical College in Maewo and Nduindui Hospital in west Ambae. Post colony, the VCC has comprised an indispensable linkage between the state and the overwhelmingly Christian population of Vanuatu.

Maewo, in the Santo highlands and the surrounding islands of Tutuba, Malo and Mavea, and smaller communities in Malakula and Tanna, “The 1999 Vanuatu National Population and Housing Census”, 20. In Ambae, the Churches of Christ accounts for 21.6% of the population (2,032 from 9,418). “The 1999 Vanuatu National Population and Housing Census”, chart 2.10 population by religion and island of residence, 94. In Ambae, the largest concentration of worshippers is at Nduindui, West Ambae but smaller clusters of settlements can be found in the districts of Longana (Nanigamo, Luvonvili), Lombaha (Ambanga, Lolovange and Lovuivele) and Lolosori (Nanako, Waisane, Lolovoli, Lolovotali). In Pentecost, the church amounts to 13% of the population (1,846 from 14,057 people enumerated). In Maewo 17.5% of the population are Churches of Christ, compared with the majority Anglicans (73%) and the minority SDA (0.05%). In 1999, nine hundred and sixty (960) worshippers lived on Efate, mostly in Port Vila. Over fourteen hundred worshippers resided on Espiritu Santo, both in urban communities and in regional communities such as Sara, Lavatkaar and Vanafo. The administrative headquarters of the Churches of Christ, Gospel Santo, are on the outskirts of Luganville. In the 1980s two churches were established in Tanna, at the behest of local people who saw in the church the means by which to combat social fragmentation, rampant alcoholism and community infighting. Ps. James Ngwango. Interview with the author. 15 Oct. 1999. Tape recording, notes. A Church of Christ was founded in Wowo in northern Malakula in the late 1950s. Kathy Solomon, Churches of Christ worshipper, Women’s Officer, Vanuatu Rural Development and Training Colleges Association (VRDTCA). Interview with the author, English/Bislama. 15 Feb. 2000, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.

⁸ The permanent members of the Vanuatu Christian Council are the Presbyterian Church, the Anglican Church of Melanesia, the Roman Catholic Church, the Churches of Christ and the Apostolic Church. The Assemblies of God and the Seventh-day Adventist Church are observer members of the VCC.

⁹ Representatives of Vanuatu’s main churches have argued that new Christian sects should be barred from entering the country because there are already too many operating in the country. E.g. In 1982, Pastor Allan Nafuki, a Presbyterian minister from Erromango, stated that “the majority of [new sects] do not enter by the gate and furthermore, a lot of these groups are only concerned about how they can make up their number [with] selfish motives.” The VCC executive later disendorsed Nafuki’s statements. Radio Vanuatu Local News Bulletin 27 Jul. 1982. For an account of the alliances that have been forged between the mother churches in opposition to Pentecostal groups, see Miles, *Bridging Mental Boundaries in a Postcolonial Microcosm, Identity and Development in Vanuatu*. 113.

¹⁰ See Miles, *Bridging Mental Boundaries*, 110.

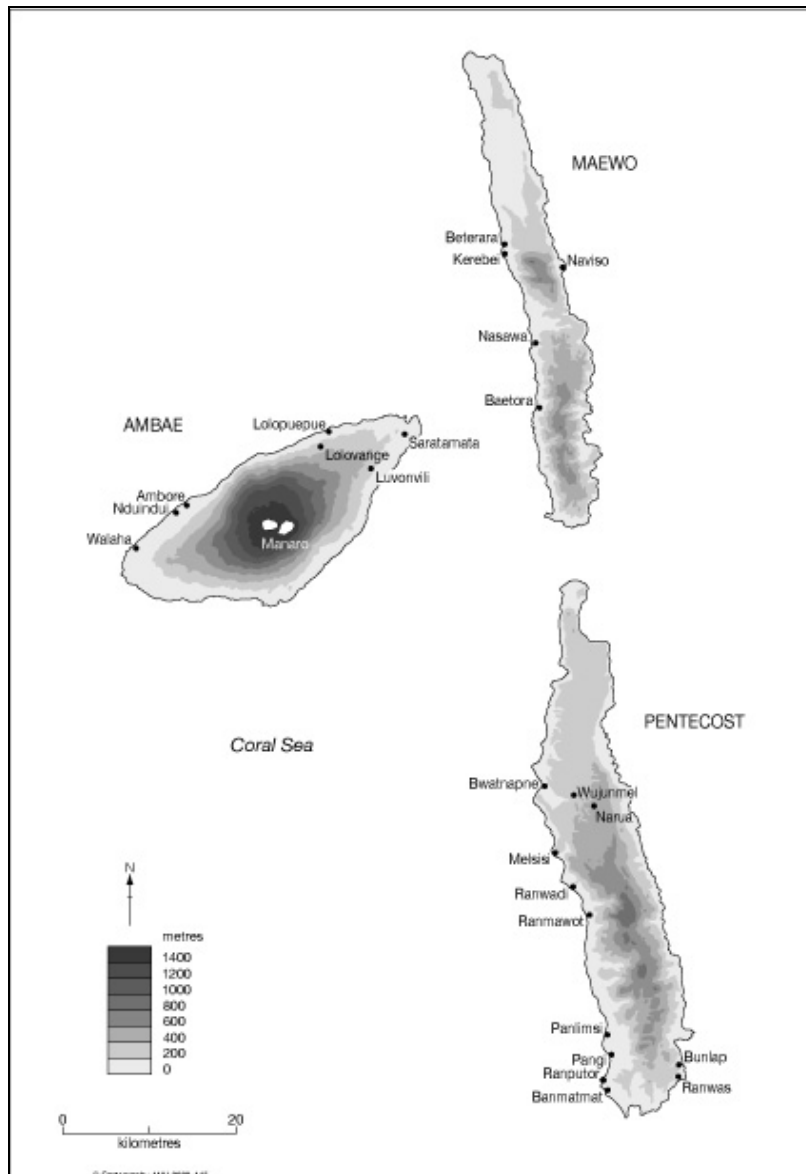
Today, most ni-Vanuatu are nominal if not practising Christians; ninety three per cent of Vanuatu's population claimed Christianity as their religion in 1999.¹¹ Christianity has therefore offered powerful, nationally recognisable symbols of unity for ni-Vanuatu. Indeed, national politicians in Vanuatu have deliberately exploited Christian symbols to project an image of the 'nation' onto the linguistically diverse population of Vanuatu.¹² Moreover, local people themselves access national (as well as regional and global) networks of support through Christian associations.

Throughout Melanesia, specific local Christian 'histories' often appear to have undermined the artifice of the nation by propelling local or island-wide particularisms.¹³ Moreover, among the Churches of Christ, the appropriation of Christianity to the national project is largely a post-colonial invention, linked to the transition of the indigenous leadership of the Churches of Christ from an untrained elder and Christian ideologue, Abel Bani, to a cadre of college-trained ministers during the late 1960s (see chapters 3 and 4). The generational transition was only fully realised after the suppression of the 'Santo Rebellion' (in which large numbers of Churches of Christ people, under Bani's leadership, took part) in 1980. Local Churches of Christ people, therefore, often view the implicit alliance between nationalist rhetoricians and local Christian leaders as highly problematic. As memories of the events and actions of parishioners during the rebellion still reverberate among Churches of Christ people, the hegemony of the nation and the dominance of the state are challenged by lingering reservations among local people about the efficacy, appropriateness and consequences of the national enterprise. Yet local leaders among the Churches of Christ are increasingly inclined to assert that their parishioners constitute a component of the citizenry of Vanuatu.

¹¹ Vanuatu, "The 1999 Vanuatu National Population and Housing Census", 20.

¹² See e.g. Walter Lini, *Beyond Pandemonium: From the New Hebrides to Vanuatu* (Wellington: Asia Pacific Books, 1980)..

¹³ See Douglas, "Weak States and Other Nationalisms? Emerging Melanesian Paradigms.", 1-2; cf. White, *Identity through History*, 245; Young, "Commemorating Missionary Heroes: Local Christianity and Narratives of Nationalism."; Robbins, "On Reading 'World News': Apocalyptic Narrative, Negative Nationalism and Transnational Christianity in a Papua New Guinea Society."; Clark, "Imagining the State."



Map 02: Churches of Christ communities, Penama Province

To explain this transition and its current implications for Churches of Christ people in west Ambae, I document a commemorative festival held in Nduindui in October 1999 at which church leaders sought to harness the conversion narratives of the Churches of Christ in west Ambae to the national narrative. In this section, I draw on the small but excellent corpus of literature detailing the interplay between church ritual and

nationalist discourse elsewhere in Melanesia¹⁴ and the rich theoretical literature on secular and religious ritual that emerged in anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁵

On 25 October 1999, the west Ambae Churches of Christ celebrated the 98th anniversary of the first baptisms in west Ambae with a two-day festival in Nanako, the first Christian community in Nduindui.¹⁶ The commemoration marked the baptism of west Ambae's first Christians in 1901 by the Presbyterian missionary Peter Milne. Throughout the festival, rather than celebrate his actions and agency, west Ambae's Churches of Christ worshippers focused on the agency of their ancestors as the 'missionaries' who first introduced Christianity to the communities that now constitute the Churches of Christ. While the festival was a specifically west Ambae celebration (except for my presence and that of three volunteers working in west Ambae at the time, only local Churches of Christ people attended the festival), it resonated with church histories recounted to me among the Churches of Christ in Maewo and Pentecost. (I take this theme up in the next section.)

Given that the festival was construed by its participants as a re-enactment and commemoration of the processes that led to the revelation of the Gospel to the ancestors of ni-Vanuatu members of the Churches of Christ, the festival (and several of its component parts) constituted secular rituals. Except for the church service that concluded the festival, none of the component parts were religious rituals because participants neither invoked divine or 'mystical beings or powers' and nor did they consider that inappropriate actions or incorrect invocations undertaken during the festival would result in, for example, 'cosmic disruptions'.¹⁷ However, during the service, which I discuss below, the minister and several key lay preachers engaged with the 'all-embracing universals' – to use Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff's terms

¹⁴ Young, "Missionary Heroes"; Errington and Gewertz, "From Darkness to Light"; White, *Identity Through History*, Section III, ch. 7, 8.

¹⁵ See Victor Witter Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publisher, [1969]); Victor Witter Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).; Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, "Introduction: Secular Ritual," in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977)..

¹⁶ A much larger festival was held in October 2001 to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the first baptisms, which was attended by local dignitaries and former missionaries. I was unable to attend.

¹⁷ See Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 19; Moore and Myerhoff, "Secular Ritual", 12.

– of religious ritual.¹⁸ Like most putatively secular rituals, the overall commemoration demonstrated and conveyed certain ‘cultural’ values. Yet its organisers attempted also to assert other values and shape what meanings those values had for Churches of Christ people.¹⁹ Like other formal church assemblies, the organisers used the festival to further a sense of collective social life and shared experience specific to the Churches of Christ; they sought to define what differentiated the Churches of Christ from other denominations. The commemoration constituted an appeal to collective memory.²⁰ While much of the festival was scheduled, many of the commemorations of ‘church history’ were organised by discrete participant groups, such as the Christian Women’s Fellowship (CWF), the principal women’s organisation among the Churches of Christ, and other informal associations, in particular groups of friends or drama groups constituted for the occasion. Sections of the festival, therefore, tended towards chaotic improvisation but others were grounded within recognised, acknowledged and above all regular ceremonial forms. I therefore examine the manufacture, performance and production of aspects of these ceremonial occasions and some of their myriad connotations.

¹⁸ Moore and Myerhoff, “Secular Ritual”, 11. In addition to being religious rituals, however, church services among the Churches of Christ have often also fulfilled certain secular functions, particularly the dissemination of information or the advocacy of certain programs which the clergy support. For example, British colonial records suggest that Churches of Christ ministers advocated for local councils from the pulpit. See Chapter 4; also Report of the tour of Pentecost, British District Agent, Central District II, 24-27 Feb. 1970. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence (V) F1/10 CDII Native Administration Tour Reports (1969-1970). FCORD.

¹⁹ See Moore and Myerhoff, “Secular Ritual”, 4.

²⁰ cf. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989).; See also Chapter 1.



Photo.01 Chief Charley Bani holds the flag of the Churches of Christ. The white field represents the Gospel. The brown border represents the people of Vanuatu. The star represents wisdom. The dove on the circular green field represents the hope for peace on earth following the Lord's message. The cross represents Jesus. (Photo: the author)

The first day of the festival opened with a march from Nduindui primary school to the Nanako Church of Christ. The lead marcher carried the flag of the Churches of Christ (pictured), after which it was raised alongside the flag of Vanuatu on the grass clearing in front of the church house, where it hung for the duration of the festival. The flag had been sewn with the express purpose of creating a symbol around which west Ambae people could rally in defiance of the colonial order.²¹ Indeed, until Vanuatu's independence in 1980, it had symbolised west Ambae's resistance to the colonial order under the leadership of Abel Bani (see Chapters 4 and 5). However, throughout the festival, it was used primarily to signify the incorporation of the west Ambae Churches of Christ into the nationalist narrative: according to community leaders, the Churches of Christ are one of Vanuatu's mother churches, Churches of Christ people are citizens

²¹ Pastor Samuel Vusi, Principal, Banmatmat Bible College. Interview with the author. 20 Aug. 1999, Banmatmat Bible College, South Pentecost. Tape recording, notes.

of the post-colonial state of Vanuatu, linked to other ni-Vanuatu by shared experiences of Christian conversion.

After the flag-raising ceremony, Samson Bue, a local businessman, former Member of Parliament and Church elder, spoke to the imposition of a new moral order implicit in Christianisation, via a representation of the official history of the Churches of Christ using motifs of west Ambae's history of Christianity: a length of sugarcane, a *natangoura* (sago palm) frond, a woven *natangoura* mat, palm spikes, a small cane hand-broom and a small bag of cotton. The sugarcane represented the Queensland cane fields where local people first encountered the Churches of Christ and signified the produce that they carried back to the islands. The *natangoura* frond represented the base material of house building but could be converted into a makeshift torch, symbolising the light of the Gospel, as carried by the earliest indigenous missionaries. However, *natangoura* can be woven into a mat and reconstructed as the wall of a house and more specifically, the wall of a church house, such as the churches in which the early evangelists conducted their services. Most of the witness of Bue's presentation would recognise the *natangoura* frond as a common theme of church histories. The individual palm spikes symbolised pagan sorcery: most Churches of Christ people are familiar with stories about the 'martyring' of early evangelists by pagan people by driving palm spikes through their eyes. Bound together, palm spikes can be transformed into hand brooms. The hand broom represented the emphasis of the Churches of Christ on community cleanliness and hygiene but also symbolised a broom to sweep away the perceived dirtiness of paganism.²² Taken together these two elements represented the redemption of local people through their conversion to Christianity and marked their transition from dangerous 'savage' to cooperative and useful 'Christian'. The bag of cotton represented modernisation, cash-cropping and community autarky. More commonly for Churches of Christ people, coconuts symbolise engagement with the cash economy but overall their significance is the same: the Churches of Christ has always pursued a program of modernisation and in particular wage labour and involvement in the cash economy to foster economic autonomy. Bue's performance constituted a projection and celebration of the distinctive features of the Churches of Christ, utilising easily recognisable local symbols

²² Many of the symbols were appropriated from the missionary emphasis on cleanliness. For example, Bue's reference to the hand broom tallied with comments made by Harold Finger: "There is infinite change within the native when he is to cleanse his environments and especially when he seeks to express that change with the sense of pride." Harold Finger Visits Pentecost, *Australian Christian*, 21 Jul. 1943, 21.

of the church. Yet Bue himself was a potent embodiment of the state: a successful local businessperson, a former member of parliament and a former government minister.²³

On the evening of Saturday 25 October, the festival was punctuated by a drama competition based on the theme of church ‘planting’: the festival organisers invited participants to interpret the early history of the Churches of Christ in west Ambae although no further guidelines were established as to the form and content of competition entrants. Most entrants adhered closely to the central theme although the Christian Women’s Fellowship entrant was a marching choir, which sang Sabine Bring-Gould’s ‘Onward, Christian Soldiers’, accompanied by harmonica and the rhythmic stamping of 40 women’s thong-clad feet.

A week before the festival, the organiser and ‘author’ of one drama competition entrant, a local Churches of Christ primary school teacher, invited me to take part in his drama. His play – a narration of the arrival of Christianity to west Ambae – was conceived and planned in the week before the festival but was neither scripted nor fully rehearsed before being performed. Of the 15 players, all but three were adherents of the Churches of Christ. (The exceptions were a Seventh-day Adventist man married to a local woman and the two accessible white men in west Ambae at the time, a locally resident Peace Corps volunteer and me.)

The actual performance lasted almost two hours. Despite its length, the audience of a few hundred west Ambae people (including about a hundred children) were delighted by the performance: it was clearly the most popular drama presented at the festival competition and won for its players first prize.

I shall briefly describe the three acts of the drama.

Act I

The drama began with a group of ‘heathens’ (*heten*) observing a European ship moored off the coast. The players’ faces were smeared with ash, mimicking shadow to signify their ‘darkness’. To complete the picture of the pre-Christian savage, each player wore plant fibre coverings over their shorts and a coconut husk helmet, both of which appear to be generic symbols of heathendom in church commemorations.²⁴ In a similar drama documented by Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington in East New Britain,

²³ Samson Bue served in the UMP cabinet of Maxime Carlot Korman, 1991-1995, as Minister of Public Works. He was re-elected to parliament in 2002. At the time of the celebrations, Bue was a self-employed businessman.

²⁴ See e.g. Errington and Gewertz, “From Darkness to Light”, 111.

pre-Christian natives were characterised as ‘pre-cultural’ incompetents, ‘trembling with cannibalistic frenzy’, ‘unable...to paddle their canoes’.²⁵ Indeed, their only competence ‘lay in killing and eating each other’. While the ‘savages’ depicted in the Nduindui drama epitomised similar qualities (though they were, I suspect, less incompetent than Gewertz and Errington’s pre-cultural savages), they principally enacted timidity and inquisitiveness at the exotic vessel moored offshore. Essentially, the savages were depicted as being ignorant of the ways of whites but engrossed by their apparent technological mastery and their very strangeness. In the next scene, two recruiters came ashore to be met by a brief show of local bravado. The recruiters, unperturbed, produced several ubiquitous local symbols of Western technology – axes, knives, clothes – in which the ‘heathens’ were interested. Immediately, the heathens’ belligerence was subdued by their desire for materials. However, once the savages’ suspicion was allayed the recruiters abducted them and transported them to Queensland.

Act II

This act depicted the endurance of the local labourers, the eventual revelation of the Gospel to them and their ultimate Christian enlightenment. The sea voyage to Queensland was enacted by three circumnavigations of the grass field in front of the Nanako Church of Christ in the bamboo frame recruiters’ cutter, powered by the church’s weed trimmer. During the voyage, a small boy fell ill and was thrown overboard by the recruiters and an old man was beaten to death, establishing clearly for the crowd the mettle of the recruiters (the very young and the old and weak were of no value to them) and the human cost of the labour trade. Once they had arrived in Queensland, the labourers were indentured on a plantation where the owner treated the surviving recruits as badly as did the recruiters. However, while labouring in the cane fields the ‘kanakas’ come into contact with another category of ‘white’, a missionary worker who became instantly discernible from the recruiters or the planter when he extended his hand to a fallen labourer (played by the author of the drama, the local primary school teacher).

In this scene the white evangelist (played by me) instructed the lead recruit ‘Vutigele’ in the Gospel by rote: in the drama this took the form of the evangelist reading small passages from the Bible which Vutigele repeated, tentatively at first but progressively more confidently until he memorises the passages and is able to teach his fellow

²⁵ cf. Errington and Gewertz, “From Darkness to Light”, 105, 113.

recruits at night in their work hut.²⁶ Throughout the final scene, the plantation owner quietened the praying labourers (a singularly un-Christian act) but they maintained their covert fellowship.

Most narratives about the labour trade among Churches of Christ people foreground both European perniciousness, embodied in ruthless recruiters, and benevolent care, embodied in the evangelists of the Queensland Kanaka Mission and, by association, Christians in general. Ironically, this locally produced binary subverts a pervasive European binary about the labour trade which constructs local people either as victims of colonialism (the fatal impact thesis) or as largely unfettered island-centred agents (island-centred histories).²⁷ By emphasising the hardships of recruitment, the deaths of abductees during the sea voyage to Queensland (often by the hand of the recruiters) and their equally harsh treatment during plantation labour, the players established a clear binary between recruiter/plantation owner, on the one hand, and mission worker, on the other. In so doing, they determined the framework for the next scene in which the kanakas receive/opt for 'the Light' of the Gospel.

The labour trade represents an historical, albeit paradoxical, juncture between the heathen past and the bright future of Christianity. In the origin narratives of the Churches of Christ, the inverted logic of abduction by labour recruiters which resulted in conversion to Christianity because of the ministry of the Queensland Kanaka Mission represents compelling evidence of divine intervention: that abduction resulted in Christian redemption demonstrated that the Lord indeed works in mysterious ways. (As I argue in the next section, with few exceptions, the labour trade is central to local histories about the transition from the heathen past to the Christian present among the Churches of Christ.) In other words, in this respect, the agency celebrated by

²⁶ During the performance, the lead player ("Vutigele") directed action while himself acting. During this scene, this gave rise to the ironic spectacle: in the drama, the supposedly educated evangelist (me, agnostic) instructs Vutigele (teacher, Christian) about the Bible; in actuality, the player (me) is instructed by the director (the teacher) in his lines.

²⁷ As Dorothy Shineberg argued in her recent attempt to dislodge this pervasive binary, whether or not the labour trade was disguised slavery is an argument as old as the labour trade itself. Dorothy Shineberg, *The People Trade: Pacific Island Laborers and New Caledonia, 1865-1930* (Honolulu: Hawaii University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 4, see also 3-10; cf. Peter Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation: A History of Solomon Islands Labour Migration, 1870-1914* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1973); Deryck Scarr, "Recruits and Recruiters," in *Pacific Islands Portraits*, ed. James W. Davidson and Deryck Scarr (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1967); Clive Moore, *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay* (Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies and University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1985); Clive Moore, "Kanakas, Kidnapping and Slavery: Myths from the Nineteenth Century Labour Trade and Their Relevance to Australia's Immigrant Melanesians," *Kabar Sebarang: Sulating Maphilindo* 8-9 (1981).

Nduindui's Christians is Christian agency; the players depicted the kanakas as human beings essentially utilised as instruments of God.

However, pivotal to the narrative are the specific conditions of west Ambae at the turn of the nineteenth century. In the final scene of the Act, the labourers prepared to return to their homes and most purchased calico, axes, knives, rifles and other materials in preparation. The evangelist advised Vutigele that he should not take a rifle back to Ambae; he need take only the Bible, which he refers to as the '*masket blong Jesus*' (Jesus' musket), the bullets of which is the Gospel. Of all the scenes, this was one of the few which the director insisted be practised and scripted. The transformed 'savage' Vutigele adopted a western name, 'Willie' and returns to Ambae as the first local evangelist.

The analogy of the Bible as a musket plays on the ideal of the Christian militant. In local constructions of pacification, conversion to Christianity is often depicted as the crucial phase.²⁸ Except in mission histories, outsiders have more commonly privileged the coercive forces of colonialism when explaining pacification.²⁹ As I argue in the next section, the creation of new spaces for Christianity – specifically the formation of the bounded unit of the village, aggregated around a church/school – is closely interwoven with conversion and pacification narratives. These narratives, moreover, are structured to contrast the two states of existence. Conversion represents a juncture between atomised local groups in perpetual cycles of violence against one another and the ideal of the pacified, stable Christian 'community'.³⁰ Thus, Michael Young has argued that 'peace would appear to be the doctrinal *sine qua non* of all other Christian teachings and all other moral and social transformations they are intended to bring

²⁸ See White, *Identity through History*, ch. 5; Rodman, *Masters of Tradition: Consequences of Customary Land Tenure in Longana, Vanuatu*; for other traces of missionaries depicted as Christian militants in local oral traditions, see Eric Hirsch, "Between Mission and Market: Events and Images in a Melanesian Society," *Man* 29, no. 3 (1994), 697.

²⁹ Margaret Rodman and Matthew Cooper, eds., *The Pacification of Melanesia* (Ann Arbor: University Of Michigan Press, 1979), 1-23. Rodman argued that pacification inarguably allowed for economic/agricultural intensification by foreign colonialist planters, for example (4-5), but acknowledged that, indeed, local people often suggested that they voluntarily renounced warfare to allow for their inclusion in religious or economic transformations. See e.g. Geoffrey White, "War, Peace and Piety in Santa Isabel", in Rodman and Cooper, eds., *The Pacification of Melanesia*, 109-140; Margaret Rodman, "Following Peace: Indigenous Pacification of a Northern New Hebridean Society", in Rodman and Cooper, eds., *The Pacification of Melanesia*, 141-159.

³⁰ cf. White, *Identity through history*, 114-117; Barker, "Village Inventions: Historical Variations Upon a Regional Theme in Uiaku, Papua New Guinea."

about'.³¹ Young characterised the analogy of the Gospel as a weapon – which he represented as a contrast between the spears of warlike Melanesians and the Gospel – as an 'answering deployment of martial tropes', a metaphor for the spiritual warfare between Christianity and paganism.³² Similarly, in the Nduindui drama, by eschewing conventional Western weaponry Vutigele returned to his home physically unarmed but carrying a far more powerful weapon in the form of the Gospel. The players marked this distinction by emphasising Vutigele's choice between the weapon of Western imperialism (the rifle), but latterly a weapon co-opted to local warfare, and the Bible. In Young's description of the commemoration of the Presbyterian missionisation of Epi, the bravery of the European evangelist who counters and eventually supplants tribal warfare with spiritual strength was emphasised by noting that he carried no actual weapon. Correspondingly, in the Nduindui drama, Vutigele's spiritual strength is also emphasised but it is deployed evenly against European avarice, exploitation and violence *and* the supposedly unending cycle of traditional warfare and social disorganisation.

This particular construction of history represents both cultural and moral rupture *and* continuity: Christianity was revealed to the labourers progressively in the Queensland cane fields but they also chose it strategically and maintained it clandestinely from the violent and heathen white exploiters. Although none of the players structured their views of Christianity as being merely a pragmatic response to the attendant problem of European advancement, Christianity was clearly represented as attractive to local people as an antidote to their own (past) heathenness *and* the perfidy of exploitative colonialists. Crucially, by emphasising that local people chose to convert to Christianity, a clear connection was established between the heathen past and the Christian present. Charley Bani (not a blood relative of Abel Bani), the elected chief of Nanako and one of its principal lay preachers later took up this theme during the church service that concluded the festival.

Act III

In the lengthy final Act, Vutigele, wearing a cane hat, buttoned-down white shirt and black trousers and carrying only his Bible, returns to west Ambae. After unsuccessfully attempting to evangelise his home community of Natalu, inland from Nanako, he retreated to the relative safety of the coast where he established a bush church and

³¹ Young, "Commemorating Missionary Heroes", 99.

³² Young, "Commemorating Missionary Heroes", 99-100.

gradually attracted followers. In the closing scene, a victorious Vutigele stood atop a tree stump in Nanako preaching to a small band of Christians, the direct forebears of contemporary Nanako people.

Similar 'dramas' have been documented throughout Christian Melanesia and are regular, often annual, fixtures of church centenaries, ceremonies and festivals. Generally, the narrative structure of the Nduindui drama followed closely that represented by Geoffrey White in Santa Isabel.³³ White's model established three core episodes in conversion narratives represented in the commemorative dramas he witnessed: approach, resistance and acceptance.³⁴ Loosely, the first and last acts of the performance in Nduindui correlated to White's categories of 'approach' and 'acceptance'. However, White's category of resistance was supplanted in the Nduindui drama by an act which depicted the trials of 'recruitment' for plantation labour, the lengthy sea voyage on which many recruits died and the eventual conversion of the abductees by the kindly evangelists of the Queensland Kanaka Mission. The principal theme of this act was the gradual revelation of the Gospel to the abductees and their transformation from 'savages' to 'Christians'. In effect, what the players depicted was the transformation of the abductees from naïve, passive but violent heathens into empowered, wise Christians able to comprehend and counter exploitation more effectively because of the revelation of the 'Light'.

White and Black Missionaries

As Geoffrey White surmised, 'the agents of missionary change in conversion narratives ... become mythic cultural heroes responsible for instituting the moral order as it is known today'.³⁵ The commemoration of conversion in Melanesia – as documented by, for example, Errington and Gewertz, White and Young – has often appeared to privilege white missionaries as the principal means by which Christianity was brought to Melanesia even if local Christian agency or local human agency were ultimately responsible for its widespread dissemination and adoption. Thus, European missionaries rather than locals have been mythologised and commemorated as cultural heroes. What is striking about the creation of such historical/mythical figures among the Churches of Christ is that for the most part these roles are given to local people

³³ White, *Identity through History*, 159; Young, "Commemorating Missionary Histories", 97.

³⁴ White, *Identity through History*, 159, 179; cf. Young, "Commemorating Missionary Histories", 98.

³⁵ White, *Identity through History*, 136.

themselves. They adopt the mantle of missionaries for change to the new moral order; in local reflections, white missionaries are constructed primarily as adjutants.

Considering that the date marked by the commemoration in Nduindui was to celebrate the first baptisms conducted in 1901 by the Presbyterian missionary Peter Milne, the absence of a white missionary in a form more substantial than the fleeting glimpses of the evangelist in the cane fields in the drama requires some explanation. The Reverend Peter Milne, the Presbyterian Missionary to Nguna since 1870, was a controversial figure in his church. In 1901, he had travelled to west Ambae to compensate for what he perceived as Melanesian Mission inertia. The Anglicans who maintained a permanent mission station at Waluriki in north Ambae had done 'nothing', he claimed, to alleviate heathenism on Ambae.³⁶ Milne's diary reports that during his stay on Ambae he baptised three promising young men, Willie Vuti (Vutigele), Andrew Tari and Sale Bani, all apparently the sons of ranking men.³⁷ Milne's claim to primacy in converting west Ambae is challenged in both oral traditions from west Ambae and in Churches of Christ mission histories that state uniformly that Willie Vutigele was converted to Christianity in Queensland and returned to west Ambae as one of the founders of the Churches of Christ work.³⁸ The suggestion that Vutigele had begun the process of conversion in west Ambae, as represented by the players, represented an attempt to assert what had taken place before Milne's arrival; it draws attention to the belief that the process of evangelism had been initiated before the intercession of the white missionaries of the Churches of Christ.

My interlocutors posited two responses to my queries about the apparent absence of Peter Milne and/or white Churches of Christ missionaries from the popular drama: some suggested that perhaps the younger men who formulated the drama had accidentally omitted references to white missionaries; others suggested that the Gospel had already arrived in the New Hebrides by the time the Reverend Peter Milne arrived in 1899, although Milne is remembered for setting down a trained catechist – Toa Nakwa – who aided local Christians and for performing the first baptisms in west Ambae.

³⁶ David Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen: A History of the Melanesian Mission, 1849-1942* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1978), 40.

³⁷ Allen, "The Establishment of Christianity and Cash-Cropping in a New Hebridean Community.", 34.

³⁸ See e.g. Bowes, *Partners, One Hundred Years of Mission Overseas by Churches of Christ in Australia 1891-1991.*, 54; also Solomon Kamali, 22 Oct. 1999; Pastor Alick Vuti. Interview with the author, Bislama. 27 Oct. 1999, Saralokambo, Nduindui. Tape recording, notes.

Plausibly, because west Ambae is a Churches of Christ area – not Presbyterian – Milne’s significance has been downplayed in local oral histories of church planting. Moreover, following this logic, Christianity had already been planted when Fred Purdy, the first white missionary of the Churches of Christ arrived in west Ambae in 1907.³⁹ Pastor Alick Vuti, a local expert on church history, suggested that the later arrival of foreign missionaries of the Churches of Christ marked not the beginning of Christianity but the bolstering of an existing enterprise. For example, he suggested, before Fred Purdy’s arrival: ‘*Olgeta I wok tugeta wantaem be olgeta tu I no stap long semmak jioj*’.⁴⁰ [They [local Christians] all worked together but they were not of the same church.] Purdy’s major legacy was unifying west Ambae’s Christians under the Churches of Christ’s metaphorical banner. Like most accounts of missionaries among the Churches of Christ, Vuti’s reflections on the effect of Fred Purdy’s arrival characterise him as a facilitator of Christianity rather than as its pioneer.

Contrasted with accounts of missionary activity in Anglican, Catholic or Presbyterian areas in Vanuatu, Churches of Christ histories – both local/oral and foreign/official – reflect an implicit egalitarianism in worship strengthened by the acknowledgment that local people first brought ‘the Light’ rather than powerful European missionaries. Plausibly, the popularity of histories such as that performed during the festival in Nduindui drew on the popular perception of the Churches of Christ in Vanuatu as a poor people’s church in which the participation of the laity in religious and secular leadership was central to the operation and self-definition of the church (see Chapter 3). Local oral histories, then, which celebrate conversion as transpiring because of the remarkable actions of largely unremarkable local people explicitly celebrate the agency of local people and thus reaffirm the principles of the ‘people’s church’.

On Sunday, 26 October 1999, the all-day church service began at 9:00 am. In the final oration during the morning service, Chief Charley Bani used the winning ‘drama’ from the previous night’s competition to draw together the themes of the festival. The recruiters duped the first group of locals into going aboard their vessel, he contended, and abducted them. Detached from their place, the abductees faced isolation, sickness and harsh treatment by recruiters. No one should forget, he advised, that many west Ambae people died working in the cane fields because of white people’s greed. But

³⁹ Purdy had worked as an evangelist for the Queensland Kanaka Mission in Childers in the 1890s and his commission was supported by an independent “group of friends”, the Aoba-Pentecost-Maewo Mission, a branch of the South Sea Evangelical Mission. The unnamed evangelist in the drama competition was widely construed as Fred Purdy.

⁴⁰ Ps. Alick Vuti, 27 Oct. 1999.

those first recruits appropriated the technologies of the planters. They became Christians and they learned how to plant and maintain cash crops. Transformed from 'heathens' to 'Christians' on their own terms, the newly evangelised labourers returned to the New Hebrides and advanced the Christianisation and modernisation of the northern islands. Approaching the millennium, he implored west Ambae people to cast their minds back to the experiences of their pre-Christian 'heathen' ancestors (his distinction) who faced similarly difficult times at the turn of the last century. They faced two kinds of 'oppression' (his word): they were challenged to shed the oppressive mantle of heathenism but also faced oppression by powerful and ruthless 'whites'. Christianity therefore appeared to fulfil certain requirements as a remedy to Western advance. Entering the new millennium, west Ambae people would succeed, he suggested, because they had adapted to changing circumstances in the past and would continue to do so in the future, following the teachings of the Gospel.

While not explicitly incorporated into the festival program, the impending millennium had been a prevalent theme in local church services in Churches of Christ throughout Penama Province in 1999 and was discussed often by local people throughout the course of the festival. The spread of millennialist prophecy in northern Vanuatu was expedited by the wide dissemination – and immense local popularity – of literature originating largely from the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the United States of America.⁴¹ Many Churches of Christ people were outwardly ambivalent about the supposedly imminent millennium: most people I spoke to suggested that no one – not even Jesus Christ – could prophesy apocalypse. Yet conscious of the possibility that it could take place, church leaders such as Charley Bani attempted to assuage local anxiety. In his sermon, he emphasised the origins of the Vanuatu Churches of Christ and sought to posit the continued presence and relevance of the Churches of Christ after 31 December 1999.

Compared with their pre-Christian ancestors, contemporary Christians were privileged, Bani argued, because they would meet the challenges of the new millennium alongside other Christian citizens of Vanuatu as one Christian people. Yet he suggested that there was more work to be done because there were still non-believers living in Vanuatu, local and expatriate. His appeal to this national future Christian community was intended to comfort worshippers who believed that the apocalypse would not take place until all people – in Vanuatu and globally – had been evangelised. However, it was also

⁴¹ Specifically, copies of Ellen G. White, *Almost Armageddon* (Autumn Publications, 1973). were disseminated throughout Vanuatu in the late 1990s. *Almost Armageddon* is an annotated version of Ellen Gould Harmon White, *The (New, Illustrated) Great Controversy*, Laymen for Religious Liberty ed. (Florida: C DeLand, 1990)..

specifically related to the immediate project of asserting a sense of commonality with other Christian people in Vanuatu. Bani's sermon concluded with an explicit appeal to the unity of Vanuatu as a Christian country by reference to the national motto of Vanuatu: *Long God yumi stanap* (In God we stand/For God we stand up).

Throughout the course of the two-day festival, the divergent agendas of participants became apparent. For example, festival organisers operated with the specific intent of harnessing the local history of Christianity to a moderate nationalist discourse (see below). Most festival participants, however, were less interested in furthering national agendas than emphasising the specific history of the west Ambae Churches of Christ; they celebrated the local history of church planting and conversion as a specifically west Ambae project. Arguably, the agendas of both organisers and participants were strategically oriented towards reinforcing the moral community of the Churches of Christ: most participants understood the festival as a celebration and cultivation of community solidarity of the Nduindui Churches of Christ. But it fulfilled other requirements, most immediately comforting worshippers about the prospects for the new millennium but more generally celebrating the moral order and indigeneity of the Churches of Christ within the framework of the avowedly Christian nation-state of Vanuatu.

Certainly, the furtherance of the national hegemony – even in the qualified form of a church festival which celebrated the Churches of Christ as a constituent in the 'nation-state' Vanuatu – dates only to independence in 1980 and must be understood in the context of recent 'political' history of the Churches of Christ. Significantly, all but one of Nduindui's current group of Christian leaders were members of a conservative faction of worshippers whose core members were graduates of the Banmatmat Bible College and whose close alliance with the Australian and New Zealand missionaries of the church during the late 1960s countermanded the leadership of Abel Bani, the pre-eminent evangelist and indigenous leader of the Churches of Christ in Vanuatu (New Hebrides). The exception to this case within the group of contemporary church leaders was one of Abel Bani's sons – himself a former Nagriamel member – whose membership of the lay leadership of the Churches of Christ was interrupted by his time as a Nagriamel supporter. At the time of the commemoration, the hegemony of the nationalist discourse into which Charley Bani's sermon fitted was not completely adhered to among the Churches of Christ and nor did it resonate more widely in Vanuatu, where ni-Vanuatu may promote regional, religious and ethnic differences to the detriment of the national enterprise. But it was consistent with the pro-independence, pro-state position adopted by the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides, the peak decision-making body of the church, in the late 1960s,

supported and advocated by most missionaries after 1969 (see chapters 4 and 5). By 1968, however, Bani advocated that most Churches of Christ people join Nagriamel as an avenue, among other things, for his anti-colonial sentiments. The impetus for the Churches of Christ leadership in west Ambae to adopt nationalist rhetoric, then, was strategically and historically contingent: in effect, it compensated for the involvement of most west Ambae Churches of Christ worshippers in Nagriamel and their suppression by government forces after independence in 1980 (see Chapter 5).

Spearheads and Handles: Indigenous Agency and Christian Community in Churches of Christ Conversion Narratives

In the first section of this chapter, I referred to the prevalence of martial tropes in Christian conversion/pacification narratives in Melanesia: local people often construe evangelism as spiritual warfare against paganism. Nelson Bulinock from Ranputor in south Pentecost constructed his own martial trope, albeit one in which he appropriated a key symbol of pagan or tribal warfare, to describe the differences between local and missionary agency in effecting conversion among the Churches of Christ: 'Those native people, they were like the spearhead and the white man is the handle'.⁴² I have used his axiom as an organising principle for this section because it encapsulates one of the key themes of conversion narratives among the Churches of Christ in northern Vanuatu and furthers the principle theme of this chapter: human and divine agency. Furthermore, I explore the wider implications of representations of indigenous agency in conversion narratives, including the depiction of the creation of new spaces for Christianity and the historical imagination of the Christian community.

Indigenous agency is a consistent theme in the conversion narratives I collected among Churches of Christ people in 1999-2000 and in each of the islands in which the Churches of Christ are situated returned labourers are commemorated as 'cultural heroes'. In Pentecost, the two most prominent figures are Willie Tabymancon for the Ranwadi area (the first Churches of Christ convert in all the New Hebrides to return) and John Wye in the Narua area of Bwatnapne, Central Pentecost. Maewo people name five former labourers: Andrew Ngangavi, Daniel Toadoro, James Arudonge, Ruben Salelinglini and Isaac Toa Nase. In Ambae, the founders of Christianity are Willie Vutigele, Peter Pentecost and Sale Bani. Arguably, among them only Tabymancon and Willie Vutigele could have claimed initially to be Churches of Christ adherents. For example, the founders of the church in Maewo are recalled as

⁴² Nelson Bulinock, former elder, Churches of Christ. Interview with the author, English. 30 Aug. 1999. Tape recording, notes.

'Christians', rather than specifically Churches of Christ adherents. Yet, irrespective of their actual denomination, their work laid the foundations for the Churches of Christ work and each is commemorated as a church founder.

Accounts of how local people came to work in Queensland – narratives of indenture and labour in the Queensland fields – provide the cornerstone of oral traditions about conversion among the Churches of Christ. Between the instigation of the labour trade in the 1860s and the forced repatriation of indentured labourers between 1906 and 1911, somewhere between forty and fifty thousand islanders were recruited to work on plantations in Queensland, New Caledonia, Fiji and Western Samoa.⁴³ Given that the population of the New Hebrides is estimated to have been between seventy and one hundred thousand people in the late



Photo.02 Titus Buleron
(Photo: the author)

1800s, the majority of islanders would have encountered the labour trade.⁴⁴ Dorothy Shineberg suggests that in 1882 as much as 14 percent of New Hebrideans – most 'active young men' – were absent working as labourers in Queensland, Samoa, Hawaii, New Caledonia and Fiji, or crewing the sailing ships that plied the Pacific.⁴⁵

As I have argued, the labour trade represents an ambiguous historical moment for Churches of Christ people after which religious and technological conversions and transformations took place. Michael Allen suggests that the first labour recruiters

⁴³ Labour recruiters initially focused on the southern islands of the New Hebrides whose greater exposure to European traders and missionaries eased negotiations between recruiters and locals but demand for labourers was such that by the 1860s recruiters rapidly shifted their focus to the northern islands. Richard D. Bedford, *New Hebridean Mobility: A Study in Circular Migration* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1973), 23.

⁴⁴ H. C. Brookfield and D. Hart, *Melanesia: A Geographical Interpretation of an Island World* (London: Methuen, 1974), 66-8.

⁴⁵ Shineberg, *The People Trade: Pacific Island Laborers and New Caledonia, 1865-1930*. 5. Margaret Jolly reasons that beginning in the 1860s, at least a few thousand men and a handful of women were recruited from Pentecost. Jolly, *Women of the Place: Kastom, Colonialism and Gender in Vanuatu*, 24. How many of these were from communities which eventually converted to the Churches of Christ is unclear. In west Ambae, Michael Allen recorded that every village (average population 65) in the district could name between four and six men who went to Queensland. He assumes, therefore, that between a quarter and one third of all adult males made at least one trip. Allen, "The Establishment of Christianity and Cash-Cropping in a New Hebridean Community.", 31.

reached Ambae in 1865 and notes eleven documented clashes between locals and recruiters between 1870 and 1890.⁴⁶ Nduindui people recounted to him that four vessels visited their districts. The first ship is said to have abducted three men out fishing, whose failure to return prompted their kin to perform funeral rites. Allen records that when they returned, however, in apparently good condition, bearing 'trunks full of steel axes, pipes, tobacco and clothes', local interest in wage labour was stimulated.⁴⁷ According to Allen's interlocutors, the ship set sail the next morning 'with a full complement of eager recruits'. Furthermore, he documented the emphasis in west Ambae oral histories on the 'hardship and cruelties' of the labour trade but suggests also that they 'convey a sense of excitement, curiosity and an eagerness to acquire...the knowledge and...material possessions of Europeans'.⁴⁸

According to Titus Buleron (pictured above), a Central Pentecost man, the net effect of Christianity was twofold: it was valuable in itself for bringing the light of the Gospel; and it tended to augur new technologies such as metal axes, which were more efficient than the locally produced stone axes and knives.⁴⁹ In local oral histories in Maewo, Pentecost and Ambae, returning labourers are characterised as bearers of new technologies, crops and ideologies. For example, west Ambae people trace the arrival of key crops – in particular varieties of taro (*tarofiji*) and banana (in west Ambae, two varieties bear the name of their supposed origin; *Sini* [Sydney] and *Samoa*) – to goods carried back to the islands by returning labourers. Similarly, they returned with axes, bush knives, fabrics and new types of firearms which people put to use in their day-to-day lives. Buleron lamented that the consequences of conversion was often the loss of self-sufficiency. The changes that Christianity brought were undeniably fundamental and welcomed but the passing of traditional knowledge (*kastom*) marked the supplanting of older but local technologies such as tool and clothes production (his examples) with more efficient but less readily available items.

Commonly in the practised oral traditions of the Churches of Christ, the effects of the labour trade are periodised into successive waves of technological and moral transformation. According to Alick Vuti, the consecutive groups of labourers are distinguished by the material and spiritual benefits of their work in the cane fields:

⁴⁶ Allen, "The Nduindui: A Study in the Social Structure of a New Hebridean Community"., 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁸ Allen, "Christianity and Cash-Cropping", 31-32.

⁴⁹ Titus Buleron, rural agriculturalist. Interview with the author, Bislama. 17 Sept. 1999, Lebbenlegge, central Pentecost.

*Jioj blong yumi I stat long Kwinslan Ostrelia. Fes grup blong go i wok nomo. Oli no lukim waetman nating bifo oli go. Fes grup i wok long tri yia.... Fes grup wetem second grup blong go oli karem I kambak akis sotgan wetem calico be grup namba tri i kambak wetem Gospel.*⁵⁰

Our church started in Queensland Australia. The first group [of Nduindui people] to go just worked. They had never seen a white man before they went. The first group worked for three years. ... The first and second groups to go brought back axes, shotguns and calico but group number three came back with the Gospel.

The exact dates that the labourers returned are unclear from the oral histories but the official church history traces the beginning of the church work to the return of labourers beginning in the late 1890s.⁵¹ John Thompson, the first white missionary of the Churches of Christ arrived in the New Hebrides in 1903 and established a mission station at Ranwadi in central Pentecost. Their arrival was more than two decades after the initial forays of the Melanesian Mission in the northern islands, which first established a permanent presence in Ambae in 1871, and over a decade after the Marists from New Caledonia, who arrived in the northern islands in the late 1880s.⁵² Moreover, it was over half a century after the arrival of the Presbyterian Church, which had established a permanent mission presence on Aneityum in the south of the archipelago in 1848.

John Thompson's arrival was assisted by the earlier return of his 'kanaka assistant', Willie Tabymancon, who had been employed at the Queensland Kanaka Mission from 1900 to April 1903, after which he returned to Pentecost as a missionary teacher. Thompson wrote in the *Australian Christian*: 'Tabymancon ... has built a schoolhouse ... and commenced Mission work in his native village. He ... has sent a very urgent message from the people of his village to come and live among them'.⁵³ When he arrived, Thompson found that Tabymancon had arranged regular services and prepared a number of villagers for baptism. Thompson was plagued by malarial fever

⁵⁰ Pastor Alick Vuti, 27 Oct. 1999.

⁵¹ A. B. Marston, *Jubilee History of the Churches of Christ in Australia* (Melbourne: Austral Publishing Co., 1903), 417.

⁵² Jolly, *Women of the Place*, 35.

⁵³ Cited in Dr. D.G.M. (David) Hammer, "John Thompson, the Birth of Churches of Christ Mission Work in the New Hebrides," *The Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society*, no. 73 (1981), Courtesy Overseas Mission Board, Conference of Churches of Christ in Australia, Adelaide, South Australia (Hereinafter OMB)

throughout his short stay and rarely left the sanctuary of the mission station but Tabymancon arranged fifty-eight people for Thompson to baptise at Ranwadi.⁵⁴

Like other indigenous Christians, Tabymancon was crucial to the evangelistic enterprise. Arguably, the return of Christian labourers expedited the rate of conversion in the northern New Hebrides. Whereas certain southern islands were completely evangelised within the space of a few short years⁵⁵, evangelisation in the northern islands had occurred only haltingly until the late nineteenth century. Undeniably, the return of Christian labourers from Queensland, Samoa, Fiji and New Caledonia in the late 1890s transformed the methods of Christian evangelism. Speaking a *lingua franca*, pijin, distilled by years of usage among the diverse Melanesian labourer communities and having greater knowledge of Biblical teachings, returned Christian labourers contributed to the spiritual transformation of the islands. Not all labourers returned as Christians.⁵⁶ However, throughout the northern islands of Vanuatu, those who did are enshrined in local histories as foundation missionaries; presumably, they often operated without the benefit of ongoing support from European missionaries and operated as missionaries in their own right.

Education was central to the Churches of Christ's mission agenda after the return of the local converts from Queensland, ostensibly to empower local people to understand the Gospel.⁵⁷ For several decades afterwards, basic education among Churches of Christ people was undertaken in bush schools conducted by local 'teachers'. In Bislama, *skul* refers both to school, in the sense of secular education but also church, deriving from

⁵⁴ John Thompson, Document Scrap, 1904. OMB; Bowes, *Partners*, 55.

⁵⁵ For example, Aneityum converted en masse to Presbyterian Christianity in the 1850s, after drastic depopulation. Ironically and tragically, the worst depopulation occurred after conversion to Christianity. Douglas, 'Christian Citizens', 24n1; See also Bronwen Douglas, "Autonomous and Controlled Spirits: Traditional Ritual and Early Interpretations of Christianity on Tanna, Aneityum, and the Isle of Pines in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, no. 98 (1989).; Bronwen Douglas, "Provocative Readings in Intransigent Archives: Finding Whiteaneityumese Women," *Oceania* 70, no. 2 (1999).; Matthew Spriggs, "Vegetable Kingdoms: Taro Irrigation and Pacific Prehistory." (PhD dissertation, Australian National University., 1981)., ch. 4.

⁵⁶ Some labourers became radically opposed to whites after their experiences in Australia. A returned labourer in east Ambae killed the Melanesian Mission priest Charles Godden in 1906. Ps. Alick Vuti, Saralokambo, Nduindui, 27 Oct. 1999. See also Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen: A History of the Melanesian Mission, 1849-1942.*, 183.

⁵⁷ Initially, the prospects for education for local Christians were divided by gender: men could be trained as evangelist-teachers at Londua Training Centre; women were initially educated no further than primary school. McLean, "Preaching in the New Hebrides", 3.

the functions of the early bush schools in which teacher-evangelists attempted to instil scripture by rote.⁵⁸

Generally, the absences of missionaries have been characterised as mission weakness.⁵⁹ Outside the Churches of Christ's mission centres at Nduindui, Banmatmat and Ranwadi, missionaries might have visited rural Christians only periodically and many communities faced extended periods without missionary guidance. From the perspective of neighbouring allied missionaries, the relatively short stays of some early Churches of Christ missionaries were cause for concern. For example, John Thompson's departure from Ranwadi after only nine months prompted the Melanesian Mission priest in north Pentecost, H.N. Drummond, to write: 'the Melanesian Mission has a natural hesitation to work in what it recognises is your sphere of work...if you cannot state definitely at what time you will return I will have to put teachers down at this point'.⁶⁰

Among the Churches of Christ, local people no doubt found cause to celebrate their own agency as Christians during the lengthy absences of missionaries from the field. Moreover, local evangelists appeared to have great success as evangelists and missionaries. John Wye, the 'father of the work' in Central Pentecost, returned to Narua in the highlands above Bwatnapne from Queensland in about 1903.⁶¹ Wye is mentioned in church correspondence only fleetingly. However, in 1936, the Federal President of the Australian Conference of Churches of Christ noted that Narua had the strongest concentration of Churches of Christ adherents on Pentecost, despite the lack of a permanently stationed European missionary.⁶² By 1968, the British District Agent

⁵⁸ See Ron McLean and Lyall Muller, "Education as Ministry", in Bowes, *Partners*, 71.

⁵⁹ Deryck Scarr, *Fragments of Empire: A History of the Western Pacific High Commission 1877-1914* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1967), 123; Allen, "Christianity and Cash-cropping", 30.

⁶⁰ H.N. Drummond, Missionary in Charge of Raga, to John Thompson, 29 Jul. 1906. OMB

⁶¹ Pastor Jos Tabi. Interview with the author. 16 Sep. 1999, Wujunmel. Tape recording, notes; Elder Eli Tabi. Interview with the author. 16 Sep. 1999, Wujunmel. Tape recording, notes; Bowes, *Partners*, 54. Local oral traditions reflect on Wye's initial warm reception in his home settlement but suggest that he was eventually banished by the Narua chiefs for disregarding *tabu* (taboo). According to Elder Eli Tabi, whose father was among the locals converted by Wye, Wye established a small church on a sacred site (*tabu ples*) from where he evangelised the entire village. In Tabi's account, the conflation of sacred sites (*tabu/kastom* with sacred/church) served to emphasise Wye's spiritual power.

⁶² Albert Anderson, Federal President of the Foreign Missions Board Annual Report: Pentecost, 1936, 2. OMB.

noted that the Churches of Christ constituted the biggest denomination in the Bwatnapne area.⁶³

According to Nelson Bulinock, the principal Christian evangelists of the early conversion era, John Wye and Willie Tabymancon, were the primary agents of conversion among the Churches of Christ in Pentecost and by the strength of their Christian belief forestalled the assimilation of the communities of Narua and Ranwadi back into pagan societies:

Tabymancon built one [station] at Ranwadi. All the other places where the workers returned [to] we did not hear from them now because when they return to their villages they turn around, back to their heathen ways again ... making *kastom* and killing pigs ... marrying two wives ... three maybe and all the things like that. However, just two places I can tell you of Narua with John Wye and Ranwadi stood up. We hang on to Christianity from then until the present time. All the other places stopped.⁶⁴

Conversion narratives are so closely interwoven with narratives of movement – specifically the creation of new spaces for Christianity in amalgamated Christian villages – that the two cannot be conceptualised separately.⁶⁵ Oral traditions of conversion among the Churches of Christ depict the formation of small Christian enclaves in coastal areas by ni-Vanuatu, as defensive strategies against ‘poisoning’ and violence by their pagan kin.

John Barker argued that Anglican missionaries who had encouraged the formation of large amalgamated Christian settlements among the Maisin of PNG convinced themselves that such villages of tribal people signified a pastoral way of life no longer practised in the industrialised West but which once ridded of heathenism was worthy of protection.⁶⁶ Thus, even though later anthropologists and local people conceptualised villages as traditional spaces, the forces of colonialism ultimately influenced them. More stridently, Matthew Spriggs, and allied scholars, have argued that coastal Christian communities in Melanesia were largely established following the dictates of missionaries. For example, in Aneityum the initial Christianisation of coastal areas by Presbyterian missionaries came about because the missionary Geddie circumnavigated

⁶³ J.F. Yaxley to British District Agent, Lakatoro, 9 Jan. 1968. NHBS 7 (iii) General Correspondence. F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils 1960-1969. FCORD.

⁶⁴ Nelson Bulinock, 30 Aug. 1999.

⁶⁵ See also Barker, "We Are Ekelesia; Conversion in Uiaku, Papua New Guinea."; Barker, "Village Inventions: Historical Variations Upon a Regional Theme in Uiaku, Papua New Guinea."; cf. Jolly, "Sacred Spaces: Churches, Men's Houses and Households in South Pentecost, Vanuatu.", 230; Roger Keesing, *Custom and Confrontation: The Kwaio Struggle for Cultural Autonomy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992)..

⁶⁶ Barker, "Village Constructions", 225.

the island looking for appropriate sites to place his catechists, from where they would spread the Gospel.⁶⁷ Later depopulation due to disease facilitated the coalescence of formerly disparate family hamlets into larger coastal communities nucleated around church institutions.⁶⁸ In Malaita, like Aneityum, pre-contact coastal populations became more Christianised and acculturated to European influence because they resided in areas 'where administration, economic development, spiritual guidance, and medical services [could] be more easily managed' by missions.⁶⁹ Indeed, the imperative to collect Christians in the one place as an antidote to tribal fighting and an adjunct to conversion pervades missionary correspondence. For example, in Sinalagu, Malaita, conversion of small 'remnant' groups to the South Sea Evangelical Mission was the corollary of depopulation due to disease, fighting and the labour trade. Mission correspondence noted: 'it was only after we got the remnant 13 together and emphasised the need of separation that change came. They made a clean sweep of the old customs'.⁷⁰ Elsewhere, Melanesians were drawn to the coast by diversified economic choices.⁷¹ Louise Morauta traced the formation of the Malalauan Kukipi community in Papua New Guinea's Gulf Province to the desire for cigarettes and tobacco amongst the men of the area and their entrance into a cash economy to pay for them.⁷²

The distinction between coastal Christian areas and highland pagan ones is a distinctive trope throughout Melanesia. Bonnemaison saw the distinction between these spaces, people and times written on the terrain of Tanna:

⁶⁷ Matthew Spriggs, "A School in Every District: The Cultural Geography of Aneityum, Southern Vanuatu," *Journal of Pacific History* 20, no. 1 (1985), 24.

⁶⁸ Spriggs, "A School in Every District", 31, 39. Spriggs noted that the return of customary land at Independence in 1980 resulted in traditional owners re-establishing land-rights in long abandoned districts of Aneityum.

⁶⁹ Roger M. Keesing, "Christians and Pagans in Kwaio, Malaita," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 90 (1967), 99.

⁷⁰ Cited in Keesing, "Christians and Pagans", 85. For examples of indigenous initiatives in establishing Christian enclaves in coastal areas, see Bedford, *New Hebridean Mobility: A Study in Circular Migration*, 28-29; cf. Rodman, *Masters of Tradition: Consequences of Customary Land Tenure in Longana, Vanuatu*. 152-4; Joel Bonnemaison, "Territorial Control and Mobility within Nivatu Societies," in *Circulation in Population Movement, Substance and Concepts from the Melanesian Case*, ed. Murray Chapman and R. Mansell Prothero (London: Routledge, 1985).

⁷¹ Bedford, *New Hebridean Mobility*, 29.

⁷² Louise Morauta, *Left Behind in the Village: Economic and Social Conditions in an Area of High Outmigration* (Boroko, Papua New Guinea: Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research, 1984), 22.

The forest in which they had previously lived was associated with the idea of dark bush...of darkness and paganism in contrast with the brightness of the coastal areas, where the missions were...with the 'niu laef'...of their converts.⁷³

Melanesians often identify the *dak bus* (dark bush) with heathenism and coming down to the coast with conversion to Christianity but this binary elides the differences in processes and means between locales and over time. In the southern islands of Vanuatu/New Hebrides from the late 1840s and in the northern islands from the 1860s outsiders arrived by ship and therefore occupied coastal areas first and established their mission stations there. However, while the pull of mission administration and economic forces was undeniable in many areas of Melanesia, the conversion narratives of ni-Vanuatu Churches of Christ worshippers give equal weight to the initial urge of retreat in the face of dominant paganism and the need to reside nearby other Christians. At this point, I explore local conceptions of the establishment of villages through two vignettes: one, an account of the foundation of Nanako, west Ambae; the other, an account of a relatively recent instance of migration of people from Lonbwe to Panlimsi, south Pentecost. In part, these narratives further claims to the indigeneity of the church made by its parishioners. Such narratives emphasise the travails of the first indigenous missionaries, the danger (both physical and moral) posed to them by their pagan kin and their eventual retreat to lowland areas to establish Christian communities.

The origin narratives of Nanako, west Ambae, suggest that Willie Vutigele and a handful of local women established the settlement as a fresh start in the new moral order of Christianity. Women are central in most west Ambae conversion narratives. For example, in most versions of the origin narratives of the Churches of Christ in Nanako, Willie Vutigele's attempts to evangelise his home community were unsuccessful but for two women (named Mary Papinye and Qweto Kwesi⁷⁴). Indeed, women often take centre stage as the first local converts to Christianity. Like their analogues in missionary texts from Aneityum, 'heathen' women are depicted in local oral histories among the Churches of Christ – all of which were narrated by men – as 'the inert objects of male violence and exploitation'.⁷⁵ Bronwen Douglas suggests: 'The reported early interest in Christianity of many Aneityumese women figures only as a providential impulse or a reflex search for refuge and relief from brutality and

⁷³ Joel Bonnemaïson, "The Tree and the Canoe," in *Mobility and Identity in the Island Pacific*, ed. Murray Chapman and Philip S. Morrison (1985), 55.

⁷⁴ Solomon Kamali 22 Oct. 1999; Pastor Alick Vuti. Interview with the author, Bislama. 27 Oct. 1999, Saralokambo, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.

⁷⁵ Douglas, "Christian Citizens: Women and Negotiations of Modernity in Vanuatu.", 2.

drudgery'. However, the conversion narratives which dramatise these processes in west Ambae often privilege women as 'natural' converts to Christianity.⁷⁶ Commonly, they are represented as exemplars of Christianity in general and specifically of Churches of Christ doctrine. In particular, in church histories certain biologically determined traits are emphasised: commonly, women are represented as being naturally peaceful, more caring and having soft and forgiving hearts. One senior clergyman suggested to me that this augurs the eventual dominance of the clergy by women. Moreover, women are characterised as having been marginalised in 'traditional' societies. As represented in west Ambae conversion narratives, Christianity offered an antidote to the social marginalisation of women by tribal warfare, which is commonly constructed as the sole domain of men.⁷⁷ Furthermore, conversion offered avenues for sociality which countered the male-only rites of kava drinking, the domain of ranked pagan men; and remedied women's marginalisation from men's activities such as grade-taking rituals.⁷⁸ Thus, according to Vuti:

*Willie hemi go daon backegen from olgeta evriwan i stap trae blong poisenem hem. Olgeta evriwan i faet. Tufala woman nomo i folem hem. Olgeta woman i wantem samting ia [Christianity]. Kava i nogud. Kilim pik i nogud. Olgeta samting ia i bisnis blong ol man nomo. Taem olgeta i harem nius long Gospel olgeta i glad tumas.*⁷⁹

Willie [Vutigele] went back down to Nanako because everyone was trying to poison him. Everyone was fighting. Only two women followed him. All the women wanted this

⁷⁶ cf. McDougall, "Fellowship and Citizenship as Models of National Community: United Church Women's Fellowship in Ranongga, Solomon Islands.", 10; cf. Danylin Rutherford, "Love, Violence, and Foreign Wealth: Kinship and History in Biak, Irian Jaya," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4, no. 2 (1998)..

⁷⁷ A small but excellent corpus of research has amassed on the role of Melanesian women in warfare both as peacemakers and as provocateurs. See Bronwen Douglas, *Across the Great Divide: Journeys in History and Anthropology*, vol. 24, *Studies in Anthropology and History* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Harwood Academic Press, 1998), 113-158; Abby McLeod, "Where Are the Women in Simbu Politics?" *Development Bulletin, Political participation in the Pacific: Issues of gender, race and religion*, no. 59 (2002), 45; Alan Rumsey, "Women as Peacemakers - a Case from the Nebilyer Valley, Western Highlands, Papua New Guinea," in *Reflections on Violence in Melanesia*, ed. Sinclair Dinnen and Allison Ley (Canberra: Asia-Pacific Press, 2000).. However, women's role in warfare—as in most practices that are characterised as "traditional"—have been effaced from contemporary Churches of Christ conversion narratives.

⁷⁸ In much of Ambae, women were active participants in grade-taking ceremonies and they often had their own ranks. See e.g. Lissant Bolton, *Unfolding the Moon: Enacting Women's Kastom in Vanuatu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, c.2003), xxi-xxxiii, 3, 98-99, 100, 104, 142-143; Jean Tarisesei, "Today Is Not the Same as Yesterday, and Tomorrow It Will Be Different Again: Kastom on Ambae, Vanuatu" (paper presented at the Women, Christians, Citizens: Being Female in Melanesia Today Workshop, Sorrento, Victoria, 1998); Grace Mera Molisa. Interview with the author. 16 Dec. 2000, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.

⁷⁹ Ps. Alick Vuti, 27 Oct. 1999.

thing [Christianity]. Kava is no good. Killing pigs is no good. All these things are men's activities. When they heard the news of the Gospel, they were very happy.

In south Pentecost, eyewitness accounts about the migration of Lonlible villagers in 1966 to Panlimsi, about a kilometre inland from the local government headquarters at Pangl, valorise religious homogeneity as an ideal condition of the Christian community.⁸⁰ Today, most Churches of Christ villages there are situated along the leeward, southwestern seaboard, known in Bislama as the *smol si* (small sea). The major villages there are Ranputor, Pangl, Panas, Panlimpsi, Hotwater, Baravet and Waterfall. Ranwas is located on the windward east coast (*bik si*) nearby the customary settlement of Bunlap, where Margaret Jolly conducted her fieldwork.

The highland village of Lonlible first encountered the Churches of Christ during the residency of missionary Frank Filmer at Banmatmat in southwestern Pentecost between 1909 and 1919 but had probably been visited by Marists from Baie Barrier since the establishment of the mission station there from the 1880s onwards.⁸¹ Filmer documented many of the ebbs and flows of commitment to Christianity in Lonlible and Lonbwe during his residence at Banmatmat. He recorded in his diary that the people of Lonlible were in a constant state of war with surrounding villages but converted relatively quickly over the next two years after a ni-Vanuatu teacher was placed in the village and Filmer began to visit more regularly.⁸²

Margaret Jolly, using the oral histories of Lonbwe and Sankar pagans, also documented the fluctuations of faith in the area, which continued until the late 1950s. According to Jolly, pagans resisted evangelisation because the Churches of Christ proscribed traditional marriage practices, specifically bride price and sister exchange: 'The Church of Christ missionary Nathan, expressed his objection in the strongest possible terms. According to Molman of Sankar, Nathan said "*Woman em i no olsem pig mo buluk.*" (Women are not like pigs or cattle, for you exchange them like this)'.⁸³ Lonbwe people, she noted, were greatly affronted by these criticisms, believing that these practices were an essential part of *kastom*, specifically that kin ought to be compensated for the loss of a daughter, her capacities to work and bear children and that the removal of such

⁸⁰ See also British District Agent, Touring Notes, British District Agent, CDII, Paama, Pentecost, Ambrym, 5-11 Nov. 1966. F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969) NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Record Division, Hanslope Park, Buckinghamshire. (Hereinafter FCORD)

⁸¹ cf. Jolly, *Women of the Place*, 36.

⁸² Frank Filmer, undated manuscript. OMB

⁸³ Jolly, *Women of Place*, 38-39.

exchanges would lead to a breakdown in communications between pagan villages and threatened their existence.⁸⁴ Jolly suggests that Lonbwe reverted *en masse* to paganism. Jolly's account shares with many local Churches of Christ conversion narratives an emphasis on personal agency as fundamental to the success or failure of the evangelising project.

Most Churches of Christ people suggest that evangelism of Lonlibli involved the dispersal of the existing village, its division and the migration of three groups of villagers to other communities. Charley Tor, a resident of Panlimsi, recalls the village's formation:

*Mi mi go long sevis evri Sunde. Mi luk we i had tumas. Mi wantem tekem olgeta oli kam long saed ia. Olgeta tri jioj i stap long wanples. Yu no luksave we Christian mo we heathen. Mi tingting blong pulemaot pipol blong Church of Christ bambae oli kam real Church of Christ. Yu luk ol loa blong Anglican. Oli danis. Oli kilim pik. Oli dring kava. Naoia ol heten nomo oli stap long Lonlibli.*⁸⁵

We started this village [Panlimsi] because of Lonlibli. I went to service there [in Lonlibli] every Sunday. I saw that it was very hard for everyone. I wanted to bring everyone down here, to this side. There were three churches [sets of beliefs] in the one place: Anglicans, Church of Christ and heathen. You could not tell where was Christian or where was heathen. I thought [it would be better] to pull out all the Church of Christ people [so that] they would become real Church of Christ. Look at the law of the Anglicans. They dance. They kill pigs. They drink kava. [Because of these reasons] they [CofC] all came here. Now only heathens live in Lonlibli.

Tor's account of the migration is no doubt truncated but it echoes themes common to conversion narratives among the Churches of Christ. In particular, he foregrounded the vulnerability of Churches of Christ Christianity when placed alongside paganism but also alongside other Christian denominations, whose practices may be at odds with those of the Churches of Christ. In short, his account of conversion, migration and community played on a local tenet of the Christian village: communities should ideally constitute religiously homogenous groups to protect against backsliding or exposure to practices deemed damaging to the church.

Central to Churches of Christ conversion/migration narratives sampled from throughout the Churches of Christ in Ambae, Maewo and Pentecost is the perceived need to collect Christians in the one place. Contained in the imagination of Christian villages such as Panlimsi in south Pentecost in the form of a bounded unit with consistent religious beliefs, distinct from the disunity and violence of paganism, is a schedule for the ideal conditions of community among the Churches of Christ. The

⁸⁴ R. Lane, cited in Jolly, *Women of the Place*, 39.

⁸⁵ Charley Tor, former VP activist, Churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 28 Aug. 1999. Tape recording, notes.

formation of self-sufficient, religiously coherent villages reaffirms a central doctrine of Churches of Christ, which suggests that churches should be a fellowship of independent Christians, each of whom worships in a local Church of Christ.

Having emerged from the American Restoration Movement of the 1700s, from which sprang many other Congregationalist denominations such as the Christian Churches and the Disciples of Christ, the Churches of Christ constitute part of the world wide Congregationalist movement. Underscoring Congregationalist philosophies was the belief that each church should be a fellowship of independent Christians; every fellowship thus constitutes a Church of Christ. Each local church has jurisdiction over its parishioners and the parishioners exert considerable control over the direction of that church (the ministership of the laity). Moreover, each local congregation has as its head Jesus alone and relations between the various congregations are those of fellow members in one common family of God. Initially, the churches adhered to an anti-hierarchical and anti-organisational philosophy. While these tenets are still central to church thinking, the Churches of Christ are now generally governed by national conferences at which delegates from individual churches are represented.⁸⁶ To conclude, the creed of the Churches of Christ and the particular histories of the communities where its worshippers now live converged in local conceptions of the ideal conditions of Christianity. John Liu, a former president of the Conference Churches of Christ in Vanuatu, reflected on these conditions when he characterised the post-conversion Churches of Christ: 'in every village there was a church and in every church [there was] a village'.⁸⁷

Introducing Christian Traditions: Missionary Agendas of the Churches of Christ

The first European missionaries of the Churches of Christ arrived in the New Hebrides with a distinct agenda in mind: to evangelise and civilise the pagan communities of the New Hebrides. In practice, this strategy harboured a distinct antipathy for customary practices (*kastom*) as evocative of heathenism and its attendant conditions: dirtiness, primitivity and backwardness. The ideals underpinning civilisation, modernisation and evangelisation were not necessarily the same but the practical consequences and local reception of Christian civilisation strategies amounted to a form of modernity.

⁸⁶ Cited online at <http://www.churchesofchrist.org.au/theology/theol.html>. Worshippers in Australia are encouraged "to follow their commitment to Jesus by expressing their faith through baptism by immersion. Baptism is a symbol which marks a turning point."

⁸⁷ John Liu, President of the Vanuatu Regional Development and Training Colleges Association (VRDTCA) Interview with the author. 17 Aug. 1999, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes. cf. Spriggs, "A School in Every District: The Cultural Geography of Aneityum, Southern Vanuatu."

Considering the rise of traditional motifs in post-colonial political rhetoric, I am careful not to dichotomise tradition and modernity, although my interlocutors often did so.

The modernising aspects of missionary work throughout Melanesia were commonly ambivalent and often inadvertent, even if, in practice, their results were profound. Former missionaries now suggest that the church always sought to advance civilisation and modernisation through engagement with the cash economy.⁸⁸ The missionary emphasis on engagement with the cash economy through cash cropping would, it was hoped, drag local people from the stasis of subsistence agriculture, the practice of pig exchange and customary advancement rites such as the grade taking *na hungwe* in west Ambae. According to the official history of the Overseas Mission Board, planting coconuts was a means to thwart the alienation of local land and was quickly adopted by local people.⁸⁹ Here the particular subtlety of Christian modernity emerges: safeguarding indigenous land holding practices (arguably an aspect of *kastom* [customary practices]) contradicts the tenets of, for example, economic rationalist arguments which presumably demand individualisation of land tenure as a prerequisite to economic modernisation. It is crucial to distinguish between modernisation and westernisation: the maintenance of customary land tenure in cash-cropping enterprises suggests the furtherance of modernising agendas but not westernising ones. Moreover, as John Barker has suggested, missionaries often arrived in the field with assumptions about mission work based upon the theory that their own Christian traditions were derived from a style of village life eliminated in the modern western countries from which they came but still prevalent in the pre-Christian contexts of Melanesia.⁹⁰ (Barker's Anglican exemplars worked in Uiaku, in what is now Oro Province, Papua New Guinea; there were significant similarities with the assumptions carried by the Churches of Christ European missionaries.) The modern-day valence of these projects can be seen in the perception that west Ambae Churches of Christ people suffered less alienation than other islands because of the number of local coconut plantations. Moreover, in addition to facilitating the integration of communities into the cash economy, the local establishment of cash-crops in west Ambae and south Pentecost Churches of Christ communities marked an indigenous 'claim on the

⁸⁸ Allen, "Christianity and Cash-Cropping", 36.

⁸⁹ Bowes, *Partners*, 57.

⁹⁰ John Barker, "Cheerful Pragmatists: Anglican Missionaries among the Maisin of Collingwood Bay, Northeastern Papua, 1898-1920," *Journal of Pacific History* 22, no. 2 (1987), 67-69; see also Barker, "We Are Ekelesia; Conversion in Uiaku, Papua New Guinea."; Barker, "Village Inventions: Historical Variations Upon a Regional Theme in Uiaku, Papua New Guinea."

land...(because)...the coconuts are all at random, whereas the European plantation they're all in straight lines'.⁹¹

Michael Allen argues that by proxy the emphasis on coconut planting among the Churches of Christ indirectly led to the abandonment of pig-killing ceremonies in west Ambae. For example, Allen attributes the deterioration of the *na hungwe* to conversion and suggests it disappeared because of the market shortages caused by transition from the pig-economy (in which much land was devoted to pig husbandry) to the land-intensive coconut groves planted by Nduindui's Christians. There was 'a direct correlation between the increasing wealth and influence of the leading planters and a decreasing prestige of the pig-impoverished pagans'. Indeed, one former missionary suggested that 'the first missionaries had two gospels: one was preach Christ; and the other one was plant coconuts'.⁹²

Churches of Christ doctrine is still noteworthy because of its proscription of customary practices, specifically, the suppression of traditional medicine, kava drinking, sorcery, polygyny, sister exchange and rank taking ceremonies. Whereas Barker's exemplars allowed the continuance of certain traditions which were broadly compatible with their Anglo-Catholic Christian ideals – that is, those which fulfilled the requirements of 'playful beliefs rather than 'real powers of evil'⁹³ – Churches of Christ missionaries adopted a blanket approach to customary activities; they were all evocative of heathenism. Moreover, the Churches of Christ missionaries exported the abstemious principles of the Australian Churches of Christ and interdicted smoking, drinking alcohol and drinking kava (which fulfilled the requirements of both a drug and an ingredient in traditional male rituals). Thus, as Margaret Jolly noted in south Pentecost in the early 1970s, Churches of Christ people were defined by their:

confrontational style with their *kastom* kin and most strenuously eschew *kastom* as incompatible with *skul* (school, church). They forbid not only polygyny, bride price and sister exchange but the keeping of pigs, the drinking of kava and any indigenous rites or religious beliefs. They are, of all the *Sa* [the language of South Pentecost] speakers the ones most heavily involved in cash cropping of copra, cacao and coffee, the herding of cattle and the pursuit of schooling for their children.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Graham Warne, 28 Apr. 1999.

⁹² Jack Edwards, former missionary, Ranwadi School, central Pentecost. Interview with the author. 26 Apr. 1999, Mulgrave Theological College, Victoria. Tape recording, notes.

⁹³ See Barker, "Cheerful Pragmatists", 68.

⁹⁴ Jolly, *Women of the Place*, 38-39.

The assault on pre-contact religious beliefs – glossed by local Christians as superstitions or possibly evidence of Satanism – among pagans does not feature greatly as a theme in the origin narratives of the Churches of Christ in Vanuatu. Most ni-Vanuatu members of the Churches of Christ recognise some power in *kastom* sorcery and poisoning, for example, although such beliefs are commonly publicly downplayed as echoes of the *taem bifo* (time before), the pre-Christian past. Yet, as Garry Trompf observed, oral histories recounted by local Christians to a researcher interested in the church may focus on the benefits of the church but may elide or obscure instances of conflict because they do not directly relate to the interlocutors' Christianised present.⁹⁵ I am unable to discern which parts of contemporary Churches of Christ practices have their origins or correlates in pre-contact, indigenous rituals. Moreover, my knowledge of local conceptions of Christianity and its interplay with local or pre-existing cosmologies is limited by my lack of vernacular expertise in the languages spoken in Churches of Christ areas.⁹⁶

Historically, the church's interdiction of *kastom* distinguished it from its near missionary neighbours. Relations between the Churches of Christ and the Melanesian Mission were generally amicable, despite the Melanesian Mission's being more lenient regarding customary practices. The Presbyterian Church, which shared the Churches of Christ's proscription of customary practices, rarely had cause to collude: the two denominations did not share an evangelising field until the late 1940s (see Chapter 4). But neighbouring Catholic Marist missionaries looked on the Churches of Christ's proscription of customary activities as inherently flawed. According to Père Groetz, the Marist missionary at Lolopuépué, north Ambae, the Churches of Christ's interdiction of customary practices was ignorant of the activities of many of the church's adherents and possibly jeopardised their overall evangelistic enterprise. In 1943, Groetz reported gleefully that the lead teacher from the Churches of Christ had engaged in a 'grand killing of pigs'.⁹⁷ This account is opaque because Groetz did not name the teacher (although he probably referred to Abel Bani, the pre-eminent leader of the Churches of Christ after World War II) and he tried to assert the superiority of the Marist approach

⁹⁵ See Garry Trompf, "Oral Sources and the Study of Religious History in Papua New Guinea," ed. Donald Denoon and Roderic Lacey (1981), 164-5.

⁹⁶ All interviews were conducted in Bislama, Vanuatu's neo-Melanesian variant. Many church services were conducted in vernacular languages, for which I relied upon translations and explanations made by my friends and other interlocutors.

⁹⁷ Monnier, *Histoire De La Mission Catholique Au Vanuatu. Ile Ambae: Nangire-Loné*. 33.

to missionisation. Margaret Jolly suggested that a grand killing of pigs may have marked the formal cessation of pig killing as a ritualised practice.⁹⁸

In general, throughout northern Vanuatu (the New Hebrides), relations between the Churches of Christ and their Marist neighbours were characteristically caustic. In south Pentecost, Marists considered the Churches of Christ missionaries 'fishers in troubled waters': interlopers in areas of Catholic influence.⁹⁹ In central Pentecost, the two churches clashed over the contending land claims of their adherents at Ranwadi and Vanwocky, neighbouring villages joined by kinship but differentiated by religion. Both communities were contained within the land claimed by the early indigenous evangelist/missionary Willie Tabymancon and through him, the Churches of Christ, for their earliest station at Ranwadi. Thus, in addition to being the administrative headquarters of the Churches of Christ in central Pentecost for over a decade, Ranwadi was also symbolically important. Mission correspondence suggests that the dispute was based on whether Tabymancon had any claim to the land on which he had built his first mission school; according to claimants from Vanwocky, Tabymancon had no rightful claim over any of the land at Ranwadi.¹⁰⁰ The dispute provoked claim and counter-claim in the Joint Court of the New Hebrides from 1936 onwards (and again after independence). Tangentially, it infected relations between the Churches of Christ mission and the Anglo-French Condominium; especially after the Catholic claimants were victorious in several cases presented to the Joint Court for adjudication. For Churches of Christ missionaries such as Harold Finger, who had pioneered missionary work in Pentecost, Ambae and Maewo, the reverses in the Joint Court compounded his entrenched anti-papist attitudes and prompted him to extend his animus to the British Administration, which had clearly failed to uphold the interests of the Churches of Christ mission. In a letter written to Albert Anderson, the Secretary of the Foreign Mission Board, he stated:

It seems to me that in the future we need to reassure ourselves that anything that this government does is not to help the people spiritually and morally but for other purposes mostly contrary to Christian teaching. I think that the less we take from them the better if this is an expression of their interest in the sacrificial work of missions.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Margaret Jolly, personal communication.

⁹⁹ Jolly, *Women of the Place*, 37; Paul Monnier, *One Hundred Years of Mission, 1887-1987* (Port Vila: Imprimerie de Port Vila, 1987), 54.

¹⁰⁰ Jack Smith, Ranwadi Station, to A. Anderson, Secretary, Foreign Missions Board, 5 Oct. 1954. OMB.

¹⁰¹ Harold Finger, Maewo, to Arthur Anderson, 20 May 1957. OMB.

These themes of resistance to the colonial order and the trenchant opposition of Churches of Christ worshippers to traditional practices are replicated in contemporary oral narratives about the early indigenous leaders of the church (see Chapter 4). However, I do not suggest that local people adopted the preferences and prejudices of their missionaries unthinkingly, although there were undoubtedly some mutual slippages between their respective ideals.

Shared missions and separate agendas: conflict between local Christians and foreign missionaries

Today in west Ambae, local people celebrate their ancestors' trenchant opposition to heathenism as necessary to the furtherance of the Churches of Christ but the local interdiction of pagan activities in west Ambae underscores the events that became a pivotal moment in early church history. In this section, I seek to show how anti-*kastom* and anti-government sentiments among the early Churches of Christ leaders of west Ambae coalesced in relation to the actions of the church council, a (for the time) modern institution which governed the lives of local Christians in varying ways and on-and-off between its formation in 1911 and independence. I take up this theme in Chapter 4, during a discussion of the attempts of the Anglo-French Condominium to institute local councils (and other forms of decentralised government) throughout the New Hebrides, especially in relation to west Ambae oral histories in which local councils are criticised implicitly by being contrasted with church councils.

To contextualise these issues, I will briefly describe the origins of the church councils and the nature of the breakdown in relations between the Anglo-French Condominium and the west Ambae Churches of Christ. Under the leadership of Sale Bani, an early Christian leader in west Ambae in 1911-1924, and the Churches of Christ missionary, A. Theodore Waters, Churches of Christ men formed church councils to govern local worshippers. The origins of the church council, as documented in colonial archives, are opaque: west Ambae oral histories suggest that church councils were founded on Sale Bani's initiative (see below and Chapter 4); in correspondence with the British Resident Commissioner, Waters claims that he initiated the council.¹⁰² (Local people and former missionaries have suggested that this could have been a strategy to protect indigenous leaders against the French or British Administration. I have been unable to establish the veracity of this claim.)

¹⁰² A. Theo Waters Correspondence to British Resident Commissioner King, 29 Dec. 1911 - 27 May 1912. NHBS 1 (I) 1907-1942 (1902-1954) 104/1911 Nomination of chiefs of Aoba. 1911-1922. FCORD; See also Albert Anderson, Annual Report, 1936: Oba. OMB.

Apart from oral histories, most of what I know about Sale Bani is derived from a dossier in the Western Pacific High Commission Archives, held in the United Kingdom, which contains correspondence relating to complaints by a French trader, Montaigne, in west Ambae. Montaigne reported to the French Residency in Port Vila that Churches of Christ people had constituted an independent government and formed a 'native police' opposed to the 'pig-chiefs' of the Ambae hinterland. Since the late nineteenth century, traders had profited from the pig trade, transporting large numbers of tusked pigs – in 1899, worth at least £30 each¹⁰³ – for exchange rituals and local chiefly advancement such as the *na hungwe*.¹⁰⁴ The operations of the church council, specifically the suppression of customary activities (*kastom*) threatened Montaigne's trade. There was no necessary opposition between *kastom* and modernity for the church council. The suppression of *kastom* was as much theological and political as a modernising strategy. The pig trade with highlanders involving French merchants shows that modernity and tradition were not necessarily antithetical.

Among the principal functions of the councils was the enforcement of internal discipline within the church. Church councils established strict guidelines for church people, including proscribing involvement with traditional dancing and pig-exchange. In practice, the church councils were opposed to pig-exchange and other heathen practices. In 1912, finances raised from fines were forwarded to the British Resident Commissioner, King, and to the Churches of Christ missions in Pentecost to fund projects there.¹⁰⁵ In correspondence between Waters and the British Resident Commissioner, Merton King, Waters suggested that local people perceived the aims and actions of the church council as compatible with their expectations of the Condominium's civilising agenda. In short, local people appeared to see a correlation between their aims (suppressing *kastom*, furthering Christianity and civilisation) and the British Administration's aims (furthering civilisation, pacification, etc.). Waters described Sale Bani Findalua, as 'the first man of the government', a local ally of the Condominium administration against the heathen chiefs (pig chiefs) of the west Ambae interior. In the few of Sale Bani's letters that survive, he also depicted himself as the

¹⁰³ "The Rev. Peter Milne at Oba", *New Hebrides Magazine*, October 1901, 16.

¹⁰⁴ The Rev. Peter Milne in an open letter to Australian Presbyterians stated that European style "Boats and cutters from Malo, Epi and the Banks Islands (as well as Fila [Vila]), trade in pigs." "The Rev. Peter Milne at Oba", *New Hebrides Magazine*, Oct. 1901, 16.

¹⁰⁵ A. Theo Waters Correspondence to British Resident Commissioner King, 29 Dec. 1911 - 27 May 1912. NHBS 1 (I) 1907-1942 (1902-1954) 104/1911 Nomination of chiefs of Aoba. 1911-1922. FCORD; Frank G. Filmer, Receipt of £20 from A. Theo Waters, 01 Oct. 1912. NHBS 1 (I) 1907-1942 (1902-1954) 104/1911 Nomination of chiefs of Aoba. 1911-1922. FCORD.

servant of the British Administration and refers to the church council as the 'government headmen'.¹⁰⁶

For the British and French administrations within the Anglo-French Condominium, the notion of religious leadership was antithetical. Although the Anglo-French Condominium had to accommodate the Christian denominations that operated in the New Hebrides because they furthered the civilisation, modernisation and westernisation of local communities, most colonial administrators preferred the imposition of social order through secular colonial officers. Military officers undertook these duties but after the enactment of the Protocol relating to the New Hebrides in 1914, district agents became responsible for governing the islands indirectly, on behalf of the respective British and French Resident Commissioners (for a detailed account of the structure of the colonial state, see Chapter 4). Thus, Resident Commissioner Merton King was initially unsure of how to approach Bani's claim to be the representative in west Ambae of the 'government'. Although he articulated few reservations about local church councils' right to set their own adherents to work on the roads for transgressions of church doctrine, he opposed the church council's attempts to impose fines upon pagans stridently.¹⁰⁷ The French Administration was also demonstrably averse to the theocratic tendencies of the church council, perhaps more so owing to Montaigne's agency in bringing the issue to the attention of the Condominium and their apparent support for trade.¹⁰⁸

Indeed, the repressive aspects of the church council's approach to pagans elicited repeated warnings from the French residency. For example, in 1914, the Resident Commissioner stated that 'it is undesirable that [the church council] should constitute

¹⁰⁶ Declaration to the Condominium Government of the New Hebrides of the Formation of the Nduindui Council, sgd. Fred Purdy, A. Theo Waters, Sale Banifidalua, 19 Mar. 1912. NHBS 1 (I) 1907-1942 (1902-1954) 104/1911 Nomination of chiefs of Aoba. 1911-1922. FCORD.

¹⁰⁷ M. King, British Resident Commissioner to Sali Bani, 16 Apr. 1912. NHBS 1 (I) 1907-1942 (1902-1954) 104/1911 Nomination of chiefs of Aoba. 1911-1922. FCORD.

¹⁰⁸ Indeed, this theme has inflected most accounts of the breakdown in relations between the Condominium and west Ambae's Churches of Christ leaders. The historian, Deryck Scarr, depicted French antipathy for Sale Bani as an attempt to thwart local strategies of defence against land alienation and support the agendas of French entrepreneurs who vied for land grabs across to archipelago and "from 1912 onward there was a marked increased in French hostility to the Protestant missions, with a corresponding increase in the active support the French gave to the non-Christian islanders". Scarr argued that, this "was because the mission organisation had come to be used to build opposition to European land claims. The teachers and chiefs, inspired, no doubt, by their missionaries, were collecting money from people, with which to retain the services of Edward Jacomb to fight the claims of - especially - the SFNH [Société Française des Nouvelles-Hebrides] when they should eventually come before the Joint Court." Scarr, *Fragments of Empire: A History of the Western Pacific High Commission 1877-1914*, 238.

itself into an inquisition. Religion whether Christian or Savage is free in the New Hebrides and this policy should be maintained'.¹⁰⁹ Although they adhered to the principle in different ways, both colonial powers operated the principle of the separation of state and church as far as practicable.

In 1913, King acquiesced to the complaints of his French counterpart. The French Administration responded and on 30 June 1914 Privat, captain of the warship *Kersaint*, arrived in west Ambae and arrested Bani.¹¹⁰ Bani was incarcerated in Port Vila for two years, apparently without charge, until pressure from Waters and Anglican Melanesian Mission missionaries eventually forced his release.¹¹¹ However, Bani's arrest did not alleviate tension between Ambae's Churches of Christ people and the pagan communities in the west Ambae hinterland and therefore relations between the church council and the Condominium remained tense. In west Ambae, friction between French traders and the local leaders continued, risking for west Ambae people further attention from the colonial authorities. However, the continued repression of indigenous religious practices by the council – and the punishment of local church adherents for participating in 'pagan' rituals – made relations between the Condominium Administration and the church councils characteristically antagonistic.

Michael Allen suggested that Sale Bani's arrest by French officers engendered longstanding resistance to any colonial intervention in west Ambae and was the foundation of the strongly held belief that west Ambae people should resist all colonial intervention because it was potentially disastrous.¹¹² Indeed, after Abel Bani's accession to the leadership of west Ambae's Churches of Christ, resistance to the colonial order again became entrenched; it is a major theme in the oral histories upon

¹⁰⁹ Cited in A. Theodore Waters to British Resident Commissioner, 1 Jul 1914 (Rec. 10 Aug. 1914) NHBS 1 (I) 1907-1942 (1902-1954) 104/1911 Nomination of chiefs of Aoba. 1911-1922. FCORD. In 1932, the French residency again warned church councillors, through the mission, that by making local people liable to eviction or fine because of their attendance at traditional dances, the church council was provoking government intervention. French Residency to British District Agent, Northern District, Hog Harbour, 19 Apr. 1932. Memo No. 224. NHBS 1/1 III (3) MP Series (1902-1954) 219/1932 French Agent's Reports of Native Disturbances. FCORD. They determined that holding an Islander against his or her will for breaching church regulations was conspiracy, assault - if accompanied by threatening behaviour - and constituted the civil offence of false imprisonment. French residency, Port Vila, to F. McKay [sic] 14 Mar. 1931. Memorandum No. 138. NHBS 1/1 III (3) MP Series (1902-1954) 51/1931 Complaint by Viratabuti of Aoba against Mr McKay. 1931-1934. FCORD.

¹¹⁰ A. Theodore Waters to British Resident Commissioner, 1 Jul. 1914 (Rec. 10 Aug. 1914) NHBS 1 (I) 1907-1942 (1902-1954) 104/1911 Nomination of chiefs of Aoba. 1911-1922. FCORD.

¹¹¹ See Howard van Trease, *The Politics of Land*, 156.

¹¹² Michael Allen, *Report on Aoba*, 38.

which this thesis is based. Yet the forcefulness of oral histories which foreground the dangers for local people of engaging with the colonial state is, I suggest, historically and politically contingent. Such histories justified the political stance adopted by Abel Bani against colonial interference in west Ambae affairs. Many west Ambae people still tell this version of their history but its political salience has declined since Abel Bani was surpassed as the leader of the Churches of Christ (see Chapter 4).

As this vignette shows, Churches of Christ people and their missionaries were clearly unified in their strict aversion to paganism as early as 1911. However, colonial and missionary archives contain fleeting glimpses of west Ambae's church councils acting contra the imperatives of Churches of Christ missionaries. Although the councils initially augmented mission authority and advanced the Churches of Christ's agenda of civilisation by suppressing heathenism, by the 1930s the councils' authority also countered the secular imperatives of missionaries. In 1936, the Nduindui church council refused to accept the transference of Robert Sandells, who had ministered Ranmawot in Pentecost, as the new missionary in west Ambae.¹¹³ Albert Anderson, the President of the Foreign Missions Board, reported that the Nduindui council members were conscious that 'if the missionary comes a great deal of the power will be taken from them...it might be fair to say that the spirit of nationalism might have been one factor against Bro. Sandells'.¹¹⁴ Sandells returned to Australia shortly afterwards.¹¹⁵ The nationalism that Anderson spoke of privileged indigenous agency over the apparatuses of the colonial state but it hinted that local leaders of the west Ambae Churches of Christ wished to maintain their ascendancy over the direction of local parishioners. Indeed, by 1939, the alliance between the Churches of Christ foreign missionaries and the people of Nduindui had soured in an environment of deep mutual suspicion between Europeans and locals. Lionel Dudley, the resident missionary and George Purdy – Fred Purdy's son – made a joint request with the French trader Marinacce for the French and British District Agents and 20 police to be dispatched to Nduindui to investigate the danger posed to 'whites' by local people.¹¹⁶ The letter,

¹¹³ Albert Anderson, Foreign Mission Board Secretary's Annual Report, 1936: Pentecost. OMB.

¹¹⁴ Albert Anderson Foreign Mission Board Secretary's Annual Report, 1936: Oba. OMB.

¹¹⁵ Churches of Christ Missionary Register. OMB.

¹¹⁶ Group letter to the British Resident Commissioner, Nduindui Aoba, New Hebrides, 26 May 1939 re race relations. NHBS 1/1 Vol III (3) 180/1939 Unrest in Aoba, 1939. 1939-1940. FCORD. See also Le commissaire-résident de France aux Nouvelle-Hébrides à monsieur le Délégué Français du Condominium à Santo, 31 Mai 1939. NHBS 1/1 Vol III (3) 180/1939 Unrest in Aoba, 1939. 1939-1940. FCORD.

signed by nine resident Europeans, including Alfred Ernest Teall, the Melanesian Mission priest at Lolowai, read:

Sir the Conditions on Aoba and at Nduindui in particular have reached a stage when we the white residents of Aoba beg that an immediate inquiry be instituted for the benefit of both Europeans and Natives.

In contemporary accounts of church councils, much of their value is in the claim to self-determination for west Ambae Churches of Christ people, from both the mission and the colonial government. Local church leaders often counteracted the imperatives of the colonial state but they also challenged the authority of the mostly Australian missionaries of the Churches of Christ who lived among them and whose Christian denomination they shared. Having converted to Christianity in the early part of the 20th century, the people of west Ambae looked to missionaries principally for religious guidance but were reluctant to defer to their dictates on putatively secular issues. Claiming equality in the eyes of God for their ancestors, local Churches of Christ people now depict the independence of the church councils as the right of Christians to ‘make their own law’. Shared religion did not always preclude the furtherance of local agendas within the Churches of Christ, using church councils to the detriment of missionary authority.

Engagements with Modernity in Local Representations of Missionaries

My analysis has so far been concerned to document the emphasis on indigenous agency in the local conversion narratives of the Churches of Christ in Vanuatu. However, missionaries are far from invisible in oral histories about the Churches of Christ. They play pivotal roles in oral histories that describe events in the post war period (1945-1980) of church expansion and the foundation of key church institutions (many of which occurred within the living memory of my interlocutors, see Chapter 3). In the course of recounting the history of the church after World War II, most local people stress the role missionaries played in establishing secular church activities such as medical centres (hospitals and dispensaries) and educational institutions (secondary schools and technical colleges). Indeed, such secular church activities are commonly recalled in oral histories about the Churches of Christ as central to the strength of the church and – somewhat paradoxically – conceived of in religious terms as crucial to the overall evangelising project. In addition to actual churches, the centres of Churches of Christ mission activity were always schools and by the 1940s and 50s, increasing emphasis was placed on developing hospitals and technical colleges. In 1957, no government hospitals had been established in the three main islands of Churches of Christ influence and missionaries considered their communities lucky ‘if a doctor visits

more than once a year'.¹¹⁷ However, each of the eleven Churches of Christ missionaries stationed in the New Hebrides at the time was engaged in medical or educational work.¹¹⁸ Christian missions advanced civilisation under the rubric of conversion and education among their parishes (albeit acting through or guided by indigenous Christians), until the 1960s and were still among the most visible agents of modernisation afterwards. With the arrival of Australian missionaries after 1903, primary schools were established at Ranwadi in Pentecost, Nduindui in Ambae and Nasawa in Maewo. With the onset of the Pacific War in 1941, the Condominium encouraged missionaries to vacate their mission fields.

The localisation and indigenisation of Churches of Christ throughout Asia and the Pacific became central to the agenda of the Australian Churches of Christ's Foreign Missions Board after 1952.¹¹⁹ After this time, Australian and New Zealander Churches of Christ missionaries sought to advance local independence and national self-sufficiency for churches in their major mission fields of China, India, Rhodesia, the New Hebrides and Papua New Guinea. In 1957, Ron McLean, who was stationed in west Ambae, declared that the failure to form a cadre of local leaders in the New Hebrides 'of adequate culture, sterling character and of undoubtful devotion' would be utter failure for the missionary enterprise.¹²⁰ McLean's comments anticipated the devolution of decision-making power to church leaders (initially mostly foreign missionaries but eventually local Christians) by a year. The first general conference of the New Hebrides Churches of Christ was conducted in 1958 and after 1964 ni-Vanuatu church members became full participants.

Although they were often at odds with the Condominium collectively or with the policies and agendas of one or both of the colonial national administrations, by the 1960s the Churches of Christ's missionaries often considered themselves the Condominium's 'friends on the front line'.¹²¹ Until the 1950s, the Anglo-French Condominium (and the individual British and French Administrations) deferred to the

¹¹⁷ Ron McLean, "Preaching Christ in the New Hebrides," in *Provocative Pamphlets* (Melbourne: 1957), 3.

¹¹⁸ Ron McLean, "Preaching Christ in the New Hebrides", 3.

¹¹⁹ Bowes, *Partners*, 64; The Churches of Christ in India were the first to be granted self-determination through the establishment of a national conference of Churches of Christ.

¹²⁰ McLean, "Preaching Christ in the New Hebrides.", 3.

¹²¹ Graham Warne, former Principal, Ranwadi Technical College. Interview with the author, English. 28 Apr. 1999, Churches of Christ Theological College, Mulgrave, Victoria.

authority of Christian missions to provide education and health services for ni-Vanuatu.¹²² The Condominium was also largely ambivalent regarding local administration, although a system of indirect rule managed by District Agents operated throughout the colony until the late 1970s (see Chapter 4).

The most prominent institution established by the Churches of Christ was the Nduindui hospital, initially founded in 1943 as a maternity ward by Sister Mary Clipstone, a trained nurse and missionary.¹²³ Three years later, Clipstone married Harold Finger and the two established Ranmawot hospital in Pentecost. After 1950, local men were trained as medical dressers. In 1953, the Fingers were posted to Maewo where they established another hospital at Nasawa. During the visit by the President of the Foreign Mission Board, Albert Anderson, to Nduindui in 1959, local church leaders requested that a doctor be sent. Consequently, several New Zealand medical missionaries, including a doctor, David Coulter, were sent to Nduindui. In 1965, Nduindui Hospital was upgraded: six new buildings were established, enlarging the hospital to a 50-bed capacity. The renovations were enabled by a £2,250 grant by the New Zealand Leper Trust but the Churches of Christ raised most of the money for the renovations locally: The Nduindui Churches of Christ contributed £4,500 towards the

¹²² Beginning in the early 1960s, both sought to overcome this inertia, arguably for different reasons. Former British colonial officers argue that they intended to create an indigenous elite to “pave the way for indigenous self-government”. See e.g. Brian J. Bresnihan and Keith Woodward, eds., *Tufala Gavman, Reminiscences from the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies and University of the South Pacific, 2002), 49-50. French policy had similar aims but was also geared towards protecting Francophonie and arguably furthering French imperialist agendas. See Beasant, *The Santo Rebellion, an Imperial Reckoning.*; van Trease, *The Politics of Land in Vanuatu: From Colony to Independence.*; Howard van Trease, ed., *Melanesian Politics: Stael Bong Vanuatu* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1995). British policymakers, however, generally eschewed the establishment of secular schools - except for the British Secondary School in Port Vila - in favour of offering grant assistance to Protestant mission schools. Similarly, the French Administration extended funding to Catholic schools in regional areas and established the *Lycée d'Antoine Bougainville* in Port Vila in the early 1970s. By the late 1970s, the French Administration established and funded several French medium schools in areas where the Nagriamel Movement proliferated, founding, for example, a French Primary School in Vinangwangwe, west Ambae, which opened in 1980. I document their policy shift regarding local government in Chapter 4.

¹²³ Bowes, *Partners*, 77. The themes of medical mission and maternity converge in the sole example of “women’s history” for the Churches of Christ, a nine-page pamphlet produced by a west Ambae woman, Nellie Sese in 1993. Sese harnesses the origins of the Nduindui Hospital to a growing sense of “women’s history” among the Churches of Christ and the current legacies of it. See Sese, “History of the Women’s Work in the Churches of Christ in Vanuatu.” Mary Clipstone trained older women in midwifery and encouraged educated younger women to become nurses. Certainly, stories about the foundation of the mission hospital suggest that the agency of particular women benefited the entire community. Sese argued that the Nduindui hospital was established after an alliance was formed between Isobel Toka, a local women’s meeting leader and the daughter of Willie Vutigele, who offered her land as the site for the hospital, Sister Clipstone and a local business leader, Cain Sese.

construction costs.¹²⁴ The Churches of Christ mission operated the 50-bed Nduindui Hospital until 1983 when it was handed over to the Vanuatu government. It was subsequently downgraded and much of the equipment was transferred to Lolowai Hospital in east Ambae.

For many Churches of Christ people, their contributions to the establishment of institutions such as Nduindui Hospital were a source of immense local pride, not least because the ability of local church programs to effect change in rural areas appeared to surpass that of the colonial government (and indeed, contrasts with the inertia of national governments since independence). A senior church member recounted to me: 'The government were surprised. We have got this hospital with fifty beds. They had not worked [to build] it. They had given us nothing. The missions gave help, volunteers gave help, so they recognised that our church could get these kind of things done ... they [the government] could not make things [happen] as this!'

Similarly, Maewo people recall the construction of the Nasawa technical college and the hydroelectric scheme which powered it as essentially collaborative projects. For example, the resident missionary in Nasawa between 1958 and 1968, an eccentric Victorian, Reg Combridge, planned and managed the construction of a hydroelectric scheme, beginning in 1960. That year, a visiting British district agency officer was concerned that Combridge often appeared to be preoccupied with tinkering with mechanical contrivances.¹²⁵ However, Nasawa's hydroelectric scheme occupies a central position in oral histories about the Churches of Christ mission in Nasawa. Nasawa's hydroelectric scheme powered the Nasawa Technical College and provided continuous electricity until the late-1970s. Rather than constructing narratives around the works of the missionaries, local people regard these achievements as part of the overall work of Christian mission in which most Maewo Churches of Christ people played an integral part. In addition to building the waterwheel, local people trained in church institutions and took part in the decision-making process governing church institutions. Paul Ren Tari, a former Speaker of the Vanuatu parliament and MP for Maewo from Beterara, remembered such collaborative projects with 'a heart of pride'.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Bowes, *Partners*, 78.

¹²⁵ Notes of the visit to Nasawa, Maewo, 29 Jul. 1960. F1/4/8 NHBS 8 (III) General Correspondence, multiple number new series, 1954-1966. FCORD.

¹²⁶ Paul Ren Tari, [former] Speaker of Parliament. Interview with the author, Bislama/English. 9 Apr. 2000, Parliament House, Port Vila.

In contemporary reflections of the value of collaborative Christian projects, then, the establishment of institutions such as Nduindui Hospital or Nasawa Technical College have contributed to a sense that the benefits of Christian sociality within the framework of the Churches of Christ are more valuable than the benefits accrued under the colonial state, or those of the post-colonial state of Vanuatu. Ironically, while these collaborative projects have been harnessed to local discourses which privilege Christianisation over the value of state building, they have simultaneously contributed to a nationalist discourse in which local people attribute missionaries, rather than colonial officers, with preparing them for independence. As Lewis Wari, from Ranlitor, recalled: *'Ol misonari blong mifala...oli bin priperem mifala ...Mifala tek ova hed ofis long Santo longtaem finis...hed long ol institusen ol blak man nomo'*.¹²⁷ [Our missionaries prepared us...We took over the head office in Santo...[At independence] the heads of all the institutions were all just black men.]

Conclusions

In each of the sections of this chapter, I have explored the representations of indigenous agency, community and modernity as reflected in oral histories of the Churches of Christ and placed them in historical and ethnological context. In oral histories about the Churches of Christ, local people foreground the agency of indigenous people in conversion and consequently depict Christianity as indigenous. In short, despite the agency of white missionaries, Christianity – and the Churches of Christ in particular – has been appropriated by local people. As I argued in the final section of this chapter, missionaries were not absent from church narratives but in oral traditions about the first conversions, the agency of missionaries is subordinated to that of local people. Thus, local people are constructed as the pivotal agents of evangelism and missionisation, they claimed agency in the formation and direction of church councils and they depicted the establishment of church institutions as collaborative projects, in which expert knowledge was requested from outside (Australia/New Zealand) but for which planning, negotiation and funding were generated locally. Thus, rather than constructing narratives around the works of the missionaries, these achievements are conceived as part of the overall work of Christian mission in which Islanders played an integral part. This theme, then, unifies the five major sections of this chapter. I have primarily documented here local histories which foreground indigenous agency when explaining causation for the transformations which conversion to the Churches of Christ entailed for local people in Vanuatu. For many of my

¹²⁷ Ps. Lewis Warri, Churches of Christ minister, former Provincial administrator. Interview with the author, Bislama/English. 27 Aug. 1999, Ranlitor. Tape recording, notes.

interlocutors, the symbolic importance of foregrounding local agency versus that of foreign missionaries grounded conversion as an indigenous initiative, rather than something imposed from outside and furthered their claims that Christianity is indeed indigenous. Moreover, because their contributions to projects such as the building of the Nduindui Hospital were sources of immense local pride, not least because they appeared to surpass the ability of the colonial or national governments to effect change in rural areas, shared experience as Churches of Christ worshippers necessarily contributed to their formulation of identities based around the church and its cooperative works. Having documented the oral traditions and eyewitness accounts which place the Churches of Christ in contemporary context, I turn now to discuss local oral histories of the activities of the indigenous leader of the Churches of Christ between World War II and independence, elder Abel Bani.

3.

CYRUS, SERVANT OF GOD:

Abel Bani and the Evangelisation of Nagriamel

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Churches of Christ people reflect on the effects of Nagriamel's popularity in their communities between the late 1960s and independence, particularly in light of the effect that that relationship had upon the leader of the Churches of Christ, Abel Bani. I contextualise these fragmentary oral narratives in historical context by documenting the diverse reflections of colonial officers, predominantly from the British National Service, contained in colonial archives and those of foreign missionaries of the Churches of Christ contained in mission correspondence. I focus on those oral histories aggregated around the notion that Abel Bani advocated involvement with Nagriamel by the Churches of Christ for ultimately evangelistic ends. I seek to disentangle the multiple themes of church expansion and evangelism undertaken under his leadership, his rise and fall and the emergence of the group of trained ministers who still dominate the Churches of Christ. In so doing, I seek to address two themes: first, to demonstrate the highly subjective nature of oral histories (eye-witness accounts, life histories); second, to demonstrate through the use of local oral histories and colonial/missionary written archives the beginning of the relationships and events that now exemplify *politik* in local historicities.

To these ends, I have divided the chapter into three sections. First, I describe the beginning of an indigenously inspired program of evangelism in Espiritu Santo undertaken by west Ambae Churches of Christ people. Describing this program, I examine the ways in which they now reflect on how this process contributed to the categorisation of its instigator, elder Abel Bani (pictured below), as central to the strength of the church. Second, I seek to document the growing relationship between the Churches of Christ and Nagriamel, after Nagriamel's formation in 1967, and the ways in which past and present Churches of Christ worshippers now reflect on that relationship. Specifically, I explore the recurrent theme in oral histories about the interplay between the Churches of Christ and Nagriamel, the resurgence of *kastom*. Third, I address the emergence of a cadre of trained ministers within the Churches of Christ and document the ways in which ni-Vanuatu Churches of Christ worshippers

now reflect on the means and justifications for their distancing of Nagriamel, based on the need to oppose aspects of *kastom*, a theme which I take up again in Chapter 6.

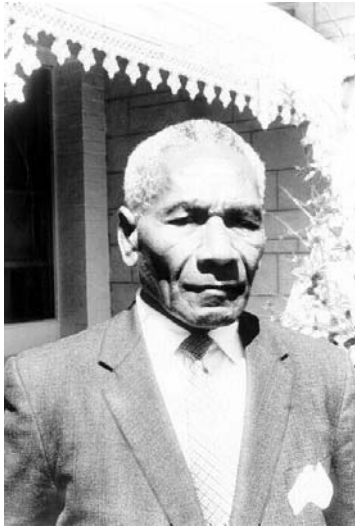


Photo.03 Abel Bani (Photo: courtesy OMB, Adelaide.)

This chapter takes its name from a reflection made by Amon Ngwele, Abel Bani's son, on the benefits of the relationship with Nagriamel and in particular on its leader, Jimmy Stephens: '*Jimmy Stephens hemi olsem Cyrus, servant of God. Hemi nogud be tru long Hem hemi unifiem olgeta pipol mo tu hemi winim smol fridoms long ol pipol tu*'.¹ [Jimmy Stephens was like Cyrus, servant of God. He was no good but through Him he unified all the people and he won small freedoms for the people too.] As narrated in the Old Testament (Isaiah 41-44), Cyrus the Great – the founder of the Persian Empire – is Jehovah's ambiguous instrument for inflicting judgment on Babylon and for delivering the Israelites

– God's people – from idolatry. He attracted the title 'servant of God' because, while he was neither an Israelite nor actively working in God's name, he is central to the prophecy of Isaiah in which the coming of the Messiah is foretold. By characterising Jimmy Stephens as Cyrus, Amon Ngwele fitted Jimmy Stephens uncomfortably into a biblical narrative and in so doing masked the damage done to the Churches of Christ by its involvement with Nagriamel.

Principal among the reasons ni-Vanuatuan Churches of Christ people now give for the longstanding alliance between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ is the belief that Abel Bani saw in Nagriamel an instrument to evangelise Santo pagans. By drawing an analogy between Jimmy Stephens and Cyrus, Ngwele implied that his father conceived of Jimmy Stephens as an agent through whom he could deliver Santo people from idolatry. He suggested that Nagriamel represented an evangelising field for Abel Bani just as west Ambae (or any other part of the New Hebrides) had for Christian labourers returning from the cane fields in Queensland in the late nineteenth century or for the European Churches of Christ missionaries who followed them shortly afterwards.

However, Ngwele's narrative is ultimately ironic. In the Old Testament, Cyrus delivered the Israelites from idolatry via his actions. By characterising Stephens as

¹ Amon Ngwele, Abel Bani's son, Churches of Christ Elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 20 Jan. 2000, Luganville. Tape recording, notes.

Cyrus, Ngwele sought to counter the widespread belief among Churches of Christ worshippers that the net effect of the interplay between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ was social and religious dislocation. Thus, by recounting a history that emphasised the benefits of Nagriamel – after all, Jimmy Stephens ‘unified all the people and he won small freedoms’ – Ngwele protected Abel Bani’s memory.

The motives for Abel Bani’s long-standing support for Nagriamel are still contested in local oral histories among Churches of Christ worshippers, not least because the interplay between the Churches of Christ and Nagriamel is now construed as having resulted in entrenched social division. Thus, local oral histories are clear that the beginning of the relationship between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ constitutes ‘a beginning’ for *politik*.

A King Among Us: Abel Bani and Indigenous Programs of Evangelism

Abel Bani is the major figure in oral histories about the strength of the Churches of Christ after World War II. Until his death in 1987, Bani was the pre-eminent evangelist and indigenous leader of the Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides whose *gravitas* had been a defining feature. According to the anthropologist Michael Allen, by the early 1960s, Abel Bani was ‘the most powerful leader in the northern New Hebrides’, a man who could expect his selection of elders and teachers to be accepted by the predominantly Australian missionaries of the Churches of Christ.² Yet by the 1960s, Bani was also an advocate of Nagriamel the precepts of which – especially its promotion of *kastom* (practices believed to be traditional by local people) – seemed to contradict the tenets of the Churches of Christ that proscribed customary practices as evocative of heathenism (see Chapter 2).

Beginning in the late 1940s, indigenous missionaries from the west Ambae Churches of Christ, led by Abel Bani, initiated a program of evangelism in the pagan areas of Espiritu Santo, the largest island in the New Hebrides, and its outliers (see figure. 02). Primarily, they went to work as informal schoolteachers but they led church services and conducted baptisms as well. Between the 1940s and the mid-1960s, evangelists established schools and churches in Mavea, Tutuba and Malo, Kolé on the north eastern Santo coast and eventually in inland Santo villages such as Butmas.³ Most of

² Michael Allen, "The Establishment of Christianity and Cash-Cropping in a New Hebridean Community", *Journal of Pacific History* 3 (1968), 41.

³ Amon Ngwele, 24 Jan. 2000; John Liu, 17 Aug. 1999; Lewis Warri, 27 Sept. 1999; Tom Bakeo suggests that a land dispute was the basis of the split between Malakulan and Ambae settlers in Kolé from the Presbyterian Church and for their invitation to the Churches of Christ from

my interlocutors now suggest that Santo people assumed that they would have greater access to the Churches of Christ's missionary schools and hospitals by adopting Christianity in this way. Others privilege the long-standing connections between west Ambae and Santo people founded on pre-contact trade linkages or the presence of expatriate Ambae people already living in Santo to explain why the Churches of Christ first went to Santo.

Abel Bani had been the head teacher in Nduindui and the indigenous leader of the Churches of Christ since the temporary departure of its European missionaries in 1941 when they were evacuated to Australia in preparation for possible Japanese incursions into the New Hebrides during the Pacific War.⁴ In 1942, to pre-empt Australian concerns about leaving a local in charge of the mission, the *Australian Christian* described Bani as 'spiritually minded and a good organiser'.⁵ However, at the time, missionaries evinced great scepticism about the ability of local people to keep the churches' institutions operating effectively in their absence:

The work has made such progress that it is felt that it can carry on for a period without our missionaries. [However, as] the old environment remains they will have many temptations to face. The greatest weakness will be lack of spiritual oversight, closing of the training class which was making splendid progress and the medical work.⁶

Within two years of Bani's adoption of the mantle of leadership (1945), west Ambae people pledged their desire to begin evangelistic work in Santo. Saunders, the resident missionary in west Ambae at the time, commended 'the fine endeavours of the simple native Christians to lead their own to the Master'.⁷ Despite its embedded paternalistic overtones, Saunders' account is notable for its acknowledgement that local Christians could effect conversions unaided by white missionaries and that local pagan people were presumably interested in having ni-Vanuatu evangelists work in their communities, even though the west Ambae evangelists could offer few tangible benefits in return. Saunders reported to the *Australian Christian*:

There are a number of unreached people on Santo and whilst one of the young men was working for a planter, he sought to preach and teach to the heathen who lived close by. So now he and another have returned to spend their full-time in preaching and teaching, at the request of the heathen there. We hope to report conversions from that

Ambae to establish a church. Tom Bakeo in Peter Larmour, ed., *Land Tenure in Vanuatu* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies; USP Extension Centre, Port Vila, 1984), 49.

⁴ *Australian Christian*, 13 Jun. 1945, 280.

⁵ *Australian Christian*, 6 May 1942, 214.

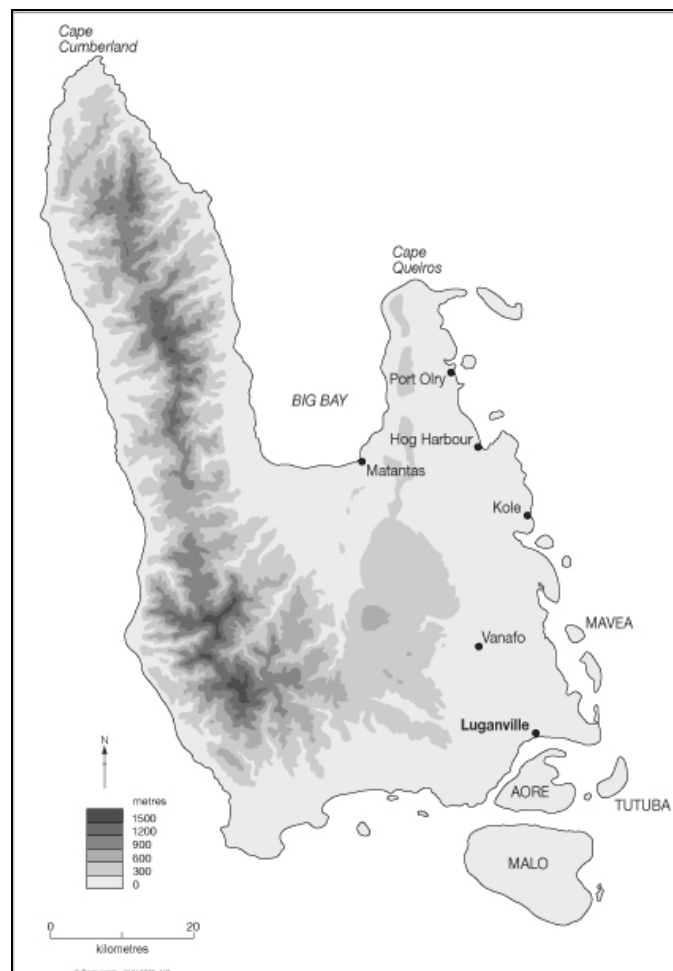
⁶ *Australian Christian*, 6 May 1942, 214.

⁷ *Australian Christian*, 3 Jan. 1945, 5.

island shortly...It was entirely their own desire to go and we were glad to see them go and preach the good news of freedom and joy.⁸

Abel Bani's program of evangelism was different because it was formulated largely in the absence of protracted input of European missionaries. Oral testimonies about the spread of Christianity throughout northern Vanuatu always foreground the role of indigenous people in conversion, although they often suggest that indigenous missionaries acted in ways compatible with European mission agendas and usually required the final imprimatur, through baptism, of European missionaries. As I argued in Chapter 2, ni-Vanuatu are commemorated as pivotal agents of evangelism since the arrival of Christianity to the New Hebrides in the nineteenth century.

The models by which the new wave of indigenous missionary evangelists funded their work differed from that of the labourer-converts who had begun work in the islands



Map.03 Churches of Christ mission fields, east Santo, c.1945-1980.

⁸ *Australian Christian*, 3 Jan. 1945, 5.

half a century earlier because it mirrored the mode of funding employed by the Australian churches that had sponsored missionary work in the New Hebrides. Individual churches contributed to the financial support of the local missionaries, including food, upkeep for the teachers undertaking mission work and funding for school and church building projects. Although this style of mission-work was co-opted from European missionaries, its impetus came from local church leaders. In 1957, Ron McLean, a South Australian missionary who ministered in west Ambae between 1948 and 1960, remarked that the evangelical thrust into Santo 'is entirely in the hands of the natives as they select the teachers, finance the work and baptise their converts. It is encouraging to find the people anxious to spread the gospel to new areas'.⁹ Abel Bani's actions established the precedents by which evangelism would be carried out by Churches of Christ people until the present.

Under Bani's direction, the Churches of Christ deviated from the established practices of the other Protestant denominations, in particular the Anglican Melanesian Mission and the Presbyterian Church. By undertaking missionary work in Santo, west Ambae people placed the Churches of Christ 'in an awkward position', vis-à-vis their neighbouring Protestant denominations, 'as [they were] entering an area considered to be Presbyterian'.¹⁰ This situation arose because in 1881 the Melanesian Mission and Presbyterian Church signed the Comity Agreement, under which they agreed not to compete with each other in the course of their evangelistic projects and thereby advantage the Marist mission inadvertently. Although the Churches of Christ never signed the agreement, they gave their *de facto* assent to its provisions. However, for local church leaders such as Abel Bani, by the mid-20th century it appeared that the onus of evangelising pagan people in Santo fell to them. According to McLean, Bani's justification was simple: 'They [Santo people] have called us. We must go. If we do not go and they do not accept the gospel it will be our fault'.¹¹ While he shared Christian denomination with the Australian Churches of Christ missionaries, Abel Bani's evangelistic drive demonstrated ambivalence to boundaries such as the Comity Agreement that had been imposed across the New Hebrides by colonialist missionaries.

Throughout northern Vanuatu, Abel Bani's missionary agenda for Espiritu Santo is celebrated as evidence of a high point in church history and indicative of his personal

⁹ Ron McLean, "Preaching Christ in the New Hebrides", *Provocative Pamphlets* (Melbourne, 1957), 4-5.

¹⁰ McLean, "Preaching Christ in the New Hebrides", 4.

¹¹ Abel Bani quoted in McLean, "Preaching Christ in the New Hebrides", 5.

characteristics. His reputation spread throughout the Churches of Christ in Australia and Papua New Guinea. For example, the mission vessel for the Churches of Christ station in the Ramu, Papua New Guinea, was named for Abel Bani.¹²



Fig.01 Nagriamel crest, drawn on the open letter to church officers, advising them of the formation of Nagriamel, c.1967. (Courtesy: OMB, Adelaide)

In west Ambae, local histories celebrate Abel Bani as the origin of Churches of Christ influence. Pastor Alick Vuti asserted that the '*jioj hemi radiate i kamaot long Abel Bani*'.¹³ [The church radiated from Abel Bani.] According to Lewis Wari from Ranwas in south east Pentecost, Nduindui's prestige within the Churches of Christ and more widely, was tied to Abel Bani's influence: 'Ambae was a pioneer church because of its senior

elder who travelled around Vanuatu. His name was Abel Bani'.¹⁴ Wari drew on Christian symbolism when he characterised Abel Bani as 'a king among us' because of his leadership because of his evangelism and because his secular power surpassed that of the foreign missionaries of the Churches of Christ.

Not for the Rich but for the Poor: the Evangelisation of Nagriamel

When the Nagriamel movement emerged on Espiritu Santo in 1967, Churches of Christ people had been undertaking evangelistic work there for over twenty years.¹⁵

¹² Bowes, *Partners*, 116.

¹³ Ps Alick Vuti, Churches of Christ minister, church oral historian. Interview with the author, Bislama/English. 27 Oct. 1999. Tape recording, notes.

¹⁴ Ps. Lewis Warri, Churches of Christ minister. Interview with the author, Bislama/English. 27 Aug. 1999, Ranlitor, south Pentecost. Tape recording, notes.

¹⁵ I believe the starting date of Nagriamel to be some time in 1967, although the alliances that led to its formation were clearly forged beforehand. In particular, I refer to the establishment of the Ambrym and Ambae enclaves at Vanafo. Robert Langdon reported the formation of a new "union of council chiefs, Nagriamel" in August 1967, which was the first substantiated reference to Nagriamel as an organisation in public media. *Pacific Islands Monthly* 10 Aug. 1967. According to Jimmy Stephens, Nagriamel was founded in 1963, although he asserted that it had existed in spirit since 1960; Jimmy Stephens, "Nagriamel," in *New Hebrides, the Road to Independence*, ed. Chris Plant (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies; South Pacific Social Sciences Association, 1977), 35. Bernard Hours suggests that Nagriamel started in 1964 in a Santo bar. Hours, "Le Nagriamel", 229. According to Howard van Trease, Nagriamel was formed at a meeting at the home of Jimmy Stephens on 3 March 1965. Howard van Trease, *The Politics of Land in Vanuatu*, 136; see also Monnier, *Histoire De La Mission Catholique Au Vanuatu. Ile Ambae: Nangire-Loné.*, 117; Richard Shears records that Nagriamel began in about 1965 when Jimmy Stephens and local chief Paul Buluk formulated the Act of Dark Bush, later signed in a

Nagriamel's initial *raison d'être* was to defend Santo people against encroachment by predominantly French ranchers.¹⁶ To this end, in September 1967 Stephens and Chief Tari Buluk delivered an open letter to 'churches officers' asking for their help to 'stop those Europeans who are putting their cement into our land'.¹⁷ Attached to the letter was covered a hand-drawn seal, depicting a pair of hands, clasping *Nagaria* and *Namele* leaves, a star and a Bible (pictured above, p111). Given that Stephens had already assumed the title Moses when the letter was drafted we can assume that he had already been baptised into the Churches of Christ by 1967.

Both missionaries and indigenous Churches of Christ worshippers were initially receptive to their request. The consent of Christian denominations – with or without the imprimatur of their ministers and missionaries – to the request for help from Jimmy Stephens and Chief Tari Buluk formally marked the beginning of Nagriamel as a distinct 'movement'. Importantly, neither Stephens nor Buluk referred to their movement as Nagriamel before this point.

Although many west Ambae Churches of Christ people already resided in Santo in the mid-1960s, working as missionaries and teachers – but also as plantation labourers and drivers, for example – more were soon to follow at the request of Nagriamel's leader, Jimmy Stephens. Ron McLean averred caution regarding Nagriamel but he recognised in it valid claims against 'European occupation'. The people of west Ambae had, he reasoned, acted immediately to thwart land alienation by Europeans in their own island and he could see the appeal for them of Nagriamel's nascent land rights campaign. In December 1967, he wrote in a letter to the British Resident Commissioner, Colin Allan:

bar. Richard Shears, *The Coconut War: The Crisis on Espiritu Santo* (North Ryde, NSW: Cassell Australia, 1980), 23. John Liu suggests that the first Church of Christ in Santo was established in 1966, John Liu, "Mission Imperatives for the Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides" (Bachelor of Divinity, Pacific Theological College, 1976), 62; Ron McLean claimed it was established in 1969, Bowes, *Partners, One Hundred Years of Mission Overseas by Churches of Christ in Australia 1891-1991*.⁶³ According to Keith Ludgater the celebration to mark the founding of the church took place just after his return from furlough in 1967, although he did not specify when the Vanafo church was first founded. Keith Ludgater, Churches of Christ missionary to west Ambae (1960-1977). Interview with the author, English. 29 Apr. 1999, Preston, Victoria. Tape recording, notes; Keith Ludgater, Telephone interview with the author, English. 28 Aug. 2001. Notes.

¹⁶ Ron McLean, Australian Churches of Christ Mission Board, to Colin Allan, British Resident Commissioner, 21 Dec. 1967. New Hebrides British Service (Hereinafter NHBS) 16/i (General Correspondence) ANR/17 Annual Reports on Administrative Districts, 1967-1971. Foreign and Commonwealth Records Division (Hereinafter FCORD).

¹⁷ Chief Buluk Paul and Jimmy T.P.S. Moses, open letter to the churches officers (undefined), 5 Sept. 67. Australian Churches of Christ Overseas Mission Board Inc. Archives (Hereinafter OMB).

While it is not for us to judge, we feel it is difficult to entirely divorce their request for the [Ambaeans] to establish a church in the area and their complaint concerning the European occupation of their land...[Ambaeans] have protected their land from European occupation and have acted immediately when they have had any suspicions that their land was being surveyed etc.¹⁸

John Liu, a former President of the Conference of Churches of Christ in Vanuatu and a graduate of the Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji, suggests that the relationship was immediately mutually beneficial. Liu's thesis for admission to a Bachelor of Divinity (1976) focused on the challenges to the church posed by Nagriamel.¹⁹ Much of Bani's appeal for Jimmy Stephens, he suggests, lay in the fact that Bani was reputed throughout the islands for his staunch anti-Condominium attitude (see Chapter 4).²⁰ In light of their distrust of colonial government, Bani and other local church leaders in west Ambae had initially imagined that Nagriamel would reinforce their claims to self-determination; Nagriamel represented a form of informal government for grassroots people.²¹ There were clearly issues of common concern between Bani and Jimmy Stephens regarding the autonomy of local people in the face of burgeoning European encroachment and the overarching issues of colonial hegemony. Initially, much value was seen in an alliance between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ.

Colonial officers and academics have privileged political expediency as the basis for the relationship between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ. University of the South Pacific historian, Howard van Trease, argued that the motivation for Bani's inroads in Santo was to alleviate west Ambae's swelling population. He reported that Abel Bani told J.F. Yaxley, the British Director of Census for the New Hebrides, in 1967 that: 'The Nduindui people...are intending to settle their surplus population back on Malo, possibly Tutuba and also the east-coast of Santo.'²² After 1962, Abel Bani waged a campaign against the involvement of west Ambae Churches of Christ people in the Aoba [Ambae] Local Government Council, which had been established in Ambore, west Ambae. Michael Allen, therefore, suggested that Nagriamel offered a means for Abel Bani to counter the growing prestige of Anglican Melanesian Mission and Apostolic

¹⁸ Ron McLean to Colin Allan, 21 Dec. 1967. NHBS 16/i (General Correspondence) ANR/17 Annual Reports on Administrative Districts, 1967-1971. FCORD.

¹⁹ John Liu, "Mission Imperatives for the Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides" (Bachelor of Divinity, Pacific Theological College, 1976).

²⁰ Liu, "Mission Imperatives", 61-62.

²¹ John Liu, President of the Vanuatu Regional Development and Training Colleges Association (VRDTCA) Interview with the author, English. 17 Aug. 1999, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.

²² Van Trease, *Politics of Land*, 158.

Church leaders in west Ambae who had allied themselves to the colonial administration – and particularly the British National Administration – in its attempts to implement local government in Ambae (see Chapter 4).²³

By contrast, what Churches of Christ people now privilege as underlying the alliance are the imperatives of Christian religion. Part of the appeal of establishing a presence in Vanafo for Abel Bani was the migration there of Santo hill people. Their adoption of Nagriamel would bring them into close proximity to Churches of Christ evangelists already working in Santo and hopefully one step closer to Christian redemption.²⁴ Most of my interlocutors agreed that there is little question that Abel Bani was pivotal to brokering the relationship with Nagriamel. Thus as John Liu suggested:

Bani considered the Nagriamel people his evangelising field. He would see this as his chance to move into the interior of Santo in order to reach those people. And with Vanafo being established as the centre of Nagriamel, fighting for the rights of Santo people that would in itself bring all the bush people down, so he could reach all the people. We just wanted to evangelise people in Vanafo. That was the idea.²⁵

Amon Ngwele suggested that some of the appeal for Santo people to invite the Churches of Christ to begin work in their communities was for better access to education and medical facilities. His sentiments are emblematic of a major theme in oral histories about the Churches of Christ: the strength of their medical and educational institutions. Ngwele recalls that the evangelism of the Santo hill people was to be Abel Bani's finest achievement: *[P]apa blong mi hemi plan se bambae Church of Christ hemi bildim wan bikfala skul antap long Vanafo. Hemi luk wel inaf blong. Bae oli sapotem olgeta sel long kakae long evri ting*²⁶ [My father planned for the Churches of Christ to build a big school on top at Vanafo. He saw well enough [that it was possible]. They would plant crops and sell them.] Indeed, the timing of these events for most of my Churches of Christ interlocutors was indicative of Bani's initial motives. According to Ngwele, the fact that a Church of Christ was first founded in Vanafo before the formation of Nagriamel suggests that primarily Bani intended only to evangelise pagan Nagriamel members:

²³ Allen, "Innovation, Inversion and Revolution", 127.

²⁴ John Liu, 17 Aug. 1999; Willie Toka, grandson of Willie Vutigele, Churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 12 Aug 2002, Sarabetu Church, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.

²⁵ John Liu, 17 Aug. 1999.

²⁶ Amon Ngwele, Abel Bani's son. Interview with the author, Bislama. 24 Jan. 2000, Luganville. Tape recording, notes.

*Mifala I no go I join Nagriamel from jioj hemi go insaed long Vanafo long 1963. Flag oli pulum long 1967 long flag long Nagriamel antap. Sipos oli relaes Nagriamel hemi part blong Church of Christ blong yumi ... bae Church of Christ hemi tekem Santo.*²⁷

We did not go to join Nagriamel because the church was already there in 1963. They ran up the Nagriamel flag in 1967. If they [the young minister-graduates from Banmatmat, see below] had realised that Nagriamel was part of our Churches of Christ maybe the Churches of Christ would have taken Santo.

Ngwele suggests that the evangelisation of Santo pagans superseded the eventual cost of involvement with Nagriamel for people in the Churches of Christ. Indeed, he structured it as a victory for the indigenous missionary evangelists from west Ambae who undertook mission work under Abel Bani's initial program of evangelism. For example, he emphasised Bani's success in bringing Christianity to the Santo pagans: '*Oli ting se mifala kam blong joinem Nagriamel. Olgeta i joinem yumi [long Churches of Christ] From Jesus hemi telem yumi i kam for the sinners to repent not for the rich but for the poor. Ol poor pipol ia oli still as this. Yu go yu luk. Ol nekid wan ia oli go putum traosas*'.²⁸ [They think we came to join Nagriamel [but we did not]. They [the Santo pagans] joined us [in the Churches of Christ]. Jesus said I come for the sinners to repent, not for the rich but for the poor. All the poor people here they were still like this [heathen]. All the naked ones put on trousers. [The heathens were converted]

The influence of Churches of Christ people on Nagriamel's formation is a pervasive theme in local oral accounts of the origins of Nagriamel. Unquestionably, west Ambae people played pivotal roles in the movement's formation. Most Churches of Christ people claim that in fact Nagriamel was their organisation (presumably, beforehand it was merely an aggregation of dissenting landholders and immigrants). For example, Joseph Vira from Vinangwangwe, west Ambae, suggests that Churches of Christ people undertook the first clearings in Vanafo: '*Ol man Church of Christ insaed long Nagriamel oli brekbrekem bus ia*'.²⁹ ['The Church of Christ within Nagriamel broke the bush there'.] Even people who eschewed Nagriamel suggest that Churches of Christ people were instrumental in creating Nagriamel. Madeleine Kanegae, a leader of the Christian Women's Fellowship from Navitora, west Ambae, recalls:

...oli telem se yumi mekem wan kakae, blong karem I go long Buluk. Mi tingse i minim wan buluk, be no hemi Jif Tari Buluk. Mifala I mekem wan kakae,

²⁷ Amon Ngwele, 24 Jan. 2000.

²⁸ Amon Ngwele, 24 Jan. 2000.

²⁹ Joseph Vira, Assemblies of God minister, formerly Churches of Christ minister. Interview with the author. 1 Nov. 1999, Vinangwangwe, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.

*karem i go. Putum wan mat wetem lif Nagaria wetem Namele blong givim long olgeta. Hemia stat long muvmen mi tu mi luk.*³⁰

...they told us to make a 'kakaē' [feast] to take to [Chief Tari] Buluk. I thought they meant a bullock [at first]. We made the 'kakaē' and took it [to him]. We carried a mat with a *Nagaria* leaf and a *Namele* leaf woven in to give to them all. It was the start of the movement and I was there to see it.

Kanegae denies involvement with Nagriamel, although her story suggests that most west Ambae people were mobilised to contribute gifts and exchange items to seal the relationship. Her story is imbued with the key symbols of the movement: *nagaria* and *namele* leaves were woven into the mat for Jimmy Stephens. The *nagaria* (croton) and *namele* (black cycad) are pervasive symbols of *kastom*: the *nagaria* is a female symbol used to mark gravesites; the *namele* is male symbol used to mark the sites of pig-killing ceremonies and thus represents both peacemaking and male leadership but also noting ownership and taboo. According to Jimmy Stephens, their combination represented the unity of Nagriamel.³¹ Joseph Vira also denied joining Nagriamel, even though he was involved in church work in Vanafo but he claims that the Churches of Christ were the first church established in Vanafo: '*Long stat blong hem olgeta oli Church of Christ. Afta ... smol taem nomo ... sam long Sevendei I kam insaed. Angliken I I kam insaed. Be oli no ova long paoa long Church of Christ*'.³² [At the state they [Vanafo people] were all Church of Christ. After a small time some Seventh-day Adventist [people] came inside, Anglicans came inside. But none of them was over the power of the Churches of Christ.] Most Churches of Christ people recall that it was not until some time after the creation of a dispensary in Vanafo by Marists in 1969 that the Churches of Christ were surpassed as the pre-eminent denomination in Vanafo. West Ambae people suggest that had the Churches of Christ established a dispensary, they would have succeeded in their mission to completely evangelise the people of Vanafo.

The extent of the Churches of Christ's influence over Nagriamel's direction is unclear but Churches of Christ people from west Ambae probably constituted the largest group of resident inter-island immigrants there. The first enclave of inter-island immigrants was probably established in Vanafo in 1966 when a group of Ambrymese migrants were

³⁰ Madeleine Kanegae, Christian Women's Fellowship leader, Churches of Christ deacon. Interview with the author, Bislama. 10 Feb. 2000. Tape recording, notes.

³¹ Jimmy Steven [sic] "Nagriamel", in Chris Plant, ed. *New Hebrides, the Road to independence* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies; South Pacific Social Sciences Association, 1977), 35.

³² Joseph Vira, 1 Nov. 1999.

allowed to settle.³³ The ORSTOM ethnographer, Bernard Hours was unable definitively to enumerate the population of Vanafo, although he stated that about 500 people resided there.³⁴ Constituting that number were 40 '*maison de man Santo*', 24 houses for Ambae people, 14 from Ambrym, 12 from Paama, 3 from Epi, 2 from Pentecost and one each from Malo, Vila and Malakula.³⁵

West Ambae people also see traces of specific west Ambae *kastom* in the titles taken by Nagriamel's leader, Jimmy Moli Stephens. For many west Ambae people, Nagriamel was claimed as a local organisation: west Ambae people were central to the movement's inception; they were intimately involved with its operation; they occupied senior positions within its organisation. Willie Toka recounted to me that: 'from [us] here in west Ambae, Stephens took *moli* as his name, [it is] the highest rank in west Ambae'.³⁶ Toka's emphasis on traditional advancement by Churches of Christ people from west Ambae suggested both an ironical acknowledgment of the rectitude of such traditional names being used by Nagriamel's leader and serves to highlight the major symptom for the Churches of Christ of involvement with Nagriamel, the resurgence of customary practices that had been largely proscribed by Churches of Christ doctrine.

Very quickly after the establishment of Nagriamel in Vanafo, Churches of Christ people in Ambae, Pentecost and Maewo adopted it. Overall, the establishment of enclaves of all of the denominations in Vanafo was a precursor to the foundation of Nagriamel outposts throughout the New Hebrides. Among Churches of Christ adherents, most of

³³ Local Government Councils - Santo Island R.J.S. Hutchison to British Resident Commissioner, c/f. No. 99/66, 12 Mar. 1966. F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969) NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence. FCORD.

³⁴ Hours, "Un Mouvement Politico-Religieux Neo-Hebridais Le Nagriamel.", 231. Hours' suggested population of Vanafo (500) was prone to fluctuate "in accordance with seasons and circumstances". Indeed, Hours claimed that Vanafo's population was amplified by as many as 300 people around the time of Nagriamel meetings. In *The Coconut War* (35), Richard Shears asserted that Vanafo's population was 250 in 1969, although his information was based on an interview conducted with Stephens in 1980.

³⁵ Hours, "Le Nagriamel", 231. It should be noted that after the Santo Rebellion in 1980, nearly 700 Malakulans were arrested for their role in it, which indicates that their involvement rose steeply during the latter part of the 1970s. See Chapter 6.

³⁶ Willie Toka, 12 Aug 2002; With the increasing validation of *kastom* among the Churches of Christ, muted concerns have been raised in west Ambae that Jimmy Stephens was granted the title *moli* free, or claimed it without undertaking the requisite ceremonial pig-killings, although Stephens' son has publicly averred his father's legitimate right to the title: "The old patriarch who became the first man to take up the political struggle for freedom, passed away on February 27 of 1994 and was buried in [V]anafo. But Mr Stevens Junior said it is not possible to remove the chiefly titles of a traditional chief and give to someone else who has not himself risen up the ranks by killing the necessary number of pigs in the pig killing graded society." *Trading Post*, 31 Aug. 2002, 1.

my interlocutors agreed that west Ambae's influence within the Churches of Christ acted as a catalyst for Nagriamel's spread. Michael Allen stated that probably as early as 1967 most Nduindui Churches of Christ people had joined Nagriamel, largely because Abel Bani gave his full support to the movement.³⁷ By May 1968, Nagriamel began to hamper the effectiveness of the Aoba [Ambae] local council.³⁸ For Pentecost, Ambae and Maewo, Nagriamel's regional headquarters were established in Churches of Christ communities – Nduindui in Ambae (1967-8)³⁹, Narua in Central Pentecost (1969-70)⁴⁰, Nasawa in Maewo (1970).⁴¹ The Churches of Christ were not the only denomination represented in Vanafo. Indeed, concomitant with Nagriamel's spread among the Churches of Christ was the formation of Nagriamel enclaves in the Torres Islands, Malakula, Ambrym, Epi and Paama.

Politically, the majority of Churches of Christ people supported Nagriamel's initial precepts such as the return of alienated land and resistance to further colonial penetration to the *dak bus* (dark bush), the dense jungle that came to symbolise indigenous resistance to conversion and colonial domination.⁴² Few Churches of Christ leaders – expatriate or local – tried initially to remedy Nagriamel's appeal among Churches of Christ worshippers. As I argue in Chapter 4, Nagriamel's opposition to French land claims fed into the Churches of Christ's long pedigree of resisting colonial incursion. William Rodman has argued that Nagriamel was also in essence a cargo movement: loyalty to Nagriamel involved the powerful promise of access to American cargo, both caches of material secreted by withdrawing American forces at the end of World War II and, by the late 1960s, what materials were available from Nagriamel's libertarian backers in the Phoenix Foundation.⁴³ Moreover, for local

³⁷ Allen, "Innovation, Inversion and Revolution", 130.

³⁸ Minutes of the Ambae Local Council, 16 Nov. 1962-9 Jan. 1969. Aoba Local Government Council Minutes 31 May 1968. PMB 48.

³⁹ Chief Marcel Tari suggests that Nagriamel was established in Luvonvili in about 1967 or 1968. Chief Marcel Tari. Interview with the author. 26 Feb. 2000, Luvonvili, East Ambae.

⁴⁰ Chief Eli Tabi, former Nagriamel leader. Interview with the author. 17 Sep. 1999, Narua, Central Pentecost. Tape recording, notes.

⁴¹ James Bwiru, Willie Kona, Ps. Valerie Garae, Ps. Selwyn Garae, et al., Focus group Interview with the author, 24 Feb. 2000, Nasawa, Maewo. Tape recording, notes.

⁴² See Bonnemaïson, "The Tree and the Canoe.", 55.

⁴³ William Rodman, "Outlaw Memories: Biography and the Construction of Meaning in Postcolonial Vanuatu," in *Identity Work: Constructing Pacific Lives*, ed. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (c.2000). 146-147.

people Nagriamel appealed as an alternative government, an antidote to the division created by colonial rivalries within the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides (see Chapter 4).

Unlike other more localised social movements in the New Hebrides – such as the Jon Frum and Kapiel cults on the island of Tanna⁴⁴ – Nagriamel's appeal transcended associations of region, island, religion and language. At its apogee in the early 1970s, Nagriamel's leadership claimed 20,000 adherents, spanning from Epi in the central New Hebrides to the Banks and Torres Islands in the archipelago's extreme north.⁴⁵ Arguably, Nagriamel was the most diverse and influential local organisation in the New Hebrides until the formation of the nationalist Vanua'aku Pati which would ultimately lead the New Hebrides to independence in 1980.⁴⁶ But the initial tacit acceptance of Nagriamel by indigenous church leaders was quickly offset by the emergence of practices within Nagriamel deemed by the clergy to be antithetical to Churches of Christ doctrine.

Many of the foreign missionaries in the church were initially sympathetic to Nagriamel because they perceived a need for a genuinely indigenous voice for local people on issues such as land alienation and to counter the apparent ambivalence of the colonial regime to the interests of local people. Reflecting on his experiences in the New Hebrides, Ron McLean observed that fusing customary practices with Christian ones – as had occurred among the Churches of Christ where Nagriamel took hold – was a natural part of the process of indigenisation.⁴⁷ Similarly, Keith Ludgater, who was stationed in west Ambae between 1960 and 1976, recalls being concerned that

⁴⁴ For ethnographic and historical accounts of Jon Frum, see Lamont Lindstrom, "Working Encounters: Oral Histories of World War Two Labor Corps from Tanna, Vanuatu," in *The Pacific Theater: Island Representations of World War Two*, ed. Geoffrey White and Lamont Lindstrom (Honolulu: 1989), 408-13; Lamont Lindstrom, "Cult and Culture: American Dreams in Vanuatu," *Pacific Studies* (1981), 101-123; Jean Guiart, "Forerunners of Melanesian Nationalism," *Oceania* 22 (1951), 81-90; Jean Guiart, "Culture Contact and the 'John Frum' Movement on Tanna, New Hebrides," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (1956); cf. Ron Brunton, "The Origins of the John Frum Movement: A Sociological Explanation," in *Vanuatu: Politics, Ritual and Economics in Island Melanesia*, ed. Michael R. Allen (Sydney: Academic Press, 1981), 357-77.

⁴⁵ Plant, ed., *New Hebrides, the Road to Independence*. 32; Beasant, *The Santo Rebellion, an Imperial Reckoning*. 18-19.

⁴⁶ The Vanua'aku Pati grew from the New Hebrides National Cultural Association, which was formed in 1971. Demonstrations against the arrest of Harrison Rarua, one of the group's organisers, resulted in the formalisation of the Association into the New Hebrides National Party in 1973. Its name was formally changed to "The Vanua'aku Pati" at the Tuata Congress in Malakula in 1977.

⁴⁷ McLean, "Land Rights", in Bowes, *Partners*, 68.

missionaries should not actively stifle the formation of a distinct 'ni-Vanuatu identity', which was not overtly anti-Christian, by opposing Nagriamel.⁴⁸ In national conference meetings, church leaders attempted to reconcile the apparent conflicts being waged within Churches of Christ communities over support for 'land-rights' versus the resurgence of putatively pagan practices: '[the] question we must come to grips with is How should a Pacific Islander worship? Nagriamel is trying to work out old custom ways which are good & to reinstate them along with more traditional [i.e. Christian] ways of worship'.⁴⁹

Despite the sanguinity demonstrated by McLean and Ludgater, the threat to church legitimacy that Nagriamel posed was only ever thinly veiled in much church correspondence. In correspondence with their Australian supporters, missionaries often sought to devalue Nagriamel's appeal by stating that Nagriamel followers were generally coerced into action, rather than making choices with their own interests in mind. In her letters to her Australian Church of Christ congregation, Shirley Ludgater – married to Keith Ludgater – wrote that Nagriamel maintained its influence because 'the people are to a large extent forced to acquiesce [to Nagriamel] through intimidation ... Those who become caught up in the fanaticism are effectively convinced that they need no other religion'.⁵⁰ Ludgater suggested further that Nagriamel's members coerced people to join: 'Pastors who decline to wear a Nagriamel badge are not allowed of visit many parts and taxi drivers who refuse to put a badge on their car lose many fares by not being allowed to drive in Nagriamel territory. One who did so, later found his taxi without wheels!'⁵¹ Attempts by church members to inspire a return to the Gospel among Nagriamel followers failed. In Santo, Nagriamel members mounted bitter opposition to the planned visit of two South Sea Evangelical Mission evangelists from Solomon Islands whose mission was to ignite Christian revival among the backsliders who had joined Nagriamel.⁵²

In church council meetings, the prevailing view was that the church should 'maintain witness' on Nagriamel members and pray for them. To 'maintain witness' means to

⁴⁸ Keith Ludgater 29 Apr. 1999.

⁴⁹ Annual Missionary Meeting, Nduindui, West Aoba [Ambae] 11-14 May 1976. OMB.

⁵⁰ Shirley Ludgater, Letter from Londua to Australian Churches of Christ, Oct. 1974. Ludgater (personal files).

⁵¹ Shirley Ludgater, Letter from Londua, Feb. 1975. Ludgater (personal files).

⁵² Shirley Ludgater, Letter from Londua, Oct. 1974. Ludgater (personal files).

maintain faith and vigilance that ‘resistant’ people will eventually respond to the Gospel (see e.g. Isaiah 55: 10, 11). According to Shirley Ludgater, those people who elected to join Nagriamel, ‘ignore the evil and maintain that they uphold only the good aspects of Nagriamel (and there *are* one or two good aspects). [They] are still trying to wed the movement with the Church. But the conflict of authority is too great. Jimmy himself, is decidedly anti-Christian’.⁵³ The majority of the Churches of Christ’s missionaries sensed the whiff of heathenism in Nagriamel.

For many local worshippers, Nagriamel’s influence opened the door to a host of practices that they thought had been exorcised as evidence of their pre-Christian past. Wherever Nagriamel had gained a foothold its members self-consciously sought to revive *kastom*.⁵⁴ Under Nagriamel’s auspices religious rituals such as spirit worship, use of traditional medicines and poisons (*lif meresin*-leaf medicine), dancing and singing were reinvigorated, kava drinking became more explicit and Nagriamel’s leader, Jimmy Stephens, adopted polygyny (see Chapter 6). According to one pastor, for these reasons Nagriamel was undeniably Satanic. For many Churches of Christ people, involvement with Nagriamel is now considered synonymous with the spiritual regression so evocative of the *taem blong dakness* (the time of darkness) before the arrival of the Christian gospel. As James Bule remembered: ‘In Nagriamel we grabbed at *kastom* but plenty within the church were still strong: this created conflict’.⁵⁵

The paradox of Abel Bani’s support for Nagriamel, therefore, was that he continued to lead the Churches of Christ and did not adopt these practices. Most accounts of Abel Bani’s mission to evangelise Santo pagans turn on the apparent disjuncture between Bani’s agenda and the actual effect of involvement with Nagriamel on the Churches of Christ, that is the resurgence of arguably customary practices. In contemporary oral histories, Churches of Christ people often depict Abel Bani as having contributed directly to the resurgence of *kastom* and its attendant problems for the Churches of Christ. One man suggested: ‘Under [Abel Bani] the work did not go straight. Old Abel was involved too much with Nagriamel. I will tell you ... in this way Abel Bani led us into sin’.

⁵³ Shirley Ludgater, Letter from Londua, Feb. 1975. Ludgater (personal files).

⁵⁴ For example, Allen, *Ritual, Power and Gender: Explorations in the Ethnography of Vanuatu, Nepal and Ireland*. 8fn.

⁵⁵ James Bule, Churches of Christ elder, Minister of Finance, Trade and Investment, Deputy Prime Minister (2000-2001), Interview with the author, Bislama. 5 May 2001. Tape recording, notes.

Most Nagriamel members deny that they strayed from Christianity during this time. For most of its former members, Nagriamel was not essentially separate to the church. For example, each of Samuel Vusi's brothers joined the movement: 'My six brothers joined Nagriamel. They never really thought it was anything different from the church'.⁵⁶ For them, involvement with Nagriamel did not involve the abandonment of Biblical text or Christian faith. Indeed, fragmentary colonial sources suggest that Nagriamel men were often bible-literate. In 1971, Nagriamel members hampered survey teams in west Ambae brandishing Biblical references – in this instance Proverbs 22:28 – like weapons: 'Remove not the ancient landmarks of thy forefathers'.⁵⁷

Moreover, outwardly Christian religious rituals were incorporated into Nagriamel's work schedule in Vanafo.⁵⁸ Jimmy Stephens routinely appealed to Christian symbolism in the course of his role as titular leader of Nagriamel although his particular mode of doing so often appeared sacrilegious (see also Chapter 6). For example, he claims to have taken the title Moses as his baptismal name only after joining the Churches of Christ.⁵⁹ Bernard Hours noted that Nagriamel council discussions often took the form of long traditional confrontational 'palavers' [*palabres*] but were annotated by Jimmy's secretaries whose work was opened and closed by prayer inspired by the Church of Christ.⁶⁰

However, most oral histories about *politik* in west Ambae focus on the growing discord within the Churches of Christ although they differ over the causes. Most Churches of Christ worshippers indicate that the dissension was based on Stephens' adoption of polygyny; a smaller number suggest that the division was emblematic of the growing division between trained ministers and the older, untrained generation of lay leaders under Abel Bani (see below). In Chapter 6, I discuss in detail two sets of accounts of a triple homicide in west Ambae which most of my interlocutors say was motivated by Jimmy Stephens' polygamous marriage to a west Ambae woman, Susan Quelep (Kwelevu). After his marriage to Quelep in late 1968 or early 1969, Stephens married

⁵⁶ Samuel Vusi, Principal, Banmatmat Bible College. Interview with the author, English. 16 Aug. 1999, Banmatmat Bible College, south Pentecost. Tape recording, notes.

⁵⁷ Proceedings of the New Hebrides Advisory Council, Verbatim Transcripts, 22nd Session, 23-27 Dec. 1971, 25-28. PMB Doc. 298.

⁵⁸ See e.g. Canadian Broadcasting Commission and Australian Film Commission, *Fella Blong Bush* (1973)..

⁵⁹ Interview with Jimmy Stephens, cited in van Trease, *Politics of Land* 159.

⁶⁰ Hours, "Le Nagriamel", 232.

another west Ambae woman and possibly three Churches of Christ women from Pentecost. Quelep became Stephens' second wife, whom he referred to as the 'witness to the rights of the mother'; his holy bride revealed by God. Stephens harnessed his claims to Susan's divine revelation to his assertion of royal Tongan heritage that he used to further his creation of a new 'Royal Family' at Vanafo and its Royal Nagriamel Mother Church.⁶¹

By the early seventies, Churches of Christ in Ambae, Santo, Pentecost and Maewo were renamed Nagriamel Royal Mother Churches, referred to elsewhere as Nagriamel Federation Independent United Royal Churches or simply Royal Churches. Garry Trompf argued that Abel Bani and another senior church leader Simon Garae (whom Trompf mistakenly names as a pastor) sponsored this breakaway church.⁶² William Miles suggested that its clergy were uniformly ex-Church of Christ pastors.⁶³ However, despite Bani's ambiguous stance on the resurgence of *kastom* among the Churches of Christ, most of my interlocutors affirmed that Bani remained a committed Churches of Christ man until his death. In oral histories and archival sources, only one trained pastor is named as openly supporting Nagriamel, although several continued to minister pro-Nagriamel areas.⁶⁴ According to Amon Ngwele, the Royal Mother Church was not a denomination with its own canons *per se* but an idea [*hemi no wan jioj hemi wan idea nomo*] that all Christians should be allowed to worship at the same place.⁶⁵ He argued that the foundation of the Royal Church was intended to provide a syncretic Christian institution that contained elements of traditional practices and which would allow Nagriamel members, rejected from day-to-day church activities, to pray. However, former Nagriamel members stated that Catholic practices were included in

⁶¹ When Jimmy Stephens was buried in 1994, he was eulogised as the "King of the Nagriamel Movement", the "late head of the Royal family of Fanafo [sic]", *Vanuatu Weekly*, 5 May 1994, 2.

⁶² Garry Trompf, "Melanesian 'Cargo Cults' Today," *Current Affairs Bulletin* 58, no. 1 (1981), 21.

⁶³ Miles, *Bridging Mental Boundaries*, 107.

⁶⁴ The pro-Nagriamel minister, Samuel Waen, lived in the "mission house in Santo and everything is perfectly all right there. In fact [he] was named Minister of Social Affairs in the new [rebel] government that has been set up on Santo." Kay Williams, Londua School, to R.S. McLean, President, OMB, 9 Jun. 1980, OMB; Ps. Samuel Vusi, Churches of Christ minister, Principal, Banmatmat Bible College. Interview with the author, English. 20 Aug. 1999, Banmatmat Bible College, south Pentecost. Tape Recording, notes; Ps. August Ben, Churches of Christ Minister, pastor, Teproma Village, south east Santo. Interview with the author, Bislama. 10 Jan. 2000; John Liu, 17 Aug. 1999; John Liu. Interview with the author. 19 Aug. 2002, Port Vila. Waen eventually became minister of Social Affairs in the short-lived Vemerana government in 1979-1980.

⁶⁵ Amon Ngwele, 20 Jan. 2000.

the church but were unclear whether they, as members of the Churches of Christ, were expected to adopt them. Jacob Tanga, from Vinangwangwe, west Ambae, complained:

I gat sam tijing I go insaed olsem mimi no akri. Plande man oli save tekem communion insaed long Royal Mother Church. Taem oli mekem prea wetem kap bodi mo blad blong Jesus long royal church emi no klia wetem infomesen mekem se no emi no aloem. Tumas i kamoat long saed long ol catholic ⁶⁶

The Royal Church] had some teachings in it that I did not agree with. Plenty of men took communion inside the Royal Mother Church. When they made prayer with the cup, body and blood of Jesus, in the Royal Church it was never clear where the information came from. Too much of it was Catholic!

For others the Royal Church was simply the result of Stephens' polygyny: as James Bule remembered, Jimmy Stephens 'tried to kill part of the Bible. He said the teachings [that proscribed polygyny] were wrong. He started his own church'.⁶⁷

If only the young pastors had understood: a trained clergy and generational conflict within the Churches of Christ

As I argued in Chapter 2, massive changes were made to the Overseas Mission Board's approach to the organisation and administration of the Churches of Christ mission work beginning in the early 1950s. In the New Hebrides, the first general conference of island churches – attended by representatives from each centre of Churches of Christ activity – was held in 1958 and after 1964 local Christians attended the decision-making Mission Meetings which oversaw the key church institutions, such as hospitals and schools. In 1965, a training college for ministers (Banmatmat Bible College) was opened in south Pentecost and its first class of ministers graduated in 1967. From the graduating classes of 1967 and 1968, twenty new ministers emerged to take responsibility for parishes around the northern New Hebrides.⁶⁸ Many of those graduates eventually secured senior posts within the church conference and, later, high posts within national civil society organisations and government offices.⁶⁹ Immediately after their graduation, however, they were stationed in areas of strong Nagriamel influence. For example, John Liu, from Tanmaeto in Maewo, took

⁶⁶ Jacob Tanga, 1 Nov. 1999.

⁶⁷ James Bule, 5 May 2001.

⁶⁸ Bowes, *Partners*, 82.

⁶⁹ For example, in 1973 John Liu was appointed principal of Banmatmat Bible College but was granted leave to undertake further studies at the Pacific Theological College from where he graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity in 1977. He served as Principal until 1981 and has served as President of the National Conference of Churches of Christ (1990). In 1994-1995, Liu was 3rd Political Secretary to the Minister of Education, Donald Kalpokas. He is now the President of Vanuatu Regional Development and Training Colleges Association (VRDTCA).

ministerial responsibilities in Kolé and Sara, northeastern Santo.⁷⁰ Bill Bulelam from Wujunmel, central Pentecost, was a member of the second graduating class from Banmatmat in 1968 and in 1969 he became the Chaplain of Nduindui Hospital and Londua School and took responsibility for evangelistic work in Vanafo.⁷¹

The emergence of a cadre of trained ministers augured a shift in the balance of power within the Churches of Christ from an untrained laity to a trained clergy. Lay leaders had constituted the pinnacle of secular and religious indigenous leadership in the Churches of Christ from the church's formal arrival in the New Hebrides in the early twentieth century, differentiating them from the Melanesian Mission and Roman Catholic denominations wherein priests commonly controlled church affairs and the demarcation between secular and religious leadership was distinct. Margaret Jolly noted the irony implicit in the structure of the Churches of Christ when she observed that compared with the Catholic Church, which had a relaxed attitude to *kastom* but has been unable to integrate ni-Vanuatu into its hierarchy (it now does), the Churches of Christ had maintained an avowedly anti-*kastom* stance but its administrative structures were dominated by indigenes.⁷² The emergence of a trained clergy among the Churches of Christ foretold stricter differentiation between secular and religious leadership. Michael Allen demarcated the respective responsibilities of ministers versus lay leaders:

pastors and elders have the right to conduct church services, including the sacraments: deacons may conduct minor services but are mostly concerned with the material side of the church work...A number of pastor graduates are appointed missionaries. Their aim is to select leading local men, appoint them as elders and train them to take a prominent part in the administration of the local church.⁷³

The new ministers directed a critical lens on the leadership of untrained but much older deacons and elders who led the Churches of Christ. The Banmatmat graduates had received three years of dedicated religious training, as opposed to the informal religious training that Abel Bani's generation had received from missionaries. Arguably, the shift in the Churches of Christ's priorities immediately antagonised Nagriamel supporters within their ambit because the Banmatmat graduates appeared far less

⁷⁰ John Liu, 17 Aug. 1999.

⁷¹ Ps. Bill Bulelam, 4 May 2001.

⁷² Jolly, "Sacred Spaces", 227.

⁷³ Allen, "The Establishment of Christianity and Cash-Cropping in a New Hebridean Community.", 43.

lenient regarding customary practices. Overall support for the alliance with Nagriamel was dispensed with in favour of a stricter approach to church doctrine.

Inasmuch as the Banmatmat graduates represented a challenge to the organisational and religious leadership of the church elders, they also signalled the end of Abel Bani's absolute dominance of church matters. In 1968, Jimmy Stephens was expelled from the Churches of Christ by one of the Banmatmat graduates for his adoption of polygyny (see below and Chapter 5).⁷⁴ The direct consequence of their decision to distance Nagriamel's leadership was their own increasing difficulty working among Nagriamel supporters. Many were simply barred from entering pro-Nagriamel communities. According to Pastor August Ben, the rejection of the trained ministers from pro-Nagriamel communities was also a consequence of the growing intolerance of outsiders but did not necessarily connote the rejection of Christian teachings. Crucially, he suggested that much of the impetus came from elders within the formal structures of the Churches of Christ. Thus, the rejection of ministers from Nagriamel areas was as strongly associated with an internal shift within the Churches of Christ as it was reflective of the overarching political atmosphere. He recalled:

*Olsem bifo long Church of Christ I no gat pasta. Kam kasem taem we ol olfala I kambak long Kwinsland long sugaken oli kam bak wetem gospel oli colem olgeta tija. Taem ol waet misonari I folo oli kam putum elda so olgeta oli hang on strong long ples ia. Nao taem disfala niu developmen hemi kam olsem I gat colej blong trenem ol man blong kam pasta blong jioj olgeta [ol elda] I no tekem. Oli ting se hemi samting blong waetman. Emia nao. Sipos yu wan elda nomo I isi nomo blong go insaed.*⁷⁵

Before in the Churches of Christ there were no pastors. Since the time when all the old fellows came back from Queensland from the sugarcane with the Gospel they were called 'teachers'. When the white missionaries followed they came and put elders [in place] so [afterwards] they [the elders] hung on [to authority] strongly here. Now, when this new development [trained pastors] came in, as in when the [Banmatmat Bible] training college was started, they [the elders] did not take to it. They thought that it was something of the white men. That was it. If an elder wished to go [into a Nagriamel area] it was easy to go in.

Amon Ngwele recalled that the distancing of Nagriamel contributed to the divisions that emerged later in the church and suggested that Stephens' expulsion ultimately removed Nagriamel from the guidance of Churches of Christ leaders:

Church of Christ hemi baptisem Jimmy wetem Buluk oli kam memba blong Church of Christ. Oli lukluk se Nagriamel hemi karem bikfala grup I kam tugeta. Bambae oli stap anda Church of Christ control. Mi minim se hemi wan men bilif. Sipos olgeta yang pasta blong yumi oli andastandem tataem. Santo hemi control long Church of Christ. From papa blong mi hemi plan se

⁷⁴ Bill Bulelam, 4 May 2001.

⁷⁵ Ps. August Ben, 18 Jan. 2000.

*bambae Church of Christ hemi bildim wan bikfala skul antap long Banafo. Hemi luk wel inaf blong hemi supotem hem sel blong kakae, long evri ting. I mo isi...Olgeta man I no luksave. Oli go the other way down. Oli ting se mifala kam blong joinem Nagriamel.*⁷⁶

The Churches of Christ baptised Jimmy with Buluk, *they became members of our church*. [The elders] saw that Nagriamel [had] gathered a big group to come together. They would stay under Churches of Christ control, I mean in terms of [Christian] beliefs. If the young pastors of ours had understood at that time, Santo would be under our control but they chose to see it the other way down [around]: *they thought that we had joined Nagriamel*.

In 1973, the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides was formally instituted and thereafter became the churches' principal decision-making body. Although the Overseas Missions Board (formerly Foreign Missions Board) maintained funding programmes for the New Hebrides Churches of Christ, it made donations and provided personnel only on request from the local Conference of Churches of Christ. In 1977, the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides adopted full responsibility for decision-making from the Overseas Mission Board.⁷⁷

Against a backdrop of burgeoning political activism in the New Hebrides, however, political animus between older lay Churches of Christ leaders and the younger trained ones became more pronounced. Politically, the Banmatmat graduates gravitated more towards the emerging nationalist New Hebrides National Party (renamed the Vanua'aku Pati in 1977) and its cleric-leaders rather than into the orbit of Nagriamel, as had the preceding generation of Churches of Christ leaders. By the mid nineteen seventies, the Churches of Christ's indigenous clergy began to assert their dominance over church matters, contributing both to heated clashes with some missionaries over church direction regarding Nagriamel; and with Nagriamel people themselves. Throughout the 1970s, relations between pro-Nagriamel and pro-Conference worshippers faltered over political issues and a significant slippage between political and religious issues occurred (see Chapter 4). In 1974, Nasawa people refused to take part in island church conferences even though they allowed the mission hospital there to keep operating.⁷⁸ In 1976, local ministers were barred from entering all Nagriamel areas on Maewo (see Chapter 4).⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Amon Ngwele, 24 Jan. 2000.

⁷⁷ Australian Churches of Christ Overseas Mission Board Inc. Policy Related To Existing Work Conducted By Overseas Mission Board and possible extension into other areas. May 1977 Annual Meeting. OMB.

⁷⁸ Minutes of the Conference Committee Meeting, Longana, 13-15 Nov. 1974. Conference of Churches of Christ in Vanuatu Headquarters Archives, "Gospel Santo" (hereinafter GSA). In their Annual Report for 1977, the Australian Churches of Christ noted, "Our New Hebridean are

In 1974, at the end of its first year of operation, the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides barred Nagriamel people from one of its key institutions, the Nasawa Technical College. The mutual antagonism between the church conference and Nasawa people prompted the temporary closure of the church's secular projects there:

No island conference has been held as the Nasawa people would not join in. Instead they asked...[orthodox Churches of Christ supporters] to attend the Nagriamel meeting. The future of Nasawa was discussed and the people stated that they did not want to be under the mission, government or conference. They want a free school and a free church with no fees or offerings. Everyone who visits Nasawa, including Pastors and missionaries, must get a pass from [Vanafo] before they will be allowed to come. The people said their orders came from [Vanafo]. K. Ludgater has spoken to Abel Bani about this and he said that this was just the cranky fashion of the Nasawa people. Abel was asked to visit Nasawa with K. Ludgater following CC [Church Conference] but he said that he will go at the end of this month. CC agreed that Nagriamel has no right to use the buildings at Nasawa. If the people insist that we move from Nasawa all buildings will be closed and left vacant until such time as an agreement can be made between CC and the people at Nasawa. CC recommends that the nurse and hospital equipment and medicines be moved to [Beterara] if this happens. It is believed that the French govt are only using Nagriamel as a tool to fight against the British government. When K. Ludgater spoke to some Nagriamel members at Nduindui about the situation they would not give an answer but said that he must go to [Vanafo] to hear what the committee there plans. CC does not want to close down the work at Nasawa but if the people insist we shall move out and if the way opens later we shall return. Next CC meeting will be held for one or two days at Nasawa in January. The people will be given until then to decide what they want. If after this meeting the people will insist on closing down the work, all equipment will be moved at that time to other stations, or sold.⁸⁰

Nasawa people recall Australian missionary Ken Warne uttering a warning outside the technical college of the great threat to the church – and to its program of modernisation – that Nagriamel entailed: it was ‘the dirty oil in the engine of the church’.⁸¹ Most local people now recount the resurgence of practices long banned by the Churches of Christ. One recalled the effects of adopting Nagriamel: ‘*Mifala i mekem tambu faea, bildim go bak. Melekem dring kava. Naoia kava wetem kastom i strong we strong bakegen*’.⁸² [We made a *tabu* fire, built it, went back [to *kastom*]. [We] milked [and] drank kava. Now kava has come back very strongly again.]

increasingly accepting greater responsibilities for their work. The Ranmawat and Nasawa hospitals are now completely staffed by New Hebrideans”, Australian Churches of Christ Overseas Missions Board Inc. Annual report, 1976. OMB.

⁷⁹ Annual Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides, Londua, 6-9 May 1976. GSA.

⁸⁰ Minutes of the Conference Committee Meeting, Longana, 13-15 Nov. 1974. OMB.

⁸¹ Barnabus Bani, former Nagriamel member, voice of Radio Vanafo, Vanuatu Christian Fellowship elder and Simeon Tari, Chief of Nasawa, Vanuatu Christian Fellowship Member. Interview with the author, Bislama. 24 Mar. 2000; Nasawa focus group interview, 24 Mar. 2000.

⁸² Willie Kona, Churches of Christ elder, former Nagriamel member. Interview with the author, Bislama. 18 Aug. 2002, Freswota, Port Vila. Mini disc recording, notes.

The Churches of Christ Overseas Mission Board reported positively that local people were increasingly accepting greater responsibilities for their work, specifically taking over the running of Ranmawat and Nasawa hospitals.⁸³ But for local people the situation appeared differently. By 1976, the situation in Nasawa had worsened: whereas church youth work had continued unhindered until 1975, Nasawa's Nagriamel leaders prohibited youth work and all gospel service.⁸⁴ In 1977, Abel Vora Kwan, who worked in Nduindui Hospital's dispensary, wrote to Ron McLean about the execrable state of the work: 'I have to tell you this, that very soon Nduindui have come like Nasawa. ... No young are [interested] in our work'.⁸⁵

The corollary of Bani's continuing mission to evangelise Santo people was that increasingly Churches of Christ practices were being supplanted with those of the Nagriamel movement. Bani's evangelistic energy did not nullify queries raised by mainstream worshippers about the influence Nagriamel was having on the religious practices of Churches of Christ people. Delegates to the 1976 Conference of Churches of Christ queried the symbolism of consecrating marriages and baptisms using *namele* leaves – a key Nagriamel symbol – as arches.⁸⁶ Recalling the events, one west Ambae man jested that, 'It was as if *we* were the ones who converted'. For Churches of Christ people throughout the islands, the period is now typified as one of extreme confusion in which the boundaries between political affairs and church activities and between the authority of church leaders and secular ones were blurred. Most of my interlocutors now typify the 1970s by its challenge to the certainty of church cohesion, rather than as an *entrée* to political autonomy (see Chapter 4). For example, Chief Mark Toa Siramanu from Baetora, Maewo, recounted to me '*tataem ia mifala i stap confus*'.⁸⁷ [At this time we stayed confused.]

While the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides contended with Nagriamel's threat to its legitimacy, the absence of effective pastors in several communities motivated parishioners to consider joining less trouble-stricken denominations. In Tutuba, the majority of Churches of Christ people had strong links

⁸³ Australian Churches of Christ Overseas Missions Board Inc. Annual report 1976. (Annual Meeting 1977). OMB.

⁸⁴ Annual Conference of the Churches of Christ in the New, Londua, 6-9 May 1976. OMB.

⁸⁵ Abel Vora Kwan to R.S. McLean, 23 Dec. 1977. OMB.

⁸⁶ Annual Conference of the Churches of Christ in the New, Londua, 6-9 May 1976, 3. OMB.

⁸⁷ Chief Mark Toa Siramanu, chief of Baetora, Churches of Christ worshipper, ex-Nagriamel member. Interview with the author, Bislama. 26 Mar. 2000. Tape recording, notes.

with the Presbyterians from Malakula and mainland Espiritu Santo, despite the migration to Tutuba of several west Ambae Churches of Christ people. In 1976 they argued that because there was 'so much trouble and not enough help [being given by the church conference, they were] thinking of joining the Presbyterians again'.⁸⁸

By 1978 all church funded services, except for a scaled down medical clinic, were withdrawn from Nasawa. Churches in Santo fell into disrepair. In Sara, Kay Williams found the people to be discouraged from Christianity by the absence of their pastor, who had been working in Santo for three months and who had not returned to the village at all during that time.⁸⁹ Although a young local man had gone to train as a pastor at Banmatmat Bible College in 1977 and had asked to return to his home village to minister the faith, he had not yet arrived. The Churches of Christ chapel in Vanafo was 'half...collapsed and...overgrown with creepers'.⁹⁰ In Kolé, Williams found the church deeply divided. Nagriamel people had blocked off the chapel, forcing services to be conducted in a small *kai* house, or outdoor kitchen. Overall, Nagriamel community projects appeared to take precedence over church work. One minister from east Ambae recalled a visit to his family's home village at the time: 'they forgot about health services. And they forgot about looking after the roads and schools, maintaining the churches. I thought that if they continued that way then the church and the schools and the health services would just die'.⁹¹ In west Ambae, Nagriamel launched a campaign against school fees. Simultaneously, Nagriamel members claimed that school would be free for all Nagriamel children and broadcast on Radio Vanafo that the Churches of Christ school at Nduindui had expelled 110 Nagriamel children and 37 at Longana.⁹²

Despite internal political and religious conflict within the Churches of Christ, Abel Bani continued to advocate and undertake evangelism; correspondingly he maintained his advocacy for involvement with Nagriamel itself. In August 1976, he began moves to open another Church of Christ in Espiritu Santo. But he emphasised the importance of independence for the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides from the

⁸⁸ Annual Conference of the Churches of Christ in the New, Londua, 6-9 May 1976, 3. OMB.

⁸⁹ Kay Williams Living Link Letter 23 Jan. 1978, 2. OMB. "Living link letters" were a means by which missionaries could report on their ongoing work in the field, which took the form of an open letter to their respective congregations in Australia.

⁹⁰ Kay Williams Living Link Letter 23 Jan. 1978, 3. OMB.

⁹¹ Samuel Vusi 20 Aug. 1999.

⁹² Kay Williams, Londua School, to R.S. McLean, President, OMB, 11 Feb. 1976. OMB.

Australian Conference because of the pressure being brought to bear on him by Australian missionaries because of his continuing support for Nagriamel.⁹³ In 1978, Bani oversaw the opening of the new Vunamele Church of Christ in Santo; its opening was evidence that Abel Bani had adhered to his agenda to evangelise Santo pagans using Nagriamel as his instrument. Churches of Christ people travelled to Santo to witness the event, irrespective of whether they were Nagriamel supporters or not.⁹⁴ Villages that had been closed to pastors and missionaries for four years due to political pressures were reopened and new churches were being built.

Although Churches of Christ missionaries were encouraged by the growth and development of the work in Santo, particularly among Nagriamel people, Abel Bani's advocacy for Nagriamel remained a source of disquiet for many former missionaries and church officers.⁹⁵ In interviews conducted between 1999-2002, former missionaries were unsure of how to comprehend his seemingly anomalous support for Nagriamel. Graham Warne, for example, suggested that Bani's rhetoric was often elaborate and 'it was very hard to tell at times which way he was leaning...he was probably leaning more towards the Nagriamel [side]'.⁹⁶ In the centenary history of Churches of Christ missionary work, Ron McLean attempted to reconcile this apparent discrepancy between Bani's outward adherence to the Churches of Christ and the implications of his involvement with Nagriamel: 'I firmly believe that Abel's interest and support for Nagriamel was not only related to land rights but also to his earnest desire to bring the people of Santo from darkness to light'.⁹⁷

Among local adherents of the Churches of Christ in northern Vanuatu, Abel Bani's advocacy for Nagriamel is rarely questioned. John Liu recalled the trajectory of Nagriamel's adoption by local people: 'the Churches of Christ, mainly from west Ambae started off as small supporters [of Nagriamel] then came in Maewo and Pentecost. They came in because west Ambae, particularly, took the lead. Abel Bani

⁹³ New Hebrides Conference of Churches of Christ, Conference Committee, Vila, 15-18 Aug. 1976. OMB.

⁹⁴ Kay Williams, Londua School, west Ambae, to R.S. McLean, President, Overseas Missions Board, Adelaide, 26 Sept. 1978. OMB.

⁹⁵ "Developments in Santo - New Hebrides", *Australian Christian*, 14 Oct. 1978, 10.

⁹⁶ Ps. Graham Warne 16 Apr. 1999.

⁹⁷ McLean in Bowes, *Partners*, 68.

gave us his assurance [that joining Nagriamel] was the *stret rod* [straight path]'.⁹⁸ Pastor Alick Vuti remembered: '*Abel Bani i plandem...flak long Nagriamel long ples ia wes Ambae*'.⁹⁹ [Abel Bani he planted it...the flag of Nagriamel, here in west Ambae.] Bill Bulelam described Abel Bani as being an evangelist of Nagriamel, as well as of the Churches of Christ.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, in Pentecost people characterised Abel Bani as 'an evangelist' of Nagriamel.¹⁰¹ In Sara wan, in north eastern Santo, the local chief remembered: '*Abel Bani hemi plandem namele ia longwe kolosap long skul blong yumi. Hemi olsem mifala i joinem long Church of Christ wetem Nagriamel tufala tugeta wantaem*'.¹⁰² [Abel Bani planted that *namele* there, next to our *skul* [church]. It was as if we joined the Church of Christ and Nagriamel, the two together at the one time']. Similarly, Joseph Vira similarly stated: '*afta Vanafo sipos you joinem Church of Christ yu joinem Nagriamel nao*'. [After [the formation of the Churches of Christ enclave at] Vanafo, if you joined the Church of Christ, you joined Nagriamel.] Vira suggested further that it was Bani who advocated that west Ambae people should travel to Vanafo to stay in the island's enclave there: '*Ananit long otoriti long Abel Bani olgeta i go. Hemi otoriti long church be telem se hemi bigman long Nagriamel tu. Oli go from hem*'.¹⁰³ [Under Bani's authority they all went. He was the authority of the church he said he was also a big man in Nagriamel. They went [to Vanafo] because of him.] Willie Toka analogised Bani's political/religious dualism as 'carrying two baskets – Nagriamel and the Church of Christ'.¹⁰⁴

Thus, Abel Bani is now often characterised as the agent of political fragmentation; that is, *politik* originated from the interplay of Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ and *ipso facto* Abel Bani was responsible. Madeleine Kanegae, a Christian Women's Fellowship leader from Navitora, west Ambae remembers that: 'Abel tried to convert

⁹⁸ John Liu 17 Aug. 1999.

⁹⁹ Ps Alick Vuti 27 Oct. 1999.

¹⁰⁰ Bill Bulelam 14 May 2001.

¹⁰¹ Ps. Lewis Warri 27 Aug. 1999; Charley Tor, former assessor, VP commissar, Churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author. 28 Aug. 1999, Panlimsi, south Pentecost. Tape recording, notes.

¹⁰² David Wilson, UMP committee organiser, Churches of Christ youth leader and Chief Matthias Lus, chief, Sara Wan, northeast Santo. Interview with the author. 5 Jan. 2000, Sara, northeast Santo. Tape recording, notes.

¹⁰³ Joseph Vira, 1 Nov. 1999.

¹⁰⁴ Willie Toka, 12 Aug. 2002.

them all. Abel still stayed within the church. He held tight to our ways. [But] many men said that from this thinking Abel would separate the church. Many men became [divided] because of these issues. [Our involvement with] Nagriamel made people separate'.¹⁰⁵ With the benefit of hindsight, Kanegae characterised this as the beginning of *politik*: 'Abel took food to make a relationship with Tari Buluk and Jimmy. He did this to make us independent. *Sayez! Politik nao!* [That is how it goes! Politik began!]'. By emphasising the sharing of food, a transparent act of reciprocity, Kanegae contrasted the result of the relationship and thereby ironically accentuated the eruption of political conflict because of the alliance with Nagriamel.

In 1978, Gordon Stirling, a former president of the Overseas Mission Board, informed readers of the *Australian Christian* that:

Abel Bani and the other "old fellows" who gave such outstanding leadership in the past are getting towards the end of their ministries and gradually handing over leadership to others. I believe that the future of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides is very bright because of the outstanding qualities of the new leadership, many of the graduates of Banmatmat Bible College.¹⁰⁶

Privately, the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides recognised that rather than the orderly handover of authority depicted by Gordon Stirling, the Churches of Christ were divided; Abel Bani demonstrated little inclination towards stepping down from his position as the indigenous leader of the church, despite his waning influence with the trained clergy.

In February 1980, a French school was opened at Vinangwangwe, to which most Nagriamel children were sent. However, at the opening ceremony 'some of the [Nagriamel] men from Natakoro arrived with 24 cases of beer to sell and were set upon by people there. They were punched and kicked and a couple of them had come to the hospital for stitches'.¹⁰⁷ For the missionary teacher, Kay Williams, the apparent divisions which had emerged within Nagriamel in west Ambae were evidence that people were increasingly disenchanted with the rebel movement: 'some of the men who speak out most against it now were some of the foremost leaders in the beginning. It's good to know that the folk will gather around and give a bit of support when [Nagriamel] members cause trouble'.¹⁰⁸ However, most west Ambae men remained Nagriamel adherents. George Mathieson, the visiting Chief Executive of the National

¹⁰⁵ Madeleine Kanegae, 26 Feb. 2000.

¹⁰⁶ Gordon Stirling, "Aoba, Vila and the Future", *Australian Christian*, 31 Mar. 1978, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Kay Williams Living Link letter, 24 Feb. 1980. OMB.

¹⁰⁸ Kay Williams Living Link letter, 24 Feb. 1980. OMB.

Conference of Australian Churches of Christ, represented Nagriamel's success as the failure of 'leadership and [lack of] community acceptance' of certain local ministers.¹⁰⁹ Arguably, the divisions ran deeper than personal failings of local ministers.

In the months before independence in 1980, many missionaries sought to downplay Bani's continuing appeal among local adherents of the church. On 19 June 1980, ten days before the scheduled transition to independence, Kay Williams wrote in a letter to Ron McLean: 'Abel is not at all popular here as he spent quite a bit of time at [Vanafo] just before George [Mathieson] came and is well and truly "on their side" according to non-NGM [Nagriamel] members'.¹¹⁰ Most loyal church people, she suggested, had little respect for anything he said.¹¹¹

On 28 May 1980, Nagriamel militants – including many nominal Churches of Christ people – stormed the British administrative headquarters in Luganville, Espiritu Santo, causing most expatriate residents, immigrant islanders – including Churches of Christ ministers – and supporters of the nationalist Vanua'aku Pati supporters to flee the town and marking the beginning of the Santo Rebellion (see Chapter 5). Soon afterwards, Jimmy Stephens declared the formation of the Vemerana Federation, a loose secessionist government that was supported by numerous expatriate business people, French colonial administrators and the American libertarian Phoenix Foundation. The suppression of the rebellion by the Vanua'aku Pati government of Father Walter Lini beginning in August 1980 and the mopping-up operations resulted in widespread arrests of Churches of Christ people. Nagriamel's suppression anticipated Abel Bani's eventual surpassing as the indigenous leader of the Churches of Christ.

Conclusions

For most Churches of Christ people, Abel Bani is an ambivalent symbol of church strength: he is remembered as the central figure of Churches of Christ after World War II, characterised by Lewis Wari, for example, 'as a king among us' because his secular

¹⁰⁹ George Mathieson, Report of the Visit to Vanuatu (Formerly New Hebrides) [sic] 3-31 May 1980. OMB. The title of Mathieson's report is anachronistic. Vanuatu did not achieve independence until 30 July 1980. However, by March 1980 the Vanua'aku Pati had settled upon the name "Vanuatu" for the new country, despite rigorous public debate about its appropriateness because of its similarity to the name of the ruling Vanua'aku Pati. See e.g. *Nasiko*, 6 Mar. 1980; *Nasiko*, 13 Mar. 1980.

¹¹⁰ Kay Williams, Londua School, to Ron McLean, President Overseas Missions Board, Adelaide, 19 Jun. 1980. OMB.

¹¹¹ Williams to McLean 19 Jun. 1980. OMB.

power surpassed that of the foreign missionaries of the Churches of Christ; but he is remembered also as maintaining the relationship with Nagriamel and through his agency the Churches of Christ were subject to critical social and political divisions. Thus, the analogy of Cyrus, with which I began this chapter, presents a paradoxical illustration of the relationship between the Churches of Christ and Nagriamel. My interlocutors often contested the reasons for the Churches of Christ involvement with Nagriamel but few people dissent from the view that Abel Bani seriously pursued a mission to evangelise Santo pagans, through Nagriamel. In Amon Ngwele's account, among many others, Bani's program of evangelism is celebrated as a church victory. Most of my interlocutors, however, observed the beginning of the relationship between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ as the commencement of the internecine political conflicts within the Churches of Christ that now characterise the beginnings of *politik*.

Unquestionably, the interplay between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ resulted in social cleavages at independence. The conflict that afflicted the church is portrayed as having deprived the Churches of Christ of more converts, as evidenced by Amon Ngwele's lament, '[m]aybe all of Santo would have joined the Churches of Christ'. Characterising Jimmy Stephens, then, as Cyrus, servant of God, deflects attention away from Abel Bani's agency in drawing the Churches of Christ into Nagriamel and serves to exonerate him from the effects that relationship ultimately had. Ngwele's suggestion that Jimmy Stephens 'unified people and he won small freedoms for the people too' plausibly reflects the perceived benefits of maintaining the relationship with Nagriamel, prior to the removal of Conference support for continuing involvement between the church and Nagriamel throughout the northern New Hebrides. According to Ngwele, his father's overall mission to evangelise pagan people in Espiritu Santo would have succeeded but for the decision taken by the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides, constituted primarily by the younger trained ministers from Banmatmat Bible College and supported by the majority of Australian and New Zealand missionaries working in the New Hebrides, to distance themselves from Nagriamel and its leader Jimmy Stephens. The strident moral tension that underscores most accounts of the relationship between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ has arisen from the belief that culpability for the divisions that emerged within the Churches of Christ can ultimately be traced to Bani's evangelistic endeavour in the early 1950s. Oral histories about the interplay of Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ depict social conflict within the church.

4.

THE WRONG TYPE OF LEADERS:

Local councils, political parties and the paradoxes of local autonomy

*Long 1960 tufala gavman i bin saenem wan samting we oli colem...decentralisation...long Niu Hebrides. Yu save faenem long Pentikos long Pangi, long Maewo long Tanmaeto, long Ambae Ambore, long Paama long Liro. I gat plande ples we decentralisation i go. Tataem ia Jimmy Stephens hemi ting se bambae hemi go long gavman. Hemi no go...Jimmy Stephens i kros. Hemi putumap Nagriamel long 1968. Tufala I stap tugeta wantaem. Jimmy Stephens wetem politik.*¹

In 1960 the *tufala gavman* signed something they called decentralisation ... in the New Hebrides. You could find [local councils] in Pentecost at Pangi, in Maewo at Tanmaeto in Ambae at Ambore, in Paama at Liro. They decentralised [government] to plenty of places. At this time Jimmy Stephens thought he would join the government. He did not go [He failed to be elected]. Jimmy Stephens was cross [so] he created [*putumap*] Nagriamel in 1968. These two things went together [*stap tugeta wantaem*]: Jimmy Stephens with *politik*.

In the exemplary passage quoted above, ‘Peter Tari’, a former Vanua’aku Pati activist from north Ambae, established a trajectory of *politik* beginning with Jimmy Stephens’ failed attempts to be elected to ‘gavman’ (the colonial government) and his consequent formation of Nagriamel in 1968. In Tari’s estimation the two events were inextricably linked. While Tari’s comments stem from his past role as a Vanua’aku Pati commissar (local political organiser) and his continuing support for that political party, his account shares with most of the local oral histories I collected among Churches of Christ people a common asserted point of origin for *politik*, namely that it began when political disputes erupted within Churches of Christ communities over support for Nagriamel or for the local manifestations of the colonial state, local councils.

Most of the Churches of Christ worshippers that I interviewed chart the beginnings of *politik* to the establishment of local councils and establish an uninterrupted trajectory between the creation of elected local councils and the current parlous state of post-colonial politics, which – following its vernacular usage – I gloss as *politik*. I take up the issue of the contemporary valence of *politik* in the conclusion. In this chapter, I

¹ “Peter Tari”, former Vanua’aku Pati commissar. Interview with the author, Bislama. 29 Feb. 2000, north Ambae. Tape recording, notes.

contrast contemporary local oral accounts of the 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. I also seek 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 (detached, in my exemplary cases, from the leadership of churches but elsewhere from the leadership of big-men) with contemporary reflections by Churches of Christ people on local government which highlight the damage done to church and community cohesion. I give special attention to the resistance to local councils given by west Ambae Churches of Christ worshippers under the leadership of Abel Bani, who initially mounted a campaign to reinvigorate the 'church council', in which church elders and deacons governed the west Ambae Churches of Christ, and address the impact of his subsequent decision to support Nagriamel. Bani justified his resistance to local councils in terms of one of the informal canons of the Churches of Christ in west Ambae: relations with the government always ended in disaster for local people (see Chapter 2).

Most of my interlocutors stressed the divisions within their communities which emerged as a result of the contending standpoints adopted by the Churches of Christ's most senior indigenous leader, Abel Bani, who eschewed local councils and subsequently advocated for involvement with the Nagriamel movement, and the position adopted by the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides (National Conference), which advocated local councils as the natural precursor to self-government.

The limited antecedent research on local councils in the New Hebrides has been dominated by the suggestion that local councils were derailed by colonial rivalry under the bifurcated Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides.² Had the British and French Administrations adopted a coherent approach to local government, went the argument, then councils would arguably have had greater likelihood of developing in the islands of the New Hebrides. Except for Michael Allen's research on west Ambae – on which I draw – little consideration has been given to indigenous responses to local government, except for those which fit within the broad ambit of Anglo-French colonial

² See Ralph R. Premdas and Jeffrey S. Steeves, "Decentralisation and Political Change in Melanesia: Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu," in *South Pacific Forum Working Paper* (1984).; Ralph Premdas, "Rebellion, Decentralisation and the State in the Southwest Pacific: The Case of Vanuatu," *Kabar Sebarang* 16 (1985).; Ralph Premdas and Jeffrey S. Steeves, *Politics and Government in Vanuatu from Colonial Unity to Post-Colonial Disunity* (Townsville: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, James Cook University, 1989)..

rivalry, or those which suggest that local councils did not fit with local practices and were incompatible with traditional authority.³ After the formation of Nagriamel in 1967, Bani shifted his advocacy against local councils to support for Nagriamel. In Maewo and Pentecost, former council officers emphasise the importance of local councils as forums for debate on local issues and as representative institutions for local people within the framework of colonial state institutions. Many Churches of Christ people in South Pentecost and Maewo characterise local councils as preparatory institutions for self-government. Because missionaries supported local councils, many people collapse their memories of local councils with the collective projects of the Churches of Christ. In short, councils gave 'voice' to local concerns and through their close association with missionary agendas, they are now recalled as essentially Christian projects of community empowerment. This chapter foregrounds the local contestation of the relative merits of local councils among Churches of Christ communities, where, except in certain circumstances, the repercussions of colonial competition were often secondary to local political imperatives. Because I am interested in local conceptions of local councils, I seek to demonstrate that, despite the resistance of the French Administration to implementing them and the influence of Europeans over Nagriamel's agenda, support for either Nagriamel or for local councils often involved contestation over local pathways to autonomy. These two positions can then be summarised bluntly as one in which people construct local councils as exploitative instruments of the colonial order and therefore something to be resisted and one in which they represented an avenue for local empowerment separate to the agenda of the Churches of Christ's indigenous leader, Abel Bani, but broadly compatible with conceptions of Christian collectivity. Thus, this chapter seeks to dramatise a series of complex, ambiguous intersections between, on the one hand, positions for and against the colonial-sanctioned system of local councils (the ambiguities and conflicts of that system notwithstanding) and eventually pro- and anti-independence; and on the other hand, generational conflict within the Churches of Christ, the effects of the bifurcated colony and the emergence of Nagriamel and political parties. In documenting these relationships, care has been given to also chart Nagriamel's shift from a broadly anti-colonial movement to one that was specifically opposed to the form of independence that was eventually adopted in the New Hebrides.

After the Churches of Christ Mission Conference voted to support local councils in 1969, divisions between the church's predominantly Australian missionaries and its west Ambae based indigenous leadership intensified. The growing divergence between

³ See e.g. Jolly, *Women of the Place*, 52.

Abel Bani's agenda and that of the Churches of Christ Mission Conference was recast as rivalry between groups of local adherents of the Churches of Christ. After the emergence of political parties, particularly the New Hebrides National Party (NHNP) in 1971 (renamed the Vanua'aku Pati in 1977), this internal schism was mapped onto the national political landscape in which local adherents of the Churches of Christ were divided by political partisanship. Recollections of local councils among adherents of the Churches of Christ, therefore, are suffused with tropes of social, religious and political dislocation.

A blueprint for civil administration

Discussing responses to local councils among adherents of the Churches of Christ, I briefly contextualise the intentions and implications of local council policy within the broader framework of the approaches to decolonisation taken by the British and French residencies and outline the major objectives of institutional decentralisation.

Until the enactment of the Native Administration Joint Regulation in 1957, the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides possessed no official representative institutions.⁴ According to Keith Woodward, who was the Secretary for Political and Constitutional Development for the New Hebrides British National Service between 1968 and 1978, grooming local people for self-government was standard British colonial policy from the 1950s onwards.⁵ From that time, the United Kingdom sought to decolonise the Condominium, which under international scrutiny in the United Nations had become an 'embarrassing political encumbrance'.⁶ The French metropolitan government, conversely, was by 1957 determined not to decolonise but the French residency in the New Hebrides demonstrated no principled aversion to decentralisation.⁷ Between 1957 and 1962, a raft of reforms was enacted,

⁴ Keith Woodward, "Historical Summary of Constitutional Advance in the New Hebrides, 1954-1977", undated ms., 1. Personal Copy.

⁵ Brian J. Bresnihan and Keith Woodward, eds. *Tufala Gavman, Reminiscences from the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies and University of the South Pacific, 2002), 49.

⁶ Sir Roger du Boulay in Bresnihan and Woodward, *Tufala Gavman*, 200.

⁷ Notes on the Discussion at the French residency, 4 Apr. 1960. 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). Foreign and Commonwealth Records Division Archives (Hereinafter FCORD); Extracts from Notes on the Discussion at the French residency, 20 Apr. 1960. Doc. 59. 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). FCORD; C.L.J. Leaney, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, Confidential Report, Local council conference - Santo May 1966, 218/66 cf. 28. F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence. FCORD;

fundamentally altering the organisation and operation of the New Hebrides specifically relating to 'Native Administration'. Foremost among them were reforms to the civil status of indigenous people. For example, until 1962 ni-Vanuatu could not 'acquire in the Group the status of subject or citizen'.⁸

Between 1914 and 1957, the New Hebrides had been governed under a system of indirect rule, under which the resident commissioners claimed responsibility for Native Administration through their asserted authority over the 'native chiefs' and through the claimed power to make administrative and police regulations 'binding on the tribes', through force where necessary.⁹ The British and French resident commissioners, in turn, governed through a delegation of powers from their respective high commissions, based in Fiji and then the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (after 1952) and New Caledonia respectively. In practical terms, local administration fell to British and French district agents who took responsibility for Native Administration in each of the four districts, Southern District, Central District I, Central District II and Northern District.¹⁰ To compensate for their infrequent visits, however, district agents were empowered to appoint native assessors who acted as their negotiators and intermediaries in local settings, as well as facilitating native courts and the visits by colonial administrators, doctors and surveyors. As William Rodman argued, assessors acted as middlemen between the colonial state and local communities, although their local legitimacy may often have been limited by their close association with potentially repressive colonial state institutions.¹¹ The introduction of assessors, he argued, was

Confidential Report of a Visit to North Pentecost - 26 Aug. 1958, 4 Sep. 1958. 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). FCORD.

⁸ New Hebrides Advisory Council, Minutes of proceedings, 5th session Dec. 1961 (Head xii, Council and District administration), 55. Minutes of the New Hebrides Advisory Council, Sessions 7-14, 1963-1967, Pacific Manuscripts Bureau Document 298.

⁹ British Government, "Protocol Respecting the New Hebrides: Signed at London on August 6, 1914, by Representatives of the British and French Governments [Ratification's exchanged at London, March 18, 1922.]", presented to Parliament by Command of His Majesty, Pacific Manuscripts Bureau Doc 438; In 1927 the "Native Code" was enacted which provided for penalties to be applied to "natives" convicted of crimes against other natives. Native Code, Joint Regulation No.6 of 1927.

¹⁰ The four districts were Central District I (CDI) encompassing Epi, Tongoa and the Shepherds Group, Efate Central District II (CDII) encompassing Malakula, Pentecost, Ambrym and Paama, Northern District (ND) encompassing the Banks and Torres Group, Espiritu Santo, Ambae and Maewo and Southern District (SD) which included Tanna, Aniwa, Futuna, Erromango and Aneityum.

¹¹ William L. Rodman, "Big Men and Middlemen: He Politics of Law in Longana," *American Ethnologist* 4 (1977)., 526-527.

resisted consistently throughout Churches of Christ areas.¹² However, Churches of Christ people in Pentecost and Maewo became assessors. The system of native administration correlated with models of indirect rule adopted elsewhere in Melanesia and in British and French dependencies in Africa, although it was exceptional because the New Hebrides was a conjoint colony.

As William Rodman has suggested, the Anglo-French Condominium was always 'a patchwork polity'.¹³ In its absence, missionaries and local Christians had often adopted the duties of government agents or acted as governments in their own right (see Chapter 2). For many foreign missionaries, their participation in arguably secular duties was an unsatisfactory arrangement. For example, in 1931, the Melanesian Mission priest in Lolowai berated British and French colonial officials for failing to station officers permanently in Pentecost and Ambae.¹⁴ The lack of a British government officer was, he argued, deleterious to the prestige of 'government' and Europeans generally and contributed to a low 'moral sense amongst the natives themselves'.¹⁵ Although Churches of Christ missionaries were often at odds with the Condominium collectively or with the policies and agendas of one or both of the national administrations, they also adopted certain duties as government agents or informal local governments (see Chapter 2).

¹² Rodman, "Big men and middlemen", 526-528; William L. Rodman, "Gaps, Bridges and Levels of Law: Middlemen as Mediators in a Vanuatu Society", in *Middlemen as Brokers in Oceania*, edited by William L. Rodman and Dorothy Ayres Counts, 69-95. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, c.1982), 72-73.

¹³ William Rodman, "The Law of the State and the State of the Law", in *Contemporary Pacific Societies, Studies in Development and Change*, edited by Victoria S. Lockwood, Thomas G. Harding and Ben J. Wallace. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), 58. Rodman challenged the assertion of Ralph Premdas that the colonial state was centralised and able to exploit the islands effectively. See Ralph Premdas, "Melanesian Socialism"; Premdas, "Rebellion, Decentralisation and the State in the Southwest Pacific: The Case of Vanuatu". Because they routinely depict the colonial order as well-organised, effective and coherent, my interlocutors often offset the depiction of the Condominium by anthropologists, political scientists and historians and local political activists, who have highlighted its chaos, the venality or cruelty of colonial officers and the tragedy of a system in which local people were denied citizenship rights. Indeed, such depictions of the Condominium as chaotic were particularly common among the first generation of nationalist politicians in the 1970s and 1980s, who sought to bolster their claims for independence. See, however, Chapter 1 and Conclusions, for my discussions about the possible implications of positive accounts of colonialism as represented in local oral histories.

¹⁴ See Memo, R. Godfrey, Lolowai Mission, Aoba, to French residency, Port Vila, 25 Aug. 1931. 76/1931 NHBS I/I Vol. III (3) MP Series (1902-1954). FCORD.

¹⁵ Memo. R. Godfrey, Lolowai Mission, Aoba to French residency, Port Vila, 25 Aug. 1931. 76/1931 NHBS I/I Vol. III (3) MP Series (1902-1954). FCORD.

Neither the British nor the French administration adopted explicitly anti-clerical stances regarding self-government but decentralisation represented an attempt by the Condominium to break down the boundaries of Christian denomination among indigenes and establish coherent secular leadership.¹⁶ Between the inception of the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides in 1908 and the adoption of policies of decentralisation (and for the British administration, decolonisation) in the late 1950s, neither colonial power had been much interested in ni-Vanuatu society except insofar as it influenced the acceptance of colonial authority. However, the increasing emphasis on encouraging indigenous participation in local government – in effect the transition from ‘native affairs’ to ‘local government’ – required both colonial powers to participate more actively and consistently in rural affairs. Because Christian missions were rather remote throughout the archipelago and because of the distinctive approaches to community organisation and leadership they adopted, the Condominium increasingly viewed the *de facto* patchwork polity as insufficient as a surrogate for the authority of the Condominium.

While British and French policies and practices of decentralisation were historically contingent and changed in line with local exigencies and expectations, they were unified by their emphasis on the establishment of secular authority, distinct from the leadership of Christian missions. In 1957, therefore, the Resident Commissioners enacted the Native Local Administration Joint Regulation, which provided for an advisory council and a system of local councils to be established throughout the New Hebrides.¹⁷ Both the British and the French administrations envisaged that local councils would have responsibility only over indigenous people.¹⁸ Both sides of the Anglo-French Condominium emphasised local secular government as the only viable means by which local people could be modernised economically, socially and politically. While local councils were initially conceived of adjuncts to the existing policies and

¹⁶ When British District Agents began compiling reports on possible local precedents for self-government, dependable indicators that the missions had established the preconditions of self-determination were few. In 1955, the British District Agent for Northern District, George Bristow, viewed Maewo, an acknowledged blind-spot for Condominium officers, as “of unrelieved monotony and drabness and the people themselves are lacking in direction.” Tour Report, Maevo [Maewo]. 5-7 Dec. 1955, 2-3. F1/4/8 NHBS 8 (III) General Correspondence, multiple number new series, 1954-1966. FCORD.

¹⁷ Anglo-French Condominium, “Biannual Report: New Hebrides 1955 & 1956,” (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1957)..

¹⁸ Keith Woodward, “Historical Note” in Brian J. Bresnihan and Keith Woodward, eds. *Tufala Gavman, Reminiscences from the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies and University of the South Pacific, 2002, 49.

regulations relating to native administration, no coherent joint policy emerged as to what structure a decentralised New Hebrides should take.

British administrators generally promoted large councils under whose ambit would come religiously and linguistically heterogeneous groups.¹⁹ Implicit in the colonial enterprise of establishing local government, then, was the mission to impose coherent, secular administrative structures of government. British policy generally sought to establish viable councils in the New Hebrides regardless of their size and composition and then encourage reluctant local people to join.²⁰ Central to British local council policy was the belief that councils ought to be able to raise funds independently to pay for their own staff and to foster a sense of self-sufficiency within the structures of the colonial state. Ironically, most local people would have considered their communities already self-sufficient. For the British Administration, then, fostering a sense that taxes would contribute to community projects was crucial to encouraging local people to become more self-sufficient.²¹

From the outset, French policy gravitated towards establishing small communes that corresponded to language or tribal groups, rather than the arguably artificial boundaries created by mission influence.²² Primarily, the French preference for communes correlated to the *mairies* of metropolitan France, in which local people were actively involved in local government but for which funding came primarily through the central state.²³ For the French administration, British attempts to foster local

¹⁹ Confidential Report of a Visit to North Pentecost - 26 August 1958, 4 Sep. 1958. 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). FCORD.

²⁰ Notes on Some Aspects of Local Council Development. S.1. Doc 75. n.d. [c1960] 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). FCORD.

²¹ Darvall Wilkins, British District Agent, CDII to Keith Woodward, 24 Jun. 1967. No. 116/67. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CD II Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

²² Extracts from Notes on the Discussion at the French residency, 20 Apr. 1960. 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). FCORD.

²³ Notes on Some Aspects of Local Council Development. S.6. Doc 75. n.d. [c1960] 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). FCORD.

autonomy were politically dangerous. Large councils would invariably promote local autonomy, to the detriment of central authority and 'native administration'.²⁴

Despite some shared support for decentralisation, these tensions resulted in the French administration's withdrawal of full support for the implementation of the local councils. Moreover, its ambivalence was eventually subsumed within the overall reluctance of the French metropolitan government to decolonise. In 1968, the French government informed the British government that it did not consider local people, especially rural people, ready for further constitutional or political advance.²⁵

Thus, British district agents became the principal instruments for implementing local councils, often hampered by the inertia or opposition of their French counterparts.²⁶ By 1967, the divergence between British and French policy was mapped on to the islands. All but one of the local councils were in predominantly English-speaking areas and were staffed almost exclusively by Anglophones.²⁷ Keith Woodward, the Assistant Secretary of the British Residency in 1960, argued for local councils to be granted the authority to consider 'matters that cannot be effectively dealt with from the centre'.²⁸ Local councils were intended to provide appropriate local 'legal principles regarding

²⁴ C.L.J. Leaney, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, Confidential Report, Local council conference - Santo May 1966, 218/66 cf. 28. F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969) NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence. FCORD.

²⁵ Keith Woodward, "Historical Summary of Constitutional Advance in the New Hebrides, 1954-1977", undated ms., 2.

²⁶ Two French District Agents, Guy Boileau in Central District II and Michel Lajus in Southern District, were prepared to work with local councils, albeit begrudgingly and one, Jacques Fabre, was sympathetic. Notes on Some Aspects of Local Council Development, Report on the Discussion at the French residency, 1960. Doc. 75. 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). FCORD; by the mid-1960s they had uniformly adopted the French residency's anti-local council line. In 1966, Jacques Fabre, who had been initially supportive of local councils, evinced scepticism at their viability. At a local council conference in 1966 organised by the British District Agency, Northern District, he referred to advocacy for local councils as "*cet empoisonnement*" [this poisoning/this irritation] and suggested rather that local councils be dispensed with because they were a waste of time and money. C.L.J. Leaney, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, Confidential Report, Local council conference - Santo May 1966, 218/66 cf. 28. F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence. FCORD.

²⁷ Darvall Wilkins, British District Agent, CDII to Keith Woodward, 24 Jun. 1967. No. 116/67. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CD II Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

²⁸ Notes on Some Aspects of Local Council Development. S.5. Doc 75. n.d. [c1960] 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). FCORD.

straying cattle, bride price, registration of births'.²⁹ Collectively they were intended to provide a corpus of information on local land usage and methods of delineation and establish locally appropriate forums to facilitate and discuss problems arising from contending local land claims.³⁰ In no sense were the councils intended to standardise or codify approaches, for example, to land usage more widely than the jurisdiction of a particular local council. But they were intended to furnish local communities with appropriate institutions to loosen the ties that bound them to the dictates of the resident commissioners and in turn free the resident commissioners and their district agents from unwieldy relations with local leaders, especially on controversial issues such as land.³¹

Although the system was beleaguered by systemic weakness and susceptible to the increasingly petulant relationship between British and French district agents throughout the 1960s, functional local councils were established in each of the four administrative districts. When the Native Administration Joint Regulation by which local councils were established was finally annulled in 1975, local councils had been established in South Santo (ND), Paama (CDII), Ambae (ND), Tanna (SD), North Pentecost (CDII), South Pentecost (CDII), North Malakula (CDII), North Ambrym (CDII), South East Ambrym (CDII), Tongoa (CDI), Tongariki-Buninga (CDI), Emae-Makura (CDI), Nguna-Pele-Mataso (CDI), Emau (CDI), North Efate (CDI) and South Efate (CDI). The greatest concentration of local councils was established in Central District I, covering the small Shepherds group of islands, north of Efate. Arguably the strongest and most established councils were those founded in north Pentecost and Ambae (Aoba). Michael Ala, an Aoba Local Councillor, saw local councils as 'a blueprint for civil administration'³² and pushed for a unified structure to be implemented throughout the islands. But the local council system was always episodic

²⁹ C.L.J. Leaney, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, Confidential Report, Local council conference - Santo May 1966, 218/66 cf. 28. F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence. FCORD; See also Minute Book, Aoba Local Council, 26 November 1963 Minutes of the Ambae Local Council, 16 November 1962 - 9 January 1969. PMB 48.

³⁰ Dick Hutchinson suggested that the formation of a Santo council was necessary so that issues such as land usage could be discussed. Memorandum Local Government Councils - Santo Island, R.J.S. Hutchinson to British Resident Commissioner. cf. no. 99/66 12 Mar. 1966. NAV.

³¹ Notes on Some Aspects of Local Council Development. S.5. Doc 75. n.d. [c1960] 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). FCORD.

³² C.L.J. Leaney, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, Confidential Report, Local council conference - Santo May 1966, 218/66 cf. 28. F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence. FCORD.

and often challenged locally on myriad grounds, especially, among the Churches of Christ, on the threat it posed to the leadership of indigenous church leaders.

Aoba Local Council

Aoba Local Council and North Pentecost Local Council were among the first to be planned by the Condominium after the enactment of the Native Local Administration Joint Regulation in 1957. British policy planners considered the people of both areas to be comparatively better organised, independent and educated.³³ In both, 'the secular and clerical forces were closely combined for the general welfare of the people and not, as in other parts of the district [Central District II], to further the means of any particular missionary or mission'.³⁴ North Pentecost Local Council was established in 1958 and became an exemplary local council; colonial advocates of local councils broadcast its achievements as evidence of the benefits of decentralisation and its suitability for local administration in the New Hebrides (see below). Although, Aoba Local Council also became reputed for its exemplary organisation, very few Churches of Christ people afforded it legitimacy.

When John Wright, the British District Agent, Northern District, visited Ambae in the mid-1950s, he found many of the west Ambae Churches of Christ communities relatively self-reliant politically. Community leadership was constituted by 'a large number of "councils" some large, such as Nduindui Council and others, having influence only over single villages but all were completely uncontrolled by the administration'.³⁵ Wright's report on Nduindui implied that the Condominium would be forced to intervene to assert uniformity across the disparate communities of Nduindui. He recognised that devolving Condominium power there would invariably need to counteract the local perception that 'the "Government" is there only to punish wrong doers if anything goes wrong'.³⁶ Indeed, he suggested that the Condominium might have to counter decades of its own ambivalence to local people during which

³³ Notes on Some Aspects of Local Council Development. S.1. Doc 75. n.d. [c1960] 12/19 Local Councils Policy: General. 1955-1960. NHBS c.4 II General Correspondence Files. 1953-1961 (c. 1934-1962). FCORD.

³⁴ Annual Report Northern District and Central District II, 1958. NHBS 5/VII District Reports. (1953-1971). FCORD.

³⁵ Annual Report Northern District and Central District II, 1958. NHBS 5/VII District Reports. (1953-1971). FCORD.

³⁶ Annual Report Northern District and Central District II, 1958. NHBS 5/VII District Reports. (1953-1971). FCORD.

time its officers and agents had intervened in local affairs only in the extreme circumstances of serious crime (and in those cases largely without enthusiasm).³⁷

In 1956, Nduindui's church councils operated much as they had in 1911, when a dispute arose between the Nanako church council and a French trader, Montaigne, which culminated in the arrest of Sale Bani Findalua (see Chapter 2). Defaulters on council rules were set to work on community projects; they probably carried out most 'public works' programs formulated by the church councils. Funding for church programs was raised through church tithing and local people looked to the Churches of Christ Foreign Mission Board (the precursor to the Overseas Mission Board) rather than to the Condominium as their principal source of funding for major projects.

West Ambae's Churches of Christ worshippers, unquestionably the nucleus of Churches of Christ activity in the late 1950s because of their concentrated population, comparative wealth and the influence of their leader, Abel Bani, typically dissented from colonial authority.³⁸ Wright noted in his annual report:

Any direct attempt now at participation in their affairs would be treated with at least reserve and at most complete refusal. Since the councils comprise all the male population, there are dangerous possibilities for the future ... The "hard core" will comprise those [indigenous] Churches of Christ Mission leaders who for years have improved their own positions on an "anti-government ticket" and who will be loth [sic] to see themselves absorbed into part of some larger organisation.³⁹

Local people's refusal to name individual secular leaders in Nduindui infuriated colonial officers. George Bristow – Wright's predecessor – had found local people's reference to its governing council maddening: any 'attempt to tie down the "Council" to its constituent members is impossible'.⁴⁰ West Ambae people now celebrate church councils as ongoing strategies to thwart colonial intervention, based on a history of local leaders being arrested by colonial forces (see below and Chapter 2).

Despite John Wright's warnings, the Condominium's initial attempts to instil support for a local council among the west Ambae Churches of Christ were derailed by the equivocal and patronising position adopted by the British and French resident

³⁷ Joint Tour of the Agents to Aoba, 18 Jun.-3 Jul. 1939, 4. NHBS 1/1 Vol III (3) 180/1939 Unrest in Aoba, 1939. 1939-1940. FCORD.

³⁸ Keith Ludgater, Churches of Christ missionary to west Ambae (1960-1977). Interview with the author, English. 29 Apr. 1999, Preston, Victoria. Tape recording, notes.

³⁹ Annual Report Northern District and Central District II, 1958. NHBS 5/VII District Reports. (1953-1971). FCORD.

⁴⁰ British District Agent, Tour of Aoba 4-14 Dec. 1956. F1/4/6 Native Administration Aoba-Nduindui (1953-1961) NHBS 8 (III) General Correspondence, multiple number "new" series, 1954-1966. FCORD.

commissioners. The first attempts to advocate the new system were undertaken by Maurice Delauney, the French resident commissioner and his British counterpart, John Shaw Rennie.⁴¹ Abel Bani and other local Churches of Christ leaders were initially ambivalent about joining a local council because of the history of the Condominium's imprisonment of local leaders. However, according to the anthropologist Michael Allen, Bani 'decided ... if they should be asked if they wanted a Council they would give qualified assent without enthusiasm'.⁴² Rather than posit support for the formation of a council in west Ambae candidly, the resident commissioners lectured the assembled crowd on what had been done in North Pentecost, suggesting that the same could be achieved in west Ambae.⁴³ For Bani, their comments dismissed the staunchly defended autonomy of the west Ambae Churches of Christ. Neither resident commissioner recognised that for the Nduindui Churches of Christ, the church councils already fulfilled many of the proposed functions of a local council and the resident commissioners' assertions of the superiority of a government council failed to persuade Bani that joining the local council would benefit Nduindui people any more than their own pre-existing church institutions. What was planned as an entreaty to entice Abel Bani into a plan for an island government served only to alienate him.

Neighbouring church communities were demonstrably more supportive of the establishment of a local council. The Anglican Melanesian Mission, with the exception of a faction of worshippers led by Walter Aru Nakwa in Tavolavola, east Ambae, offered instant support for a local council.⁴⁴ In February 1962, former British Assistant Medical Officer Michael Ala organised an informal vote for councillors and presented to

⁴¹ Memorandum, "Recent Developments, Nduindui, Aoba concerning the Local Council, Recent Drink Regulations and Cargo Cult Manifestations", Michael Allen, esq., to R.J.S. Hutchinson, Feb. 1962. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁴² Memorandum, "Recent Developments, Nduindui, Aoba concerning the Local Council, Recent Drink Regulations and Cargo Cult Manifestations", Michael Allen, esq., to R.J.S. Hutchinson, Feb. 1962. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁴³ Memorandum, "Recent Developments, Nduindui, Aoba concerning the Local Council, Recent Drink Regulations and Cargo Cult Manifestations", Michael Allen, esq., to R.J.S. Hutchinson, Feb. 1962. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁴⁴ Annual Report Northern District and Central District II, 1958. NHBS 5/VII District Reports. (1953-1971). FCORD.

the British District Agent a list of six men as their council representatives.⁴⁵ Inspired by the rapid mobilisation of the majority of the Melanesian Mission, Walaha people also furnished three preferred council candidates, nominated by the local leader of the Apostolic Church in Walaha, Joe Lulu.⁴⁶ The leaders of the Melanesian Mission and Apostolic Church had consciously nominated as councillors younger men, who were neither major church leaders nor prominent businesspeople.⁴⁷ The intention of the Melanesian Mission and Apostolic Church leaders, then, was to partially cede power to younger leaders, while maintaining informal leadership through personal influence. Among the Melanesian Mission and Apostolic Church, older community leaders stage-managed the emergence of cohorts of younger men who would eventually take on the mantle of community headship.

By contrast, among the Churches of Christ, the emergence of a generation of younger church leaders in the late 1960s – most of whom were trained at Banmatmat Bible College – prompted Bani to defend his authority more vigorously. Antagonism between Bani and the Banmatmat graduates would, by 1969, be mapped onto the cleavages which emerged within the Churches of Christ over putatively political differences, particularly over support or opposition to Nagriamel (see below). For Bani, the decision of the Apostolic and Melanesian Mission church leaders to join the local council represented a betrayal of an older style of leadership, in which leaders of all villages and denominations discussed matters of district wide importance. Bani, then, saw in local councils a threat to his personal prestige. Increasingly the Melanesian Mission and the Apostolic Church convened discrete meetings to which Abel Bani and

⁴⁵ Memorandum, “Recent Developments, Nduindui, Aoba concerning the Local Council, Recent Drink Regulations and Cargo Cult Manifestations”, Michael Allen, esq., to R.J.S. Hutchinson, Feb. 1962. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁴⁶ Memorandum, “Recent Developments, Nduindui, Aoba concerning the Local Council, Recent Drink Regulations and Cargo Cult Manifestations”, Michael Allen, esq., to R.J.S. Hutchinson, Feb. 1962. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD; Walaha had been earmarked as a potential site for establishing a council in 1958 because its leaders were generally more amenable to government administration than were Nduindui’s. Annual Report Northern District and Central District II, 1958. NHBS 5/VII District Reports. (1953-1971). FCORD.

⁴⁷ Memorandum, “Recent Developments, Nduindui, Aoba concerning the Local Council, Recent Drink Regulations and Cargo Cult Manifestations”, Michael Allen, esq., to R.J.S. Hutchinson, Feb. 1962. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

the Churches of Christ leaders were no longer invited.⁴⁸ Despite having been a persuasive voice in island politics since World War II Bani was marginalised in negotiations for the local council.⁴⁹ To counter the threat to his authority Bani mobilised the Ambae Churches of Christ against local councils.

According to former missionary Keith Ludgater, the Churches of Christ leaders in west Ambae believed 'that they were the leaders in the area...Aoba local council shouldn't have been set up without their involvement'.⁵⁰ After the visits of the Resident Commissioners, Churches of Christ leaders discussed presenting their mission records and ledgers to the Condominium and to other churches to demonstrate the virtues of their church council. Ultimately, their position was predicated on local pride in their organisation: their ledgers showed annual expenditure for teachers' salaries, gifts to the Churches of Christ in Australia, new church buildings and contributions to joint church projects, such as the construction of the buildings for the Churches of Christ hospital at Nduindui and the growing, locally organised missionary work in Santo.⁵¹

Should Bani have supported the local council, he could not have assured his followers that Nduindui's prestige would have translated into a sufficient power base within the council. The Aoba Local Council was to be constituted by wards, demarcated by population and the west Ambae Churches of Christ could expect to be allotted only one third of the voting seats. Twelve of the 18 ward seats in the local council were prearranged for the Melanesian Mission and Apostolic Church.⁵² Bani had articulated already his suspicion of any elected council that he considered antithetical to the consensus required in church council meetings and in which he could not automatically

⁴⁸ Memorandum, "Recent Developments, Nduindui, Aoba concerning the Local Council, Recent Drink Regulations and Cargo Cult Manifestations", Michael Allen, esq., to R.J.S. Hutchinson, Feb. 1962. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁴⁹ Michael R. Allen, "Innovation, Inversion and Revolution as Political Tactics in West Aoba", in *Vanuatu-Politics, Economics and Ritual in Island Melanesia*, edited by Michael Allen. (Sydney: Academic Press, 1981), 126-8.

⁵⁰ Keith Ludgater, Missionary, west Ambae. Interview with the author, English. 14 April 1999. Preston, Victoria. Tape recording, notes; See Michael Allen, *Report on Aoba*, French residency, 1961.

⁵¹ See Memorandum, "Recent Developments, Nduindui, Aoba concerning the Local Council, Recent Drink Regulations and Cargo Cult Manifestations", Michael Allen, esq., to R.J.S. Hutchinson, Feb. 1962. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁵² Confidential Report, Aoba Local Council, J.F. Yaxley, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, 25 Jul. 1964. Doc. 104. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

claim leadership.⁵³ With proposals for a local council encompassing all of Ambae, Bani could not mobilise support to counter the combined populations of the Melanesian Mission and the Apostolic Church. Numerically, the Anglican Melanesian Mission alone accounted for about forty-three percent of Ambae's population (the Churches of Christ amounted to about thirty percent of the population).⁵⁴ In the event that Abel Bani committed the Churches of Christ to local council politics, its population would have translated into only six ward seats. For Abel Bani, the Condominium government appeared intent on limiting the authority of west Ambae.

Keith Woodward formally requested the formation of Aoba Local Government Council on 1 May 1962, claiming support from all the local leaders except from the Churches of Christ in Nduindui, anticipating that they would join later.⁵⁵ Ambore, where the council headquarters were built, was on Melanesian Mission land, sandwiched between Londua School and Navitora, a Churches of Christ community. On 2 October 1962, the British and French district agencies for Northern District advised Abel Bani in a joint memorandum drafted in English, French and Nduindui language of the formation of the Aoba Local Council. They asked him to circulate it for the benefit of the people of west Ambae so as to allow Churches of Christ people to take part and be represented in the council and to guarantee that no person was 'denied the opportunity to advance socially or economically'.⁵⁶ Local councils, the District Agents advised, were the only means to avoid the New Hebrides being disadvantaged in a rapidly progressing world.⁵⁷ But contained in the note was the thinly veiled threat that should Abel Bani and the Churches of Christ continue to repudiate the validity of the local council, they would not be consulted *at all* on matters of government in Ambae:

In future, in matters concerning the welfare and progress of the Aoban people we shall refer to the Aoba Local Council (as representative of all Aoba)...It will be a pity...if the

⁵³ Michael Allen, "Report on Aoba" (Port Vila: British Residency, 1961), 209.

⁵⁴ See Margaret Rodman, *Masters of Tradition: Consequences of Customary Land Tenure in Longana, Vanuatu* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987),

⁵⁵ Joint Letter no. 2/62 regarding Aoba Local Council 21 May 1962. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁵⁶ Memorandum 2 Oct. 1962 NHBS no.13/62 f.1/10/2. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁵⁷ Memorandum 2 Oct. 1962 NHBS no.13/62 f.1/10/2. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

members of your church are excluded from the work and discussions of the Aoba Local Council.⁵⁸

The joint threats of the British and French District Agents merely served to entrench Bani's resistance to the local council. In 1963, he stated to John Yaxley, the visiting Assistant British District Agent, that he would still consider joining the Aoba Local Council should it prove itself by its actions.⁵⁹

But by 1963 Abel Bani was cognisant that the Aoba Local Council had failed to deliver on several its development promises. The council teleradio had not been repaired after it sustained damage during an electrical storm soon after installation. Four hot copra driers built by the council in 1963 had proved to be uneconomical to use because of unfavourable copra prices.⁶⁰ And each of the council's major fundraising schemes – primarily intended to subsidise the construction of two dispensaries, the purchase of a boat and the construction of water supply projects – had come to nil.⁶¹

Between 15 and 17 July 1964, the Churches of Christ engaged in three days of celebrations, arguably to mark the 60th anniversary of the church's operation in Nduindui.⁶² Bani used the celebration as a platform to launch a campaign to reinvigorate the church council that had once governed Nduindui with almost absolute local authority.⁶³ On 15 July, he held a meeting under the banyan tree in Nanako – where Nduindui's first Christians had conducted church services – with representatives from all the Churches of Christ of Ambae. In characteristically theatrical fashion, Bani addressed the congregation from behind a table on which sat a large bowl of flowers.

⁵⁸ Memorandum 2 Oct. 1962 NHBS no.13/62 f.1/10/2. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁵⁹ Confidential Report, Aoba Local Council, J.F. Yaxley, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, 25 Jul. 1964. Doc. 104. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁶⁰ Confidential Report, Aoba Local Council, J.F. Yaxley, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, 25 Jul. 1964. Doc. 104. NHBS 8 (iii) General Correspondence, multiple number 'new' series, 1954-1966. F1/4/1 Native Administration Tour Reports, 1959-1966. FCORD.

⁶¹ Confidential Report, Aoba Local Council, J.F. Yaxley, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, 25 Jul. 1964. Doc. 104. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁶² Note: 1964 marked the 63rd anniversary of the church. Today, local people celebrate the first baptisms in west Ambae marking the birth of the local church in late October (see Chapter 2). I have found no other references to anniversary celebrations being held in July.

⁶³ Confidential Report, Aoba Local Council, J.F. Yaxley, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, 25 Jul. 1964. Doc. 104. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

Yaxley recounted that Bani spoke of how the church council had gradually dissipated from its former glory. As a dramatic finale, he scattered the flowers amongst the assembly, symbolising the downfall of the church council and the dispersal of its authority.⁶⁴ In turn, each of the leaders from Ambae Churches of Christ stood to speak about the virtues of a new church council. At the conclusion of each oration, the speaker picked up a flower and placed it into the bowl until it was filled again, symbolising the broad support of Churches of Christ people in Ambae for church, rather than secular, leadership.⁶⁵ With few exceptions, Ambae's Churches of Christ leaders eschewed the Aoba Local Council.

A contrast of recent local reflections on the Aoba Local Council with those on the church council reveals the principal grievance west Ambae people had with the Condominium's attempts to implement local government. Overwhelmingly, local oral accounts of resistance to the imposition of local councils contrast foreign, exploitative local councils against organic and arguably more inclusive forms of leadership, in particular the church. Many west Ambae people recall that because local councils were perceived by local people to be something of the 'white man', they would necessarily augur the dispossession of their land. Jacob Viralingalana remembered: *'Yes oli kam long ples ia long 1960. Dis taem olgeta oli fraet olgeta long ples ia. Oli ting se gavman emi wok long waetman. Oli kam long ples ia i wipim yumi, tekem ol land blong yumi oli stap.'*⁶⁶ [Yes, they [Local Council] came here in 1960. At this time everyone was afraid here. Everyone thought that the local council was the work of the white men. They were afraid that they would come here and whip us, take the land of the people who lived [on it].] For other Ambae people, their irritation was founded on the belief that local councils were another example of unilateral Condominium intervention: the major grievance with local councils was that the government had

⁶⁴ Keith Ludgater quoted in Confidential Report, Aoba Local Council, J.F. Yaxley, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, 25 Jul. 1964. Doc. 104. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁶⁵ Confidential Report, Aoba Local Council, J.F. Yaxley, Assistant British District Agent, Northern District, 25 Jul. 1964. Doc. 104. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CDII Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁶⁶ Jacob Tanga, former Nagriamel member, Joseph Viralingalana, former Churches of Christ minister, Assemblies of God minister. Interview with the author, Bislama. 1 Nov. 1999, Vinangwangwe, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.

imposed them without first achieving local consensus about their viability and legitimacy.⁶⁷

Most Nduindui people recall church councils as organic institutions of government in which community consensus, rather than the dictates of the colonial order, guided decisions. Because church elders and deacons dominated discussions, their spiritual and moral authority underpinned the secular authority of the church councils, constituted by their disciplinary and public works functions. Compared with their reflections on the Aoba Local Council, west Ambae's Churches of Christ people often characterise church councils as effective institutions of local government, underpinned by the virtue of the spiritual and religious leadership of Churches of Christ deacons and elders. For example, Amon Ngwele invoked the two canons of Churches of Christ mission activity – Christian communalism and modernisation – and recast them as fundamental aspects of church councils: '*Tataem ia i had long olgeta. Oli wok from olgeta long taem ia. Olsem gospel hemi gud be wok tu i gohed. Oli katem rod, katem bus, oli plandem sid. Tufala i go tugeta wantaem.*'⁶⁸ [At this time it was hard for everyone. Everyone worked for each other at this time here. [It was] as if the Gospel was good but [public] work also went ahead. They cut roads, cleared the bush and planted [coconut] seeds. These two things went together at the one time.]

Because the colonial government had often appeared to target Nduindui's church leaders for arrest (see Chapters 2 and 5), the history of the church council has been co-opted to a gentle democratic discourse, which downplays the strength of individual leadership and celebrates the thwarting of Condominium authority in west Ambae. Churches of Christ worshippers now commonly suggest that the formation of church councils was a strategy intended to protect individual leaders from punitive Condominium forces and therefore avoid the imprisonment of their leaders. Presumably, a church council, which comprised all the local churchmen, would be impervious to the removal of its leaders. West Ambae people therefore recall the church council as a successful ruse in defence of the church's leaders. One church leader interpreted church councils as a key indigenous strategy of resistance to the colonial order: *Kaonsel hemi tingting long ol man ples long Nduindui. Protectem*

⁶⁷ Amos Bangga, UMP MP Ambae, 1991-1995. Interview with the author, Bislama. 27 Feb. 2000, Losaiwiru, east Ambae. Notes; Sam Bue, UMP MP Ambae, businessperson, church elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 23 Feb. 2000, Limagke, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.

⁶⁸ Amon Ngwele, son of Abel Bani. Interview with the author, Bislama. 24 Jan. 2000, Luganville. Tape recording, notes.

*olgeta. Mifala no stap anda long wan jif. Yumi plande i formemap ol kaonsel.*⁶⁹
 [The church council was the thinking of all the *man ples* [people of the place] of Nduindui. [To] protect everyone. We did not stay under [a system of] chiefs. [So] Plenty of us formed up councils.]

Bani's reinvigorated church council operated, more or less as planned, in Nduindui until the mid-1970s. In the mid-1960s, Bani became increasingly engaged in mission work in Santo – motivated by the desire to increase the Churches of Christ's prestige through the evangelisation of Santo pagans and by the defence of his own standing in the northern New Hebrides – and eventually by his advocacy of Nagriamel. While the majority of Ambae Churches of Christ people and some communities in Maewo and Pentecost joined the growing Nagriamel movement, the remainder supported local councils, dividing Churches of Christ people along emergent political lines. According to Michael Allen, Nagriamel offered an attractive avenue through which Abel Bani could divert anti-colonial sentiment. Facing political marginalisation from other denominations in west Ambae and a possible internal revolt because of the mass support of their own parishioners for Nagriamel, Allen contended, Bani and the politically astute elders of the Churches of Christ decided 'instead to identify with [Nagriamel] and hence incorporate its ideology with their own definition of reality'.⁷⁰ In November 1968, reflecting the colonial approval for the Melanesian Mission and, arguably, reflecting greater local support for decentralisation there, the local council headquarters for Ambae were removed to the Longana district of east Ambae near the centre of Melanesian Mission activity on the island.⁷¹

Unlikely to find the right kind of leader: local and colonial conceptions of local government

Attempts to establish local councils in the northern New Hebrides were always met with some degree of scepticism by local people. For colonial officers, this reticence marked ignorance of the value of self-government. For example, Darvall Wilkins, the British District Agent, Central District II, between 1962-1977, suggested that part of local people's reluctance to enmesh with local councils was based on the misapprehension that such councils were responsible for no more than organising

⁶⁹ Amon Ngwele, 11 Jan. 2000.

⁷⁰ Allen, "Innovation, Inversion and Revolution", 127.

⁷¹ Camille Gloannec cited in Bresnihan and Woodward, *Tufala Gavman*, 268.

public works.⁷² Although successful councils were established throughout the New Hebrides, colonial officers often appeared frustrated that their transparent offers of self-government were not fully recognised by local people. In 1967, an exasperated British Cooperatives Officer, Tom Layng, noted that, 'the average islander has a good idea of what "government" does – mainly through the persons of the District Agents – but most have very little grasp of the idea that [local councils] are an extension of central government, or in some fields, a substitute'.⁷³

For local people, resistance to local councils was framed by negotiations of appropriate leadership. Even in North Pentecost, where the first local council was established, people were reluctant to cede full power to the councils and voiced concern that councils were damaging the prestige of arguably more authentic local leaders, specifically church leaders and chiefs.⁷⁴ Ironically, such local apprehensions inverted the initial premise of decentralisation: the Condominium sought to dismantle the boundaries which had arisen between Christian denominations and impose a uniform, secular state; local Christians were reluctant to dispense with arguably more organic or pre-existing religious leadership.

Whereas colonial officers such as Darvall Wilkins decried local people's lack of cognisance about the reciprocal relationship between the state and the people, constituted by the payment of taxes in return for the provision of services, local people frequently feared that local councils would undermine church leadership.⁷⁵ Without provisions for religious guidance, local councils threatened to unleash on local communities social practices considered to be socially corrosive. Many Ambrym people, for example, refused to accede to the initial request from the British District Agency to form local councils because they feared being forced to adopt 'drunkenness,

⁷² Darvall Wilkins, British District Agent, CDII to Keith Woodward, 24 Jun. 1967. No. 116/67. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CD II Native Administration: Local Councils 1960-1969. FCORD.

⁷³ T.H. Layng to Keith Woodward, 30 Mar. 1967. NHBS 16 (III) Correspondence Files Relating to Cooperatives/Resident Commissioners General Correspondence. N. T.43/199/2. FCORD.

⁷⁴ Darvall Wilkins, British District Agent, CDII to Keith Woodward, 24 Jun. 1967. No. 116/67. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CD II Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

⁷⁵ Darvall Wilkins, British District Agent, CDII to Keith Woodward, 24 Jun. 1967. No. 116/67. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence F1/10 CD II Native Administration: Local Councils (1960-1969). FCORD.

dancing, smoking' under secular leadership.⁷⁶ 'If we form a local council', they argued, 'it may force us to do all these things and then we shall break the law of our church'.⁷⁷ In Ranmawot, a south Pentecost Churches of Christ man told a visiting Assistant Administrative Officer that local councils would necessarily turn people away from the leadership of the church Elders, to an uncertain future.⁷⁸

After the formation and rapid spread of Nagriamel throughout the northern New Hebrides, the British Administration increasingly regarded the implementation of local councils as a countermeasure to the spread of Nagriamel. In Santo, the foundation of Ambrymese 'squatter settlements' in Vanafo in 1966 – a precursor to the formation of Nagriamel – forced the issue for the British District Agent for Northern District, Dick Hutchinson:

it is apparent that the wrong type of leaders are beginning to make themselves heard. If we cannot establish a local council for Santo we are unlikely to find the right kind of leaders emerge. The vacuum between the decline of the power of traditional chiefs and the establishment of responsible local administration is now being felt here.⁷⁹

After the inauguration of Nagriamel in 1967, Jimmy Stephens' rhetoric was suffused with references to local councils being active strategies to disenfranchise local people and alienate their land. In an open letter asking for support from the major Christian denominations active in the New Hebrides, which marked the beginning of Nagriamel as a political movement, Stephens and Buluk outlined their fears. The note read: 'We...disagree to see local council putting us in a cell for our own private land. The local council and the condominium they are not helping us children here at Veamarana or Espiritual Santo and Neighbouring Islands'.⁸⁰

For Nagriamel's regional supporters, decades of colonial competition had engendered great scepticism about the prospects of any unified colonial policies emerging. Very quickly after Nagriamel's formation, local people used their membership as a defence

⁷⁶ Tour of North Malekula, west Ambrym, 28-31 May 1968. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence f1/8 CD II Part V. Native Administration Tour Reports 1969-70. FCORD.

⁷⁷ Tour of North Malekula, west Ambrym, 28-31 May 1968. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence f1/8 CD II Part V. Native Administration Tour Reports 1969-70. FCORD.

⁷⁸ Paul Binihi and Inspector Weqas, Touring notes, west Ambrym and South Pentecost, 29 Jun. - 7 Jul. 1968. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence f1/8 CD II Part V. Native Administration Tour Reports 1969-70. FCORD.

⁷⁹ Local Government Councils - Santo Island, R.J.S. Hutchison to British Resident Commissioner, c/f. No. 99/66, 12 Mar. 1966. ANR/17 Annual Reports on Administrative Districts. 1967-1971. FCORD.

⁸⁰ Chief Buluk Paul and Jimmy T.P.S. Moses, open letter to the churches (undefined), 05 Sep. 67. OMB.

against joining local councils.⁸¹ By May 1968, Nagriamel was so widespread that Aoba [Ambae] local government councillors complained that relatively few people paid their council taxes in Nduindui, preferring instead to contribute to 'Buluk's council' (Nagriamel) on Santo.⁸² For most of its supporters, Nagriamel appeared to be an organic local strategy of social organisation. Because it stressed land alienation as the single most important issue unifying ni-Vanuatu, Nagriamel generated staunch support among the Churches of Christ throughout Ambae, Maewo and Pentecost, as it did elsewhere in the northern islands. This factor, suggested Assistant Administrative Officer A. George Kalkoa, an Efatese man employed by the British national administration, ensured Nagriamel's widespread appeal:

The people who join J [Jimmy] & B [Buluk] are not all uneducated, most are average village standard, however some are quite intelligent and have strong views concerning land. The illiterate man knows very little of what happens in a meeting but land is something both the literate and the illiterate have in common.⁸³

Despite internal disputes within the Churches of Christ about the implications of the resurgence of customary practices under Nagriamel (see Chapter 3), former Nagriamel members in the Churches of Christ insist that they maintained Christian practices. That the indigenous leader of the Churches of Christ, Abel Bani, also supported Nagriamel added weight to their claims that Nagriamel was a local organisation which did not endanger leadership by local Christians, although it often involved defying the pronouncements of foreign missionaries. Indeed, Nagriamel appeared to local people to fulfil local requirements for an indigenous movement, whose policies and direction were generated by local people. Despite its increasing relations with French and American commercial interests, Nagriamel therefore presented to local people a unified movement ostensibly detached from bifurcated colonial administration and its contradictory policies. In 1969 the Nagriamel committee in Benaur, South West Bay Malakula, drafted a letter to Paul Binihi, the Assistant Administrative Officer at the British District Agency in Lakatoro:

Dear Paul,

Mr Wilkin [Darvall Wilkins] had told us that: 'don't try to force any person to do any kind of work or job'. Twice *you* come and force *us* [My emphasis]. The Nagriamel Committee said that, 'no forcing us anymore for local council thank you'. We have got

⁸¹ Notes on tour of Santo, 3-6 Dec. 1968. NHBS 16 (I) General Correspondence ANR/17 Annual Reports on Administrative Districts (1967-1971). FCORD.

⁸² Minute Book 16 Nov. 1962-9 Jan. 1969. Aoba Local Council - New Hebrides. 35mm microfilm, PMB 48.

⁸³ Tour of Paama, Ambrym and Pentecost, 29 Jun.-11 Aug. 68. NHBS 5/vii District Reports (1953-1971). FCORD.

enough. The committee does not want local council. We told you, 'we had join Nagriamel. Is Nagriamel only, not Local Council. We know the Nagriamel is right side to us. It brings us to know only God's name is hallowed and our creator. It shows us what God wants us to do or to say always to do his will or right.

Kind regard,

Nagriamel Committee

p.s. Every work we do in the world today is only run by one God, not two Gods.⁸⁴

The Benaaur Nagriamel committee had flagged the importance for local people of a unified stance against the Condominium, couched in terms of Christian religion. By analogising the colonial government as 'two Gods', the authors of the letter denounced the confused policies of the Condominium. Nagriamel offered an integrated avenue for political action, despite its increasing cooptation to the French colonial agenda (see Chapter 5).

Foreign clergy, especially ministers and priests of the majority Anglican Melanesian Mission and Presbyterian denominations, had often acted as advocates of engagement with the colonial state and after 1960 most also advocated participation in local councils. For example, the Melanesian Mission cleric, Father Derek Rawcliffe, actively encouraged participation and support for local councils in Melanesian Mission areas throughout the northern New Hebrides.⁸⁵ As Nagriamel's appeal among Churches of Christ people grew, Churches of Christ missionaries and the cadre of young ministers, the first class of which graduated from Banmatmat Bible College in 1967 (see Chapter 3), distanced themselves from Abel Bani's leadership by siding with the leaders of the other Protestant denominations. In June 1969, the Churches of Christ Mission Conference, comprising local and expatriate church leaders was convened in west Ambae and delegates voted to support the formation of local councils and advocate involvement in them by Churches of Christ people.⁸⁶

Among the Churches of Christ, relations between indigenous church leaders and foreign missionaries had often faltered over divergent agendas (see Chapter 2). While relations were generally amicable, especially in west Ambae, shared Christian religion did not preclude animated exchanges erupting between local leaders and Churches of Christ missionaries. By 1969, Bani's campaign against the Aoba Local Council was nine

⁸⁴ Nagriamel Committee, Benaaur Village, South West Bay, to Assistant Administrative Officer Paul Binihi 23 Apr. 1969. Notes on tour of South West Malekula by CAAO, P. Binihi, 22-29 April 1969. File 4. NHBS 5/vii District Reports (1953-1971). FCORD.

⁸⁵ R.J.S. (Dick) Hutchison to British Resident Commissioner, c/f. no. 100/66 12 Mar. 1966. *Nasonel Arkaev blong Vanuatu* (Hereinafter NAV).

⁸⁶ Touring notes, Pentecost, British District Agent 19 Jun. 1969. NHBS 5/vii District Reports (1953-1971). FCORD.

years old and most west Ambae people supported Nagriamel. The adoption of a pro-council stance by the Churches of Christ's predominantly Australian missionaries widened the gulf between their agenda and Abel Bani's. After its formation, the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides in 1973, which became the church's principal decision-making body, also advocated involvement in local councils. By 1977 the Overseas Mission Board no longer generated policy for the national conferences of countries where mission work was being conducted.⁸⁷ Abel Bani's resistance to local councils in conjunction with his pro-Nagriamel stance fomented discord between him and the younger generation of indigenous church leaders. Increasingly, Churches of Christ people were forced to choose between the old order of local leaders, embodied in Abel Bani and the younger generation, which had inherited none of his reluctance to join the government. In Pentecost and Maewo, local people allied to the Churches of Christ missionaries there became strong supporters of local councils.

According to Aron Natu, a Churches of Christ elder and local council officer responsible for tax collection for the Maewo local council during the 1970s, local councils offered orthodox Churches of Christ adherents an avenue for self-government without the implications of involvement with Nagriamel but they also provided a means to circumvent Abel Bani's authority:

*Abel Bani i no wantem local council. Abel Bani hemi tij agents gavman. Hemi no akri blong mifala i go insaed long gavman. Mo tu from hemi no wantem gavman blong kam insaed long jioj. Pipol long Nduindui oli stanap strong agensem gavman. Long Maewo mifala i fri from Combridge. Fri long mind blong mifala. Hemi idea blong Abel Bani blong stanap agensem gavman. Hemi no givim raet blong mifala nating blong disaed.*⁸⁸

Abel Bani did not want the local council. Abel Bani taught against [all] government. He did not agree that we should join the government. And also he did not want government to come inside the church. The people of Nduindui stood up strongly against government. In Maewo we were free because of [Reg] Combridge. Free in our minds. It was Abel Bani's idea to stand up against the government. He did not give us any right to decide [for ourselves].

South Pentecost Council

In south Pentecost, Churches of Christ people appeared initially to support wholly the creation of a local council. In October 1969, south Pentecost Churches of Christ people promised to establish a local council by early 1970, supported by the Melanesian

⁸⁷ Australian Churches of Christ Overseas Mission Board Inc. Policy Related To Existing Work Conducted By Overseas Mission Board and possible extension into other areas. May 1977 Annual Meeting. OMB.

⁸⁸ Aron Natu, Churches of Christ elder, former Secretary Maewo Local Council. Interview with the author, 26 Mar. 2000. Beterara. Tape recording, notes.

Mission village at Point Cross.⁸⁹ The initial surveys of South Pentecost had shown majority support for a local council; of the 950 people in south Pentecost surveyed by the British District Agency (CDII), 700 supported the formation of a local council and only 250 opposed it.⁹⁰ Owing to the substantial minority opposed to local councils the British officer suggested that no coercion should be used in the collection of taxes but he noted that, as most Churches of Christ people would be subjected to a barrage of propaganda from the pulpit, none would be necessary.⁹¹ Despite a visit by Abel Bani in 1969 in which he had advocated against the Churches of Christ joining the council, no one in South Pentecost articulated their opposition to the British District Agency and its officers to local councils in terms of their preference for Nagriamel.⁹² However, Darvall Wilkins complained to the French residency in Vila that between 1969 and 1971, owing to the prevarication of his French counterpart, Boileau, opponents of local councils had been allowed to mobilise.⁹³

The South Pentecost local council was formally constituted in July 1971 and held nominal jurisdiction over Anglicans, Catholics, Churches of Christ adherents and custom villagers who resided between Baie Homo at Pentecost's southern extremity and Waterfall, in central Pentecost. At the council's opening ceremony, Harold Finger, who had been a Churches of Christ missionary in West Ambae and Maewo, described 'all government...as God's instrument for law and order'.⁹⁴ The leaders of the local

⁸⁹ Touring Notes Ambrym and Pentecost, Darvall Wilkins, British District Agent Central District II, 10-15 Oct. 1969. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence Part V. f1/10 CDII Native Administration Tour Reports (1969-1970). FCORD.

⁹⁰ Report of the tour of Pentecost, British District Agent, Central District II, 24-27 Feb. 1970. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence Part V. f1/10 CDII Native Administration Tour Reports (1969-1970). FCORD.

⁹¹ Report of the tour of Pentecost, British District Agent, Central District II, 24-27 Feb. 1970. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence Part V. f1/10 CDII Native Administration Tour Reports (1969-1970). FCORD.

⁹² Report of the tour of Pentecost, British District Agent, Central District II, 24-27 Feb. 1970. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence Part V. f1/10 CDII Native Administration Tour Reports (1969-1970). FCORD.

⁹³ Report of the tour of Pentecost, British District Agent, Central District II, 24-27 Feb. 1970. NHBS 7 (III) General Correspondence Part V. f1/10 CDII Native Administration Tour Reports (1969-1970). FCORD.

⁹⁴ Harold Finger, "A Council House...and History", *Australian Christian*, 1972, 19.

council, according to Graham Warne the Principal of Banmatmat Bible College, 'were all Church of Christ'.⁹⁵

Because Churches of Christ people dominated the South Pentecost local council and because most Churches of Christ missionaries supported them, local people now often characterise work programmes undertaken by the south Pentecost Council as indivisible from church work.⁹⁶ Frank Tabi, a Churches of Christ deacon from Waterfall at the northerly extension of the South Pentecost Local Council's authority, recalled: *Ol man we i stap wok insaed olsem ol lida blong church. Samfala problem we i kam insaed i anda jioj authority. So oli mekem marej. Luk se hemi gud tumas. Oli blokem grog olsem.*⁹⁷ [All the men who were working inside [the local council] were all leaders of the church. Some problems which came inside were [therefore dealt with] under church authority. So they made marriage [guidelines]. It seemed very good. They blocked grog as well.] Indeed, under certain conditions, the close alliance between secular and church authority probably bolstered the Churches of Christ's abstemious agenda by backing it with the implicit weight of the colonial state.

For south Pentecost people who supported the councils, Darvall Wilkins' attempts to institute a local council are recalled as the first acts of empowering local people for independence. Lewis Wari from Ranwas recalled that among local people the District Agents – and in particular Darvall Wilkins – were responsible for fostering the first coherent ideas of self-government that transcended mission boundaries. Local councils, he suggested, were crucial components of preparing ni-Vanuatu for self-government and independence.⁹⁸ Tom Bakeo was born in Nduindui in the mid-1940s and educated at Londua School and then King George VI Secondary School in the Solomon Islands between 1960-1964.⁹⁹ For Bakeo, who eventually became the acting British District Agent for Central District II (1978-1979), local councils were always beset by problems of organisation and often incapable of raising sufficient funds to

⁹⁵ Graham Warne, 28 Apr. 1999.

⁹⁶ Charley Tor, former VP activist, Churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 28 Aug. 1999. Tape recording, notes.

⁹⁷ Frank Tabi, Churches of Christ deacon, elected chief of Waterfall. Interview with the author, Bislama. 15 Sep 1999, Waterfall. Tape recording, notes.

⁹⁸ Lewis Warri, 27 Aug. 1999.

⁹⁹ Tom Bakeo, former First Secretary Ministry of Home Affairs, former Director of Local Government, former British District agent, Central District II. Interview with the author, English/Bislama. 25 Jan. 2000 & 15 Feb 2000, Port Vila. Tape recordings, notes; Tom Bakeo, in Bresnihan and Woodward, *Tufala Gavman*, 80.

carry out their work schemes, but that did not diminish their ultimate value: '*Long saed long ol local kaonsel sakes be sakes hemi sakes long wei we mifala save proposem evrisamting we mifala i wandem.*'¹⁰⁰ [Local councils were successful but [this] was a success because we could propose everything we wanted.]. Similarly, Charley Tor, who was a secretary of the South Pentecost Local Council, recalled: '*sipos yu no gat wan local kaonsel vois blong mifala i no naf blong go insaed long gavman long eni rikwest o eni nid we mifala i gat. Yu mas gat wan vois wan strong vois long eria.*'¹⁰¹ [Without a local council our voice was not [strong] enough to be heard [*go insaed*] by the government...You must have a voice, a strong voice, for the area.] It is doubtful whether the processes of requesting funding for projects was as simple as Bakeo suggested. Yet clearly, in certain contexts, local councils are seen to have fulfilled certain requirements for local empowerment. Whereas support for community projects had been given by the Australian Churches of Christ and augmented or funded by tithes from local churches, after the formation of the South Pentecost Local Council, community projects were able to draw on Condominium funding.¹⁰² By supporting the local council, Churches of Christ people in south Pentecost gained access to broader networks of support for their initiatives.

However, when they recall local councils, most of my interlocutors highlighted the divisions that emerged within their communities over support for local councils or for Nagriamel. While most of the local council officers for South Pentecost were Churches of Christ men, not all Churches of Christ people supported the local council. While overall support for the south Pentecost local council undoubtedly fluctuated, the anthropologist Margaret Jolly suggested that at the time of its opening in 1972 only a third of the South Pentecost population – excluding most Catholic villages, custom villages and some Churches of Christ villages – recognised its authority.¹⁰³

Peter Tor was the secretary of the South Pentecost local council from its inception in 1971 until 1977, when he resigned to resume his responsibilities as a teacher at Ranmawot. In 1977 the touring Assistant Administrative Officers for Central District II, Ken Mala and Abel Kaloris, lamented Tor's departure because he had been an exemplary administrator and because the viability of local councils was often

¹⁰⁰ Tom Bakeo, 25 Jan. 2000.

¹⁰¹ Charley Tor, 28 Aug. 1999.

¹⁰² Charley Tor, 28 Aug. 1999.

¹⁰³ Margaret Jolly, *Women of the Place: Kastom, Colonialism and Gender in Vanuatu* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), 49-51.

predicated on the strength of key staffers.¹⁰⁴ Peter Tor's account of his resignation from the south Pentecost Local Council is remarkable for the apparently banal reason he now gives for his decision to leave. Tor considered local councils crucial institutions of local government but his visible support for *gavman* [government] marginalised him from certain social relations within the Churches of Christ. He recalled: '*Tataem ia mi stap in love wetem wan gel Ranlitor, be papa blong hem telem se, 'No'. Yu no save maretem man ia from hemi gavman naoia*'.¹⁰⁵ [At this time I was in love with a girl from Ranlitor but her father told her, 'No. You cannot marry this man because he is government now'.] Tor's story may be apocryphal (it might not be) but it brings personal and local tension to his account of his decision to leave the local council. The personal cost of his identification with *gavman* highlighted the prevailing political climate and emphasised the validity of his decision to opt for a less contentious position as a teacher: '*tataem ia politik i kam antap bikwan. Agens i kam insaed long jioj from samting ia. I mo gud blong stap wok insaed long jioj olsem wan tija nomo*'.¹⁰⁶ [At this time *politik* intensified [*kam antap bikwan*]. Divisions affected [*kam insaed*] the church as a result of this thing [council/*politik*]. It was better to be working inside the church, just as a teacher.]

Maewo Local Council

In Maewo, local people periodised community responses for local councils into two distinct phases: in the first, Churches of Christ people supported the work of the local council as an extension of church work; and in the second, they stress the divisions which emerged between council supporters and Nagriamel people. Maewo local council was established in 1965 and by 1967 operated effectively, without the usual 'difficulties about tax collection'.¹⁰⁷ For British administrators, the most visible sign of

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth Mala and Abel Kaloris, Joint Touring Notes, South, Central and North Pentecost, 7-12 Mar 1977. Carton IV CDII. Nasonel Arkaev blong Vanuatu (Hereinafter NAV).

¹⁰⁵ Peter Tor, teacher, former Secretary, South Pentecost Local Council. Interview with the author, English/Bislama. 20 Sep. 1999, Baravet, central Pentecost. Tape recording noted, notes.

¹⁰⁶ Peter Tor, 20 Sep. 1999.

¹⁰⁷ Northern District Report for the Year 1967. NHBS 16/I General Correspondence ANR/17 Annual Reports on Administrative Districts. 1967-1971. FCORD.

Maewo local council's success was its management of the construction of a road leading northwards from Nasawa, the headquarters of the Churches of Christ on Maewo.¹⁰⁸

Like most Nasawa people, Willie Kona's recollections of the beginning of local councils were suffused with the spirit of church cooperation and local empowerment. Kona stressed the agency of the Churches of Christ missionary in Nasawa, Reg Combridge but he emphasised the cooperative aspects of council work:

*Oli putum wan local kaonsel saot kasem not long Maewo. Long 1965 something. I kam antap. Oli putum ol assessor long vilej blong mifala. Assessor oli go toktok. Oli mekem ol wok long local kaonsel. Assessor oli go tru wetem. Oli putum wanem mifala I mekem. Hemi long taem long Mr Combridge ia. Jioj I sapotem local kaonsel ia. Mifala I wok tugeta. Wan wok long riva long bikfala smol wil. Wota I brekem foldaon antap long hem I stap. Yu luk wan Christian we, blong wok tugeta. Local kaonsel I statem. I stap gogo. Wotawil. Self gavman I mekem allez I stap. Smol wota I karemaot paoa long saed long battery mifala. Mifala I hapi from taem we olgeta I mekem olgeta I mekem kaba gogo nao mifala I mekem trak tu.*¹⁰⁹

They put in a local council, [covering] south to north Maewo. In 1965, or thereabouts, it began [*kam antap*]. They put assessors in our villages. The assessors went [around] and talked to people. They did the council work. They went through with it. They put [in place] whatever we made. This was at the time of Mr Combridge. The church [in Maewo] supported local councils. We [church and council, all the people] worked together. One [of our] works [was] in the river, the big [project involving] the small [water] wheel. [Where] the water broke, it fell down on top of where the wheel was. You see this was a Christian way of working together. The local council started [this project]. It went on, the water wheel. Self-government made this [happen]. The small water [wheel] carried out power for a battery of ours. We were happy at this time where they made all these things because we made *kaba* [corrugated metal roofing] maybe [one day] we would have made trucks too.

In Willie Kona's memories of local council projects, community work was synonymous with Christian communalism. Nasawa's hydro-electric scheme, a waterwheel which powered Nasawa's technical college, occupied a central position in oral histories about the Churches of Christ mission in Nasawa. Most Churches of Christ people remember that the resident missionary in Nasawa between 1958 and 1968, Reg Combridge planned the waterwheel which provided Nasawa with continuous power between its construction in 1966 and the departure of the Churches of Christ mission from Nasawa in 1976. Rather than constructing a narrative around the works of the missionaries, local people regarded these achievements as part of the overall work of Christian mission in which most Maewo Churches of Christ people played an integral part (see Chapter 2).

¹⁰⁸ Northern District Report for the Year 1967. NHBS 16/I General Correspondence ANR/17 Annual Reports on Administrative Districts. 1967-1971. FCORD.

¹⁰⁹ Willie Kona, Churches of Christ elder, former Nagriamel member. Interview with the author, Bislama. 18 Aug. 2002, Freswota, Port Vila. Mini disc recording, notes.

In 1970, Willie Kona, like most Churches of Christ people in Nasawa, joined Nagriamel and withdrew from the local council. He recalled that local Churches of Christ people supported Nagriamel's emergence: '*Mifala tu i glad from land. Land i senta blong ol kastom wei. Mifala i karem i kam. Nagriamel i agensem tufala gavman. Mifala i tingting gogo. Mifala i join from Nagriamel i sendem i go mifala evriwan i gobak long kastom*'.¹¹⁰ [We too were glad [to join Nagriamel] because of the land. Land is the centre of all *kastom* ways. We brought it back. Nagriamel was against the *Tufala gavman*. We thought about it [for some time but eventually we joined Nagriamel] because Nagriamel sent every one of us back to *kastom*.]

Willie Kona's emphasis on the cooperative aspects of working on local council projects, therefore, contrasts with his willingness to join Nagriamel and embrace *kastom*. Arguably, both placed similar emphasis on collective actions. Kona, like most Maewo people, prized community projects such as the hydroelectric scheme that powered Nasawa's technical college and hospital and provided continuous electricity for Nasawa's residents. In 1976, Nagriamel's dominance of Nasawa prompted the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides to withdraw support for the technical college and hospital and remove its equipment to institutions in other areas. Soon afterwards the waterwheel fouled and Nasawa residents gutted the technical college for what equipment remained. Willie Kona holds local people (including himself) responsible for the destruction of the Churches of Christ's institutions in Nasawa because they joined Nagriamel. The decay of church institutions is offset by the value of joining Nagriamel: local people believed that they had gained control over their land. While local councils cooperated with the Churches of Christ for mutual benefit, local councils were conceived as institutions imposed by the colonial government. Plausibly, because the leading figure in the Churches of Christ until 1968 was Reg Combridge, the Churches of Christ also appeared to be foreign-dominated. Conversely, Nagriamel immediately tapped into locally salient issues such as the control of land. While it had originated in Santo, Nagriamel was closely allied to the Churches of Christ's indigenous leader, Abel Bani; it therefore appeared to Willie Kona as a wholly indigenous organisation.

Nagriamel's influence did not extend to communities in Beterara, Navitora and Tanmaeto. Most people suggest that relatively few Churches of Christ worshippers in Beterara, central Maewo, supported Nagriamel and characterise support for Nagriamel

¹¹⁰ Willie Kona, 18 Aug. 2002.

in most of Maewo as *wan wan olbaot* [one or two people scattered over large distances]. Baetora people, to Nasawa's south, also joined Nagriamel.

United soldiers in Christ: political factionalism within the Churches of Christ

By the mid-1970s, escalating political factionalisation of the Churches of Christ was mapped onto the pre-existing divisions created by divergent responses to local councils and Nagriamel. In October 1971, the New Hebrides National Party (NHNP) was formed in Santo by members of the Anglican and Presbyterian clergy, junior bureaucrats and teachers.¹¹¹ Father Walter Lini, a Melanesian Mission priest based in Longana, east Ambae, and two Presbyterian-trained teachers, Peter Taurokoto and Donald Kalpokas, constituted the core leadership group of the NHNP.¹¹² After its formation, the NHNP pressed for the rapid decolonisation of the New Hebrides through a concerted program of demonstrations and political agitation. While NHNP leaders often appeared impatient with the colonial powers, they were broadly supportive of the state and therefore advocates of local government; their major grievances stemmed from their disagreements with the colonial powers over the timetable for decolonisation and the form that emerging state should take (see Chapter 5). Although, ni-Vanuatu clergy dominated the NHNP's leadership and most of its members were probably practising Christians, its platform supported secular state institutions.

In response to the NHNP's emergence, two conservative, primarily Francophone parties emerged: in 1973, urban French settlers, or *métis*, mixed-race ni-Vanuatu, and Francophone ni-Vanuatu from northeast Malakula formed the Mouvement Autonomiste des Nouvelles-Hébrides (MANH), considered at the time to have been the urban wing of Nagriamel;¹¹³ quickly thereafter, urban Francophone ni-Vanuatu and French settlers in Port Vila formed the Union Communales des Nouvelles-Hébrides (UCNH). While political parties proliferated in urban areas, the major political divisions that emerged in rural Churches of Christ communities were delineated by adherence to Nagriamel or support for the New Hebrides National Party. Other

¹¹¹ For a detailed account of the rise of political parties in the New Hebrides see Chris Plant, ed., *New Hebrides, the Road to Independence*. Plant, ed. *New Hebrides, the Road to Independence* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies; South Pacific Social Sciences Association, 1977).

¹¹² Plant, *Road to Independence*, 23-24; Churches of Christ people had been involved in the New Hebrides National Cultural Association, the precursor to the NHNP. Bowes, *Partners*, 64.

¹¹³ Keith Woodward, "Summary of Constitutional Advance", 3. Leadership challenges, the perceived urban/rural dividend discrepant priorities often tested the alliance between Nagriamel and MANH.

political parties, such as the UCNH or MANH were rarely mentioned, possibly reflecting the irrelevance of these political parties for people outside urban areas.

Among Churches of Christ worshippers, the burgeoning animus between political parties appeared to foment deeper disputes. Politically, the leaders of the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides gravitated towards the NHNP (renamed in 1977 the Vanua'aku Pati) and its cleric-leaders rather than into the orbit of Nagriamel, as had the preceding generation of Churches of Christ leaders, such as Abel Bani. Many younger church leaders in Ambae, Pentecost and Maewo eschewed spectatorship in the unfolding drama and joined the Vanua'aku Pati. A few Churches of Christ people became Vanua'aku Pati commissars, the leaders of local party cells.¹¹⁴ By the mid-1970s, support for local councils in Churches of Christ areas was synonymous with political affiliation. Graham Warne, the former principal of the Churches of Christ Junior Secondary School at Ranwadi, suggested that those South Pentecost people who did not take part in the council were: 'protesting against the fact that the Churches of Christ had aligned themselves, as the Churches of Christ [Conference] with the Vanua'aku Pati ... The same people were in there as were in the political parties and in the councils'.¹¹⁵

Increasingly, Nagriamel adopted outwardly anti-European rhetoric. Lyall Muller, a missionary teacher at the Churches of Christ Junior Secondary School at Ranwadi, recounted the strong position central Pentecost Nagriamel supporters had adopted regarding their autonomy: 'we want all the New Hebrides be joined as one under Nagriamel. Not under British or French Government, not under the Church, not under missionaries'.¹¹⁶ In 1977, Jimmy Stephens represented Nagriamel's position on the Vanua'aku Pati and its allies to a visiting journalist as an essential conflict over support or opposition for local councils:

The feeling was that most of their [NHNP] members were Local Council members. Nagriamel is against government and therefore against local council and so we are against the National Party. We didn't want to get pulled back into government. Secondly, we had problems with [organised] religion.¹¹⁷

Stephens' conflation of support for the NHNP with support for local councils is difficult to verify, although the NHNP was broadly supportive of administrative

¹¹⁴ Charley Tor, 28 Aug. 1999; Aron Natu, 26 Mar. 2000.

¹¹⁵ Graham Warne, 28 Apr. 1999.

¹¹⁶ Lyall Muller, Ranwadi School, to Ron McLean, President, Overseas Mission Board, 28 Jan. 1978. OMB.

¹¹⁷ Jimmy Stephens in Plant, *Road to Independence*, 40.

decentralisation. Nagriamel's blanket opposition to local councils predated the increasing influence of the Phoenix Foundation and French settlers on its outlook. However, Stephens' opposition to local councils was undoubtedly strengthened on the advice of visiting members of the American libertarian Phoenix Foundation that had provided funding and materials such as a radio for the Nagriamel headquarters at Vanafo. Local councils were antithetical to the Phoenix Foundation's core belief in negligible government.¹¹⁸

Nagriamel's increasing hostility to missionaries compelled many Conference of Churches of Christ supporters to join the Vanua'aku Pati whose Anglican and Presbyterian leaders were more sympathetic to the presence of European missionaries. Frank Tabi recalled his reasons for supporting the Vanua'aku Pati:

*Mi joinem Vanua'aku Pati from olsem taem we oli statem toktok blong olgeta I stap long fridom blong kaontri. Oli telem kaontri bae I tekem independen. Wanem we mifala ol stret man church of Christ I haremsave oli telem se ol waetman we I kam long ples ia oli kam blong givhan long wok blong God. Oli givhan long saed blong independen.*¹¹⁹

I joined the Vanua'aku Pati because it when they [the Vanua'aku Pati] started to talk, their talk was about the freedom of the country. They said the country will take independence. What we, the straight Churches of Christ men understood was that all the white men [missionaries] who came here, came to give us a hand with the work of God. They [the missionaries] gave a hand on the side of independence. [Helped us achieve independence]

Between 1976 and 1978, Churches of Christ people who sided with the Vanua'aku Pati faced trenchant opposition from kin whose allegiances to Nagriamel appeared stronger than those to their family members or Conference of Churches of Christ leaders. For example, Pastor James Ngwango recalls that his own family banned him from entering his village of Amata in west Ambae because he supported the Vanua'aku Pati.¹²⁰ In the mouths of politically affiliated pastors, the Gospel became a weapon of political rhetoric. In west Ambae, Vinangwangwe people recall visits by local pastors who collapsed their political and religious gospels. Jacob Tanga recalled: 'the National Party made him come up here and say, *'Gospel bae i kam long ples ia mo kilim yufala*

¹¹⁸ See Robert Doorn, *A Blueprint for a New Nation: The Structure of the Nagriamel Federation* (New York: Exposition Press, 1979)..

¹¹⁹ Frank Tabi, 15 Sep 1999.

¹²⁰ Ps. James Ngwango, graduate, Banmatmat Bible College (1967), Churches of Christ minister. Interview with the author, English/Bislama. Amata, West Ambae. 15 Oct. 1999. Tape recording, notes.

sipos yu no letgo long Nagriamel.'¹²¹ [The Gospel will come to this place and strike you if you do not leave Nagriamel].

Ironically, for Churches of Christ people who entered national politics, the resurgence of political symbols based on *kastom* also posed serious problems. The consecration of political allegiances through *kastom* ceremonies such as pig-killing was inimical to Churches of Christ dogma: 'On West [Ambae] a pig killing ceremony was our most sacred pagan religion...It is not just feasting. To us in West [Ambae] never a man wants to kill a full circle tusks' pig after he became a Christian'.¹²² These issues, raised in the 1970s during the *taem blong politik*, retain their valence in the presence. According to Charley Tor, a former VP activist from Panlimsi, great pressure was brought to bear initially on Churches of Christ leaders to engage in pig-killing ceremonies and kava drinking as symbols of political solidarity in the VP, although he claims that he refused to participate.¹²³ The widespread resurgence of customary practices has forced the Churches of Christ to reassess its doctrinal proscription of customary practices.¹²⁴

As the colonially controlled progression towards decolonisation escalated, the national political atmosphere intensified. After 1975, national political developments shifted the onus from establishing local government to the rapid decolonisation of the New Hebrides. In 1975, local councils were surpassed with the enactment of a joint regulation laying out the formation of a system of rural and urban communes.¹²⁵ That

¹²¹ Jacob Tanga, 1 Nov. 1999.

¹²² Anon, "Pagan Baptism", *Vanua'aku Viewpoints* 1977, 11.

¹²³ Charley Tor, 28 Aug. 1999.

¹²⁴ Vanuatu Conference of Churches of Christ, Secretary's Report, Conference Committee Meeting, Londua, West Ambae, 26-30 Jan. 1987. Gospel Santo Archives (GSA). These pressures have dissipated slightly because Edward Natapei (VP), who became Prime Minister of Vanuatu in 2001, also abstains from drinking kava at national functions on religious grounds. He is a devout Presbyterian.

¹²⁵ The system closely resembled the French residency's preference for communes that correlated to language and tribal groups, rather than the arguably artificial boundaries of Christian denomination. Both urban and rural community councils were constituted by secret universal suffrage ballots and thus were differentiated from the local councils which operated as an adjunct to Native Administration. Community councils had the power to provide public amenities and operate public services and were empowered to impose local taxation and enact by-laws binding on all residents under their ambit, irrespective of race or country of origin. Note for Advisory Council (26th Session) Development of Local Government in the New Hebrides. Document 15. n.d. FCORD; British administrators ensured that those local councils that still operated stayed functioning in the interim between the annulment of the Native Local Administration Joint Regulation and Independence. Joint Regulation no.1 of 1975 "provided that local councils should continue to remain in being for a period of two years after the enactment of that regulation." Joint Regulation No.1 of 1975. A second Joint Regulation was

system operated nominally until independence, at which time the Vanua'aku Pati government opted to decentralise power to eleven island-wide Local Government Councils, constituted by representatives elected from local area councils. Only two community councils – at Wala and Rano in Malakula – were inaugurated before independence on 30 July 1980.¹²⁶

In 1977, the Vanua'aku Pati boycotted national elections to constitute a National Representative Assembly claiming colonial ineptitude and the obvious hand of European interference in domestic politics.¹²⁷ On 19 November 1978, the Vanua'aku Pati declared the formation of the People's Provisional Government throughout the New Hebrides and declined to take part in the colonially sanctioned process of decolonisation. In effect, the PPG entailed fortifying areas that supported the Vanua'aku Pati, controlling all movement into and out of them.¹²⁸ In the lead-up to the declaration of the People's Provisional Government, violence erupted between Vanua'aku Pati cadres and UCNH supporters in Malakula and Vila.¹²⁹ Despite fears that the declaration would result in violence between Churches of Christ people, flag-raising ceremonies in Ambae, Pentecost and Maewo passed largely without incident.¹³⁰

However, the Churches of Christ were divided between Nagriamel supporters and orthodox worshippers, including Vanua'aku Pati people. Jeremiads given from the pulpit and in church publications failed to assuage fears that ingrained political divisions would derail the church entirely. For the Churches of Christ Conference in the New Hebrides, which prided itself on its avowedly subaltern stance against colonialism, the emergent political/religious cleavages being played out at the

enacted in 1976, extending that period by 12 months. Joint Regulation 36 of 1976, s.3. Brian Bresnihan, the Assistant Secretary of District Affairs in the French residency, requested that the British District Agent for Central District convince his colleague that local councils and community councils be allowed to co-exist until mid-1978 to provide some basic structures of local government in what was otherwise a state of political flux. B.J. (Brian) Bresnihan to R.D. (Tim) Osborne, British District Agent, Central District I, 08 Nov. 1977. 134/6 BDI/134/1. NAV.

¹²⁶ Bresnihan and Woodward, *Tufala Gavman*, 83.

¹²⁷ *Vanua'aku Viewpoints*, Dec 1977. After its Tauta Congress, the Vanua'aku Pati opted to withdraw from the Condominium-sanctioned assembly altogether, citing the continued policy of the Condominium powers to include colonialist commercial interests in the National Assembly. See *New Hebrides News*, 20 Sept. 1977.

¹²⁸ See Ellen Facey, "Kastom and Nation-Making", in *Nation-Making, Emergent Identities in Post Colonial Melanesia*, edited by Robert J. Foster (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 207-11.

¹²⁹ Kay Williams to R.S. McLean, 21 Nov. 1977. OMB.

¹³⁰ Kay Williams to R.S. McLean, 21 Nov. 1977. OMB.

grassroots between people of shared faith, struck deeply at the mission of the church and undermined the sense of community and church cohesion. Before the escalation of the political tensions marked by the declaration of the PPG in 1978, John Liu had lamented the impact that such division had in the villages: local people were more 'political parties conscious rather than...united soldiers in Christ fighting the good fight of faith against aggressive colonial and New Hebridean injustices and sin'.¹³¹

Party		Formed	Platform	Electoral support, 1979. ¹	
Vanua'aku Pati [Formerly NHNP]		1977 [NHNP 1971]	Nationalist, statist, pro-Anglophone education, pro-independence. [National power base]	62.3%	
Federal Pati	Nagriamel (NGM)	1967	Anti-local council, anti-missionary, pro- <i>kastom</i> . By 1979, pro-French, pro-liberal economic development, pro-autonomy from VP. [Nth. New Hebrides only]	~36%	~ 14.7%
	MANH	1973	Pro- <i>colons</i> , pro-independence (1985+), pro-investment. [Predominantly Espiritu Santo support]		
	UCNH	1974	Urban/francophone alliance, pro-independence (1985+), pro-investment. [National power base]		~21%

Table 01: Major political parties, 1979.

In November 1979, national elections to constitute the first fully elected national parliament were held concurrent with elections for regional assemblies for Santo and Tanna. In elections in which an estimated ninety percent of the population took part, the Vanua'aku Pati won a stunning majority in the Representative Assembly and two slim majorities in the regional assemblies. In the Representative Assembly, the Vanua'aku Pati won twenty-six from thirty-nine seats based on over 60% of the vote (see Table 01).¹³² Despite a comparatively high level of electoral support for Nagriamel (~14% nation-wide) its electoral defeat triggered its intention to resist the authority of the Vanua'aku Pati government. In 1980, Nagriamel and elements of the MANH and UCNH declared their intention to secede (see Chapter 6), resulting in open insurrection at independence on 30 July 1980.

¹³¹ Liu, *Mission Imperatives*, 70.

¹³² *Nabanga*, 21 Nov. 1979, 4-5.

The Churches of Christ were divided between supporters of the victorious Vanua'aku Pati, who constituted the minority within the church, and the secessionist Nagriamel movement, which accounted for most Churches of Christ people in Ambae and significant sections of the Pentecost and Maewo communities. The relative support for Nagriamel among the Churches of Christ is difficult to verify but some conclusions can be drawn from the results of the 1979 census and the number of nominal Churches of Christ worshippers who openly supported the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides. According to the 1979 census, the Churches of Christ accounted for 3.8 percent of the adult population of the New Hebrides.¹³³ However, since the 1967 census the number of people claiming adherence to the Churches of Christ had declined palpably. In 1967, the Churches of Christ accounted for 5.1 per cent of the population.¹³⁴ The reasons for this sharp decline were numerous and might have included problems with enumeration and the reluctance of local people in rural areas to allow census officials into their communities at all. These caveats notwithstanding, in 1980, the New Hebrides Conference of Churches of Christ reported that of the 57 villages under the church's influence only 26 remained associated with the conference, 12 were aligned with Nagriamel and one was opposed to conference, although the political affiliations of this church's congregation were not disclosed.¹³⁵ No mention was made of the political inclinations of the remaining eighteen villages that remained unaccounted for.

Conclusions

Despite their conception by colonial officials as training grounds for self-government, local councils are predominantly represented in the local oral histories I collected as causing social dislocation; the interplay between the colonial state, Nagriamel and the church created *politik*. Although many Churches of Christ people supported the implementation of local councils as preparatory institutions for self-government, the majority of Churches of Christ in Ambae (and sections of the Pentecost and Maewo communities) followed the leadership of Abel Bani and became Nagriamel supporters. Distinguishing local approaches to local councils were local conceptions of organic local leadership versus the appeal of cooperative state/church activity. Opposition or

¹³³ Cited in Miles, *Bridging Mental Boundaries*, 112.

¹³⁴ Norma Macarthur and J.F. Yaxley, "A Report on the First Census of the Population 1967," (Sydney: New South Wales Government Printer, 1968), 67.

¹³⁵ R.S. McLean, President, Australian Churches of Christ Overseas Missions Board, to R.K. Welsh, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 27 Feb. 1980. OMB.

support for local councils was mediated via Abel Bani's personal negotiations of authority in west Ambae but after the Churches of Christ Mission Conference and, subsequently, the Conference of Churches of Christ gave their imprimatur to local councils, local Churches of Christ communities were divided between supporters of contending and, arguably, mutually incompatible ideologies. In oral histories, therefore, this tension was construed as having generated conflict within the church, and is thus construed as an origin of *politik*.

In the politically charged atmosphere of national politics during the 1970s, those divisions were recast as political conflict between Nagriamel and Vanua'aku Pati partisans. In the twenty-three years between the first attempts to implement local councils pursuant to the Native Local Administration Joint Regulation in 1957 and the eventual granting of independence in 1980, divisions emerged within the Churches of Christ initially between missionaries and the Churches of Christ's indigenous leadership in west Ambae and consequently between contending groups of indigenous worshippers. The percolation of political antagonism throughout the 1970s had challenged the unity of the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides, threatened the church's secular programs, culminating in the withdrawal of Conference support for key institutions such as the Nasawa Technical. The declaration of secession by Nagriamel in 1980, therefore, divided indigenous members of the Churches of Christ between supporters of the rebel movement and supporters of the nationalist government, which held as a prerequisite the maintenance of the boundaries of the colonial state, post-independence.

5.

WHAT KIND OF REBELLION WAS THIS?

Political economies of knowledge about the Santo Rebellion.

Having detailed the meanings and implications of the oral traditions of the Vanuatu Churches of Christ in Chapter 2 and charted the origins of local historicities about *politik*, in this chapter I compare eyewitness accounts of the Santo Rebellion authored and narrated by past and present Churches of Christ worshippers in northern Vanuatu with ‘public histories’ of these events authored by foreign academics and national politicians. The chapter examines why the theme of foreign intervention occupies a relatively minor position in oral histories of the rebellion among Churches of Christ people and aims to demonstrate how events and relationships invested with significance in public histories are often marginalised in local oral accounts of the same events. In Chapter 6, I further this discussion through a contrast between written colonial records and local eyewitness accounts in order to suggest that all accounts of the past are conditional. I seek to demonstrate how eyewitness accounts of the past are both personally and historically contingent: that is, memories are often altered, truncated or extended in line with local historicities and to emphasise personal agency. Both this chapter and Chapter 6 seek to show the ways in which people author and authorise history and make sense of their respective pasts.

Most published accounts of the Santo Rebellion focus on the actions and agency of foreigners when ascribing causes for the outbreak of hostilities, thereby justifying the suppression of the rebellion as a necessary means to thwart the possible division of the emergent nation-state of Vanuatu by foreign intervention. Oral histories about the Santo Rebellion among Churches of Christ worshippers often elide the importance of foreign intervention or subordinate them to local causes or *raison d'être*. Most commonly, when asked about the rebellion they focus on its direct effects among Churches of Christ people in regional communities rather than the events of the rebellion proper in Espiritu Santo. That is, the significance of the rebellion is to be found in its consequences for local people.

In the oral histories sampled, the most prevalent theme was the passage of the joint mission of the Vanuatu Police Force (Criminal Investigations Division [CID]) and

Police Mobile Unit (PMU), the precursor to the Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF), in the aftermath of the rebellion, when police suppressed Nagriamel in Ambae, Maewo and Pentecost. Ostensibly, the mission was undertaken to investigate the theft of medical supplies and store goods from Luganville during its occupation by Nagriamel rebels and the distribution of these materials throughout pro-Nagriamel areas, but being undertaken at the same time as a tour of the islands by the victorious nationalist government, the police mission was also designed to assert the new state's dominance over rebellious communities.

This chapter takes its name from a rhetorical question asked by Amon Ngwele about the nature of the rebellion: '*Wanem kaen rebellion ia se yu go wetem bow and arrow? Wetem nulun yu save brekem!*'¹ [What kind of rebellion was this that you go with a bow and arrow? You can break it with a club [*nulun*]]. His phrase has become the general organising principle for this chapter because it frames the distinction between national conceptions of the Santo Rebellion and local ones. Only in retrospect have I been able to understand how oral histories about *politik* cohere around the events of the Santo Rebellion and more precisely around its aftermath.² As part of my focus on local conceptions of *politik* among Churches of Christ worshippers in northern Vanuatu, I participated in numerous discussions about the Santo Rebellion, a pivotal moment in local histories of the Churches of Christ and a core component of the nation's origin narrative in public histories of the emergence of Vanuatu from colonialism. Taken collectively, these eyewitness accounts tallied to a plausible Churches of Christ historicity in which the Santo Rebellion is remembered largely as an uneven conflict between disorganised, probably naïve Nagriamel rebels and brutal, organised state agencies, fought largely over support for the state, on the one hand, and the expectations of Nagriamel on the other. Furthermore, this theme was emphasised by the small sample of police officers I interviewed about these events.

Churches of Christ worshippers have formulated aggrieved histories that suggest that the church is marginalised in national politics because of the involvement of members in the rebellion even though the national decision-making body of the church supported the Vanua'aku Pati government. Worshippers who did not take part in the rebellion contend that they are marginalised from day-to-day access to state power

¹ Amon Ngwele, Abel Bani's son, Churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 20 Jan. 2000, Luganville. Tape recording, notes.

² cf. Chris Ballard, "Making History: Event, Memory and Narrative in The New Guinea Highlands", published as "La Barbeque De L'histoire, Evenement, Memoire et Recit Dans les Hautes Terres de Nouvelle Guinee", in *Les Rivages Du Temps: Histoire et Anthropologie du Pacifique*, edited by Isabelle Merle and Michel Naepels, 111-34. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 3.

because of the perception that their church uniformly supported the precepts of the rebels. Significantly, these sentiments represent important discursive strategies for political mobilisation and are often played out in orthodox state political arenas (see Conclusions). I therefore approach these eyewitness accounts as historically and politically contingent reflections on these events, although they necessarily contain certain 'facts'.

To date, two authors have asserted 'counter-histories' of the Santo Rebellion. The first by Joel Bonnemaïson examines the rebellion from the perspective of Tannese rebels.³ The second, a short paper by William Rodman, analyses aspects of the life history of 'Nicodemus Wai', one of Rodman's long-term interlocutors who was a radio operator and announcer for the Nagriamel movement during the rebellion.⁴ Rodman posited that Wai's reflections are implicitly of limited valence because they represent the perspective of the losing side.⁵ His intention was to 'present material towards a counter-history of the Santo Rebellion, a key event in the history of the New Hebrides/Vanuatu'.⁶ He suggests, therefore, an implicit coherent revolutionary narrative; Wai's story was made into a corollary of the national narrative, framed around the same events but explained from the other side.

Many of the local and personal histories documented here are in one way or another subversive of state agenda, as was Wai's, and critical of the foundation narratives of nation valorised in government-sanctioned histories and public pronouncements by national political leaders. Yet they did not always complement national narratives. Different events and relationships are invested with significance in such ways as to alter the nature of the historical subjects under scrutiny fundamentally. The ironies and inconsistencies of local peoples' engagements with colonialism and decolonisation in Vanuatu suggest another way of viewing the history of Vanuatu through the variable lenses of local historicities. This thesis has sought to make sense of the 'multi-layered and seemingly contradictory nature of subaltern polities, cultures, and struggles' as

³ See Joel Bonnemaïson, *The Tree and the Canoe* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986)..

⁴ William Rodman, "Outlaw Memories: Biography and the Construction of Meaning in Postcolonial Vanuatu", in *Identity Work: Constructing Pacific Lives*, edited by Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, 138-56, c.2000.

⁵ Rodman, "Outlaw Memories", 140.

⁶ Rodman, "Outlaw Memories", 140.

represented in local oral histories.⁷ Therefore, this chapter neither proffers a coherent revolutionary or alternate national narrative of events surrounding independence and the rebellion and nor does it assert a detailed alternate factual account of events. Rather, through comparing genres of historical information, it seeks to situate the heterogeneous recollections of the rebellion in historical and political context.

What I know about the Santo Rebellion comes from a broad survey of the existing literature detailing the events leading up to the rebellion, the components of which were mostly shaped immediately after Vanuatu's independence and which sought to depict the Santo Rebellion as essentially fomented by external forces. As I discuss below, much of this discourse was generated by people close to the regime of the nationalist Vanua'aku Pati government of Father Walter Lini, the first prime minister of the independent Republic of Vanuatu. In addition, there are two independent accounts. First, the Oxford anthropologist Jeremy MacClancy wrote a short history of the New Hebrides/Vanuatu in preparation for independence and a short political chronicle afterwards in which he outlined the effects of colonial rivalry, one of which he suggested, was the rebellion. Second, the journalist Richard Shears penned an irreverent and largely apocryphal account of the rebellion and the travails of covering it, entitled *The Coconut War: Crisis on Espiritu Santo*, in which he included several eyewitness accounts of the rebellion. Shears was often as critical of the Vanua'aku Pati government and its English press officer, John Beasant, as he was of the rebels and their backers. Yet these authors are unified in their suggestion that foreign forces – specifically French settlers, complicit French administrators and American libertarian agents – fomented rebellion.

Reports of the trajectory of the CID Police officers and the Police Mobile Unit (PMU) are cursory at best – there are no government reports available in Vanuatu – but stories told throughout the islands and fragments contained in newspaper reports and church correspondences detail widespread and apparently arbitrary instances of physical violence and ritualised humiliation (see below). Much of the information about the joint police mission was contained in church correspondence found in the Churches of Christ's Overseas Missions Board (OMB) Archives in Adelaide, South Australia, especially in a series of letters written by Kay Williams, a missionary teacher at Londua School in west Ambae, to Ron McLean, the President of the Overseas Mission Board at the time. However, the bulk of information about their activities was called forth in the

⁷ Florencia E. Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History", *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994), 1504. See also Chapter 1.

memories of witnesses to and participants in the rebellion recounted to me between 1999-2002.

These sets of historical information contained in national, public histories, personal letters and local, oral reflections intersect only tangentially. Few – if any – of the people interviewed have read or are knowledgeable about those histories of the rebellion written by western academics, journalists or ni-Vanuatu politicians although they are, for several reasons, aware of their basic precepts and occasionally agree with their conclusions. Nonetheless, most of the eyewitness narratives utilised here focused on the effects and aftermath of the rebellion, specifically the suppression of the rebellion by Police Mobile Units and CID officers. They fitted the rebellion into an emergent Churches of Christ narrative and often structured the rebellion as the conclusion of the conflict within the Churches of Christ and more broadly between the emergent post-colonial state and the church organisation, on the one hand, and Nagriamel and dissenting Churches of Christ worshippers led by elder Abel Bani, on the other.

To compare these categories of historical information, section I establishes a linear narrative of the events leading to the Santo Rebellion drawn from secondary sources – primarily histories written by western academics but including key local publications – and places them within the broader context of relations between ni-Vanuatu and the Anglo-French Condominium in the last decade of conjoint colonialism. In section II, I explore the points of intersection between the public histories mentioned above and local oral histories about *politik* and the rebellion. Section III addresses oral accounts of these events narrated by ni-Vanuatu members of the Churches of Christ in Ambae, Maewo and Pentecost and places their testimonies in context by drawing on news clippings and church correspondence which detail the methods employed by the joint police mission to suppress Nagriamel.

I

To place local accounts of the Santo Rebellion in context, I now turn to representations of the Santo Rebellion made by Western academics and accounts published by senior members of the Vanua'aku Pati government. These accounts were constructed for the benefit of the victorious government to suggest that the rebellion came about because of the machinations of French *colons*, French administrators and the libertarian Phoenix Foundation. These histories are linked by a shared logic of causation for the rebellion although their comparative emphases differ slightly between accounts (see below). Concisely, their arguments alternate between two key positions: the rebellion was 'a last-ditch effort by various interests to form a pro-French breakaway state at the

time of independence'; and/or that the Santo Rebellion resulted from the manipulation of essentially innocent and naïve ni-Vanuatu by foreign forces.⁸ Both of these positions were broadly supportive of the stance adopted by the Vanua'aku Pati government after independence. Moreover, opposition to colonial interference became a key motif in public histories about the rebellion, which simultaneously aimed to emphasise the pre-existing unity of ni-Vanuatu based on shared respect for *kastom* while stressing the threat to that unity by external forces.⁹ Thus, while accounts of colonial politics in the New Hebrides have tended to favour the agency of foreign interventions over local agency, the prevalence of foreign intervention as an explanation for the rebellion was also accentuated by the need of the newly independent government to bolster its authority by suggesting that such strident opposition to its rule was necessarily fomented externally.

The rebellion in history: an imperial reckoning; a national awakening

In order to place the oral histories of the rebellion in context and to establish the *raison d'être* of national narratives of the Santo Rebellion it is necessary to discuss the events that precipitated the attempted secession. Vanuatu won its independence from the United Kingdom and the Republic of France on 30 July 1980. The ending of the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides through which the conjoint colony had been governed since 1906 was marked by celebrations in Port Vila and a public lowering of the British flag. The French administration, following the tradition of never lowering the *tricolor* in public, held a private ceremony. As part of the celebrations on 30 July 1980, a military parade was held in Port Vila, notable for the visible presence of 150 Papua New Guinean troops recently sent to quell the rebellion (see below) and for the gun salutes from the visiting Australian frigate *HMAS Yarra* and the New Zealand survey ship *HMNZS Monowai* and flyovers by Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) and New Zealand Air Force planes.

The show of military sophistication in Port Vila contrasted the lack of government authority in Espiritu Santo. While the former conjoint colony celebrated its independence, Nagriamel and its allies (predominantly members of the Mouvement

⁸ See e.g. Greg Fry, "Australia and the South Pacific: From 'Strategic Denial' to 'Constructive Commitment'," (Canberra: Department of International Relations, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, 1991).; see also C.H. East, "The Vanuatu Affair - the inside Story," *Pacific Defence Reporter* VIII, no. I (1981).; Richard Shears, *The Coconut War: Crisis on Espiritu Santo* (Melbourne: Cassell, 1980). See below.

⁹ See e.g. Roger Keesing and Robert Tonkinson, eds., *Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia. Special Issue Mankind*, vol. 13:4 (1982). See e.g. Tonkinson, "National Identity and the Problem of Kastom in Vanuatu.", 310-12.

Autonomiste des Nouvelles Hebrides [MANH] aided by advisers from the American Phoenix Foundation and key *metis* and French settlers) pursued their drastic vision of autonomy as the rebel Vemarana Federation, concentrated in the northern island of Espiritu Santo but involving people from several islands in the northern New Hebrides. French *Gardes Mobiles* and British Paratroopers, flown in by the colonial powers to oversee the transition to independence, guarded the flag-raising ceremony there. Already, members of the Jon Frum and Kapiel movements had instigated an uprising in the southern islands in early June 1980 but it was short-lived; the British Constabulary and British Police Mobile Unit aided by supporters of the Vanua'aku Pati suppressed the uprising almost immediately.¹⁰

Throughout the 1970s, political factionalism had become entrenched in the New Hebrides. At the time, colonial attempts to institute representative assemblies had faltered over the continuing inclusion of expatriate commercial interests and the inclusion of *kastom* leaders in state forums (see Chapter 4).¹¹ By the late 1970s, sensing that the processes of devolution and decolonisation might be overturned, the British and French metropolitan governments facilitated negotiations for the formulation of a constitution for the future republic. The negotiations brought together the leaders of Nagriamel, MANH and the Vanua'aku Pati in debates about the proposed power structures of government and administration and the levels to which *kastom* and colonial administration could be merged.¹² Work on the constitution began in 1979 after the formation of an interim administration named the Government of National Unity, comprising the leaders of the major Anglophone and Francophone political parties. The constitutional committee was able to reach agreement on all issues except decentralisation, which was resolved temporarily through the intervention of the French Minister for Overseas Departments and Territories, Paul Dijoud, who exerted considerable pressure on the francophone political leaders and rebel groups to accept the provisions on decentralisation.¹³ His plan involved the establishment of regional

¹⁰ For detailed accounts of the Tanna uprising see *Tam-Tam*, 30 May 1980; Ken C. Calvert (Presbyterian Missionary, Tanna), "Martyrs and Mercenaries", *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Aug. 1980, 31; *Voice of the New Hebrides*, 5 July 1980; 296; *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Aug 1980, 18.

¹¹ See e.g. Lissant Bolton, "Chief Willie Maldo Bongmatur and the Incorporation of of Chiefs in the Vanuatu State," *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project Discussion Paper*, no. 2 (1999), 5-7.

¹² Yash Gai, ed., *Public Administration and Management in Small Island States* (The Commonwealth Secretariat; the University of the South Pacific, 1990), 2.

¹³ Yash Gai, *Law, Government and Politics in the Pacific Island States* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1988), 16.

councils for the main islands of Tanna and Santo and the strengthening of the position of President.¹⁴

The agreement ratifying the constitution was signed in Port Vila in 1979. Yet in the tense negotiations between colonial powers and indigenous political leaders over the future form of the emergent independent state, disputes over the proposed timetable for decolonisation had emerged. French policy, which supported empowering regional francophone and settler strongholds, appeared to be consistent with the attempts of expatriate agitators to derail independence. After the elections, decentralised institutions were to have negotiated with the central government for their exact powers. Against a backdrop of increasingly tense negotiations between the New Hebrides colonial powers about the timing and form that the independent nation-state would take, the Vanua'aku Pati had won convincingly national elections held in November 1979, fought ostensibly over the issue of who would lead Vanuatu to independence. However, the electoral defeat of the Federal Pati (an amalgam of the Vanua'aku Pati's opponents) precipitated the rebellion and meant that provisions for decentralisation were not implemented.¹⁵

After the elections, the antagonism between rival political groups, which had simmered throughout the 1970s, erupted into physical violence; Nagriamel and its allies increasingly furthered their political agendas through force. Three days after the November 1979 elections, groups of Nagriamel supporters carrying war clubs (*nulnul*) and bows and arrows descended on Luganville in a show of force. From then until May 1980, the Vanua'aku Pati government had little authority in Luganville or in its surrounding areas.¹⁶ On 28 May 1980, Vemerana activists

attacked and took possession of the British District Station (known as the British Paddock). They left the French equivalent untouched, since rightly or wrongly – Vemerana saw the French administration as being sympathetic to its determination to avoid coming under Vanua'aku Pati and anglophone rule at independence scheduled for 30 July 1980.¹⁷

Using *namele* leaves, which signified *tabu* (taboo), Nagriamel members barred the doors to the British administration offices. A handful of local officers of the British

¹⁴ Gai, *Law, Government and Politics in the Pacific Island States*, 17.

¹⁵ Gai, *Law, Government and Politics in the Pacific Island States*, 31.

¹⁶ See e.g. editorial note to Job Dalesa in Brian J. Bresnihan and Keith Woodward, eds. *Tufala Gavman, Reminiscences from the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies and University of the South Pacific, 2002), 192.

¹⁷ Editorial note to Job Dalesa in Bresnihan and Woodward, *Tufala Gavman*, 192.

administration – including the head of the local police detachment, Captain Karie and the District Commissioner, Job Dalesa¹⁸ – were taken prisoner. A senior policeman, probably Karie, was reportedly ‘paraded through the main street in only his underpants, [while] his wife was being raped’.¹⁹

Foreigners not allied to the rebels and Vanua’aku Pati supporters were evacuated or fled by private means. Father Walter Lini’s interim government organised an evacuation plan and established a blockade around Espiritu Santo.²⁰ Most Churches of Christ

missionaries on Santo, were forced to leave ... August and Maeline Ben [ni-Vanuatu missionaries, recently returned from PNG] had to leave their work at the Sonlight Friendship Centre [in Luganville] and return to Aoba. The church work on Santo has been hindered because of the rebellion as people have been unsettled and many returned to their own islands.²¹

According to a report in the *Australian Christian*, Gospel Santo, the church headquarters in Luganville, and local Churches of Christ throughout Espiritu Santo kept their doors open for worship each Sunday during the uprising through the agency of a senior Nagriamel leader and trained Churches of Christ minister, Samuel Waen, the social affairs minister of the Vemerana governing council.²²

In order to quell the uprising, Vanua'aku Pati government envoys sought agreements from Vanuatu's regional near-neighbours. In early August, the Papua New Guinean parliament agreed to endorse the use of its troops in the suppression of the revolt.²³ On 16 August 1980, a further one hundred and fifty soldiers joined the one hundred and fifty PNGDF troops of Kumul Force who had taken part in the independence celebrations. Supported logistically by Australian and New Zealand forces and the

¹⁸ After February 1980, the position of District Agent was renamed District Commissioner.

¹⁹ Shears, *The Coconut War*, 196.

²⁰ Howard van Trease, *The Politics of Land in the New Hebrides* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies; University of the South Pacific, 1987), 252.

²¹ Australian Churches of Christ Overseas Mission Board Inc. 1980 Report. 4. OMB.

²² *Australian Christian*, 8 Nov. 1980, 10.

²³ *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Aug 1980, 17; For a detailed account of the negotiations over the commitment of Papua New Guinean troops see Norman McQueen, "Beyond Tok Win: The Papua New Guinea Intervention in Vanuatu, 1980," *Pacific Affairs* 61, no. 2 (1988)..

large Papua New Guinean patrol boat *Madang*, they were diverted to Espiritu Santo later that day.²⁴

Beginning with the recuperation of Luganville, they set about reasserting the dominance of the newly elected government. Kumul Force was landed in Santo by Australian transport planes and, supported by the *Madang* and reconnaissance planes, it suppressed the revolt over the course of the next two weeks.²⁵ Vanafo was blockaded and several expatriate and *métis* supporters of the rebellion escaped into the northern extremities of Espiritu Santo. Between 16 August and 30 August 1980, sporadic skirmishing between Papua New Guinean troops and rebels and between local supporters of Nagriamel and the Vanua'aku Pati had occurred without recorded casualties.²⁶ On 28 August 1980, a truck carrying Eddie Stephens, the eldest son of the Nagriamel leader, rammed a PNGDF roadblock. Stephens was killed instantly by fire from Kumul Force soldiers.²⁷ Three days later, one hundred and fifty Papua New Guinean soldiers and members of Vanuatu's Police Mobile Unit advanced on Vanafo where they found the remaining Nagriamel supporters (possibly as many as 2000 people) sitting at the foot of the Vanafo *nabanga* (banyan tree) around a white flag.²⁸ Jimmy Stephens was arrested soon after at his house. Matantas and Port Olry in northeastern Santo, where key *metis* and expatriate rebels had taken refuge were bombarded from the *Madang*. The remaining rebels soon surrendered. The rebellion was ended on 31 August 1980.

An Imperial Reckoning? Elite national and foreign assertions of causation for the Santo Rebellion

As Geoffrey White has noted, 'public histories', exemplified by colonial histories, tend to subordinate local agency, as illustrated in the following examination of representations of the Santo Rebellion.²⁹ Public histories of the Santo Rebellion have in general privileged French interference or the complicity of American libertarian

²⁴ *Australian Foreign Affairs Review*, Aug 1980, 274.

²⁵ *Australian Foreign Affairs Review*, Aug 1980, 274.

²⁶ See Shears, *The Coconut War*, 206-207.

²⁷ Beasant, *The Santo Rebellion*, 133-4.

²⁸ Shears, *The Coconut War*, 209.

²⁹ White "Afterword", 178.

agents provocateurs as causative factors.³⁰ While drawing on diverse theoretical and historical standpoints, all the chroniclers of the rebellion have shared a broadly compatible understanding of the impetuses for rebellion, not least because they often appeared to be actively engaged in sharing information, fuelling each others' *oeuvres* and were often allied to the Vanua'aku Pati government, either as standing officers (John Beasant) or sympathetic, anti-colonial scholars (Howard van Trease).

There is little doubt that much of the impetus for the rebellion – as distinct from political dissent, not enacted violently – came from external forces. The weight of evidence supporting some level of French Administration complicity and the intervention of the American Phoenix Foundation in fomenting rebellion in Vanuatu is compelling. Although the clear majority of Nagriamel's supporters were ni-Vanuatu (both anglophone and francophone), the Phoenix Foundation, Australian, British and French settlers and officers of the French High Commission had encouraged the movement opportunistically towards secession.³¹

Walter Lini

The Vanua'aku Pati's leader and first Prime Minister of the Republic of Vanuatu, Father Walter Lini, posited that the rebellion was the result of, 'outside influences who use Melanesian people in order to promote their own interests and achieve their own aims'.³² Lini asserted that French gendarmes had trained Nagriamel militants and that a French warship was used 'to deliver arms, food, and supplies to Nagriamel'.³³ While Lini emphasised the role of outsiders in fomenting rebellion, he suggested that ni-Vanuatu 'involved in the rebellion [were] confused and feeling lost. They [did] not know what the rebellion [was] trying to achieve'.³⁴ Lini's interpretation has become orthodoxy, largely because the Vanua'aku Pati was ultimately victorious (and therefore able to 'write history') and because people close to Walter Lini's regime, such as John

³⁰ See e.g. John Beasant, *The Santo Rebellion, an Imperial Reckoning* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984); Jeremy MacClancy, "Current Developments in the Pacific: From New Hebrides to Vanuatu, 1979-80", *Journal of Pacific History* 16, no. 2 (1981), 92-104; Jeremy MacClancy, *To Kill a Bird with Two Stones* (Port Vila: Vanuatu Cultural Centre, 1980); Richard Shears, *The Coconut War: Crisis on Espiritu Santo* (Melbourne: Cassell, 1980).

³¹ Transcript of Jimmy Stephens' trial, cited in *Voice of Vanuatu*, 27 Nov 1980; Beasant, *The Santo Rebellion*, 142-3.

³² Walter Lini, *Beyond Pandemonium: From the New Hebrides to Vanuatu* (Wellington: Asia Pacific Books, 1980), 52.

³³ Lini, *Beyond Pandemonium*, 50.

³⁴ Lini, *Beyond Pandemonium*, 54.

Beasant and Howard van Trease, have produced the major works on the issue. Significantly, Howard van Trease edited and contributed to Walter Lini's book *Beyond Pandemonium*.

John Beasant

John Beasant was the personal assistant to Walter Lini from March 1978 until independence and was also Vanua'aku Pati Press Officer at the time of the rebellion. Beasant's *The Santo Rebellion: an Imperial Reckoning* (1984) is a detailed account that focused primarily on the external impetuses to rebellion. Beasant suggests that it grew from the desire of the indigenous people of Santo 'to reassert their custom land rights against encroachment by European settlers'.³⁵ However, more influential were the interventions of property developers, libertarian ideologues 'who sought to turn Santo into a bastion against communism', and French chauvinists who believed that 'French language and culture was something which everyone sought to cherish and desire' and who 'saw the independent central government as a ... threat to their existence as land barons'.³⁶

Beasant's is the most detailed account of the Santo Rebellion principally because of his unique access to government documentation and intimate knowledge of government personnel.

Howard van Trease

Howard Van Trease and Kirk Huffman, the former Director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, found a carton of documents behind the French Residency the day after independence in 1980, which purported to detail French government complicity in encouraging the Santo Rebellion and indicated a long-term strategy of thwarting certain moves towards decolonisation (see also Chapter 4).³⁷ Based on this information, van Trease suggested that '[t]he proof is...overwhelming that top officials in the French residency were fully involved in the secessionist rebellion'.³⁸ These administrators, French colonists (*colons*) and francophone mixed race locals – termed

³⁵ Beasant, *The Santo Rebellion*, 2.

³⁶ Beasant, *The Santo Rebellion*, 2.

³⁷ PMB, "Newsletter of the Pacific Manuscripts Series 5, No. 6," (Canberra: Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, 1997).. The reports were microfilmed as the following PMB title: PMB 1135 New Hebrides French Residency: Monthly Reports, Dec 1966-Dec 1978. 3 reels.

³⁸ Van Trease, *The Politics of Land*, 255.

metis in most accounts of the rebellion – allied to conservative elements in New Caledonia intended to ‘link the islands of Santo and Tanna with the loyalty islands to form a separate buffer state between Vanuatu and New Caledonia’.³⁹ Van Trease suggested that the High Commissioner in Noumea and the French Minister for Overseas Territories and Departments (DOMTOM), Paul Dijoud, knew of the plans and were therefore also implicated in the conspiracy.

Jeremy MacClancy

Oxford anthropologist Jeremy MacClancy depicted the Santo Rebellion as the (almost) natural conclusion of the fractious Anglo-French Condominium: ‘In 1980, the year Vanuatu achieved independence, its people suffered, in a concentrated fashion, the consequences of having lived under a two-headed Condominium for 74 years’.⁴⁰ He suggested:

Its roots surely lay in the inept Condominium system of government which allowed such a system to develop but which was too paralysed by its inbuilt restrictions to do anything effective to resolve it. Consistently failing to arrest people for the crimes they committed, and thus teaching disrespect for the law, the colonial administration postponed the crisis and, by so acting, only made it all the more difficult when it came.⁴¹

According to MacClancy, French officials – up to and including Paul Dijoud – had full knowledge of the rebellion and gave it their *de facto* assent.⁴² MacClancy’s account can be differentiated from Lini, Beasant and van Trease’s histories because he neither participated in state-sanctioned histories of the Santo Rebellion and nor was he a government officer. However, he wrote a short history of Vanuatu, undertaken on request from the Director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, Kirk Huffman, in preparation for independence.⁴³ Thus, while less stridently polemical, his history shared the logic of the other accounts sampled here because it framed the Santo Rebellion as a result of colonialism and colonial competition.

³⁹ Van Trease, *The Politics of Land*, 255.

⁴⁰ MacClancy, “From New Hebrides to Vanuatu”, 92.

⁴¹ MacClancy, “From New Hebrides to Vanuatu”, 103.

⁴² MacClancy, “From New Hebrides to Vanuatu”, 105.

⁴³ See MacClancy, *To Kill a Bird with Two Stones*.

II

The limits of the national hegemony: French complicity and the Churches of Christ

In part, the strength of this position for offering an explanation of the rebellion benefited from the long-standing tradition in historical and political scholarship on New Hebrides/Vanuatu of mapping colonial rivalries onto local politics.⁴⁴ The theme of colonial competition exploited the prevalent and enduring suspicion that the colonial rivalries played out within the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides would implicate local people in contests not of their own making. Significant salient linguistic divisions within the indigenous population based on divergent education systems were clearly cultivated, especially when considered from the national perspective. The impact of the bifurcated colonial system under which the New Hebrides was governed between 1906 and 1980 was clearly a significant force in fomenting political conflict in the New Hebrides and ultimately in inciting rebellion; the sweep of its legacy should not be under-drawn.

Concisely, this academic tradition has extended the effects of the bifurcated colonial system (particularly dual languages of education) to the limits of the colony and underlined colonialism as the single most pressing issue facing indigenes. For instance, a former British officer in the New Hebrides, R.A.S. Forster, suggested that local people would be unavoidably divided by educating them in two different languages and cultures, which had been mutually antagonistic towards one another through 'a thousand years of turbulent history on the other side of the globe'.⁴⁵ While later scholars such as William Miles distanced themselves from such unproblematic assertions of antagonistic anglophonie and francophonie by positing a more nuanced political binary, at independence former British colonial administrators evinced great scepticism about the colonial enterprise in the New Hebrides. Miles suggested that rather than reflecting linguistic competence, the terms anglophone and francophone denoted a politico-religious allegiance. They 'are inherited, with whole villages, or

⁴⁴ See e.g. Deryck Scarr, *Fragments of Empire: A History of the Western Pacific High Commission 1877-1914* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1967), 182-184, 218-252; 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), 80.

⁴⁵ R.A.S. Forster, "Vanuatu: The End of an Episode of Schizophrenic Colonialism", *Round Table* 280 (1980), 371.

fractions of villages, usually identified with one camp or other'.⁴⁶ The comparative influence of these linguistic poles has been of major interest to both western educated, primarily Anglophone scholars and became a tool of nationalist rhetoric, especially after it appeared that the French metropolitan government was complicit in attempts to thwart independence.⁴⁷ The perceived intervention of French colonial officers, in particular, raised the ire of the nationalist Vanua'aku Pati, souring relationships between France and Vanuatu after independence and unfairly tarring all Francophone ni-Vanuatu with the brush of sedition.⁴⁸

Many ni-Vanuatu concur with representations of the causes of the rebellion that suggest French interference ultimately fomented rebellion. Pastor August Ben had been evacuated from Santo alongside supporters of the Vanua'aku Pati and expatriates who opposed the Nagriamel uprising in May 1980. He briefly returned to west Ambae where he undertook pastoral duties at Nduindui hospital before returning to Luganville. He suggested that French policy during the 1970s amplified existing political rivalries among the Churches of Christ, especially because the French administration established schools in pro-Nagriamel areas at which students could attend without paying fees, as was required in British schools and grant-assisted schools at the time. Indeed, he suggests that the provision of free schooling fed into Nagriamel propaganda that promised free access to hospitals and schools and thereby often appeared to further cargo-cult tendencies among local people.

In certain circumstances, the agency of Francophone urban political agitators and 'overseas groups' are privileged in local oral histories as fomenting rebellion. For example, according to Amon Ngwele:

Mi bilif se i no bifo blong Nagriamel oli organaes. Ol politikol pati i go insaed ia nao blong wokem samting blong ol. I mekem se from tataem ia i gat MANH Pati, i gat UCNH, oli grup tugeta oli ovasi. Oli go wetem hem from Jimmy

⁴⁶ William F. Miles, "Francophonie in Post-Colonial Vanuatu," *Journal of Pacific History* 29, no. 1 (1994), 49-50.

⁴⁷ See also William F. Miles, *Bridging Mental Boundaries in a Postcolonial Microcosm, Identity and Development in Vanuatu* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998); Grace Molisa, Nikenike Vurobaravu, and Howard Van Trease, "Vanuatu - Overcoming Pandemonium", in *Politics in Melanesia* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies; University of the South Pacific, 1982); Howard van Trease, ed. *Melanesian Politics: Stael Bong Vanuatu* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1995).

⁴⁸ See e.g. Jean Paul Virelala, "To be Francophone in Vanuatu", in van Trease, *Melanesian Politics*, 404.

*Stephen ol taem se we blong hem I pasem tufala condominium gavman. Umbrella long Nagriamel I save mekem evri ting.*⁴⁹

I believe that Nagriamel was not organised before. All the political parties went into Nagriamel now and worked [on] their own things [to their own agendas]. It made it so that MANH, UCNH all grouped together, all the overseas groups. They went with him all the time saying his way bypassed the authority of the Condominium government. Under the umbrella of Nagriamel you could do anything.

Although Ngwele's account of the Santo Rebellion resonated with national public histories because he stressed the manipulation of local people by external forces or by Francophone urban political parties, his ultimate aim was to depict Nagriamel people as undereducated and naïve. Indeed, the involvement of *man bus* in the rebellion appeared to him to indicate the continuing need for education and the dangers of rejecting Christian teachings: '*Oli neva gat gud edukesen; Oli neva gat gud Christian bilif; Oli no wok*'. [They never had good educations. They never had good Christian beliefs. They did not work.]

The linkage between the French National Administration and Nagriamel has been well documented. From 1966 onwards the French administration made great efforts to strengthen francophone education throughout the New Hebrides. Education was perceived to be the primary means by which the French residency could effect change at the grassroots. According to Maurice Delauney, the French Resident Commissioner from 1960-1965, it was necessary to '[s]pread French education of a high standard for the training of a local elite'.⁵⁰

Elsewhere in Vanuatu, the Anglophone/Francophone divide undeniably played a major role in local or next-to-local relations but these experiences did not necessarily constitute synecdoche for the entire New Hebrides archipelago. In the national context, the political division that arose between anglophone and francophone ni-Vanuatu was stronger in islands such as Malakula and Ambrym than in Ambae, Pentecost or Maewo. Tom Bakeo, a west Ambae man who served in the British National Service, claimed that there was a much closer correlation in Malakula between language and political polarisation.⁵¹ Similarly, the anthropologist Bob Tonkinson suggests that Ambrym was clearly delineated between francophone west Ambrym and anglophone southeast Ambrym.⁵² Moreover, in 1980, from a national perspective, the

⁴⁹ Amon Ngwele, 20 Jan. 2000.

⁵⁰ Cited in "Camille Gloannec", Woodward and Bresnihan, *Tufala Gavman*, 260.

⁵¹ Tom Bakeo, 25 Jan. 2000.

⁵² Bob Tonkinson, *personal communication*.

delineation between anglophone and francophone national politicians was unmistakable. When the national parliament first sat 30 July 1980 despite the full complement of 26 anglophone, Vanua'aku Pati members, only three opposition members remained in parliament, each of them an educated francophone.⁵³ Tension between ni-Vanuatu over language rights had clearly escalated during the 1970s, especially after the Vanua'aku Pati adopted an English monolingual education policy as part of its political platform, culminating in the largest single demonstration in the colony's history in support of continuing francophonie.⁵⁴

What is striking is that except in very rare instances, political polarisation along these lines is relegated to the periphery of oral histories of *politik* within the Churches of Christ. Political conflict within Churches of Christ communities was clearly protracted and in several instances, antagonism between Churches of Christ supporters of Nagriamel and other political parties was as severe as it had been between denominationally differentiated groups. In oral histories of *politik*, the paramount political conflict involved Nagriamel supporters and orthodox members of the Churches of Christ, the later impact of French interventions notwithstanding. John Liu, a former Principal of Banmatmat Bible College, south Pentecost, suggests that until independence 'within the Churches of Christ conflict was not so much between the francophone and the anglophone as it was between those who joined Nagriamel and those who did not'.⁵⁵

Many Francophone ni-Vanuatu were Nagriamel supporters but in most Churches of Christ communities in Ambae, Maewo and Pentecost, nominal Francophone communities were in the minority. In west Ambae their influence was minimal, their comparative influence island-wide and especially in north Ambae, notwithstanding. In Maewo, there was no possibility of depicting a Francophone minority until the foundation of a single French language primary school in the former Churches of Christ stronghold at Nasawa in the late 1970s and whether this constituted a perceptible Francophone minority remains debatable. In Pentecost, where the Catholic community is aggregated around the Marist headquarters in Melsisi and where Francophone Catholics constitute the second largest group on the island, behind the dominant

⁵³ The three francophone Members of Parliament in July 1980 were Vincent Boulekone, Maxime Carlot Korman and Gerard Leymang.

⁵⁴ *Nasiko*, 6 Mar. 1980. The support for these sentiments from arguably Anglophone communities has been poorly documented but clearly deserves much more critical attention.

⁵⁵ John Liu, 17 Aug. 1999.

Anglicans, there is a long history of political antagonism between Francophone/catholic communities and Anglophone/Churches of Christ communities (among other denominational binary sets, see Chapter 2).⁵⁶ Yet *politik* is not used to describe antagonism of this kind. Indeed, Silas Buli, the principal of Ranwadi school, central Pentecost, typified conflict over land as wholly different from *politik*. Conflict over land at Ranwadi, 'was not Nagriamel, not *politik*: more Catholic versus Church of Christ and between claims [of] custom landowners within churches'.⁵⁷

Despite differences between interpretations of the nature of the colonial linguistic legacy for ni-Vanuatu, it was not sufficient to describe grassroots political tensions among the Churches of Christ and nor were these dynamics reflected in oral histories about the nature of *politik*. The implications of these developments for Churches of Christ people were manifested only in the last few years before independence in 1980. The establishment of French language schools in the Churches of Christ but pro-Nagriamel communities of Vinangwangwe [1980] (west Ambae), Luvonvili [1979] (East Ambae) and Nasawa [1979] (Maewo) threatened the unity of Churches of Christ education policies and provided tangible evidence of French opportunism.⁵⁸ Yet in highlighting conflict between local people, narratives about *politik* infer a great degree of local agency in, for example, colonial competition between the British National Administration and the French National administration. In their reflections on the rebellion, many of my interlocutors diluted the impact of colonial competition in favour of the immediate motives of island communities that were often formulated devoid of apparent, concerted intervention by Europeans, albeit influenced by their presence. For example, Madeleine Kanegae wilfully obscured the agency of the French colonial administration by claiming the primacy of local politics in the establishment of a French language school in Vinangwangwe: '*Hemi from saed long politik ia. Telem se fulap oli wakabaot long jioj of Christ long taem long politik, hemi olgeta oli pulaot nomo. Oli putum wan skul ia. I had long oli kam bak long jioj bakegen soi olgeta i pulaot bakegen ia i mekem oli singaotem Franis gavman blong bildim skul ia*'.⁵⁹ [It was because of *politik* here. That is to say that many of them [walked out] of the

⁵⁶ Pere Paul Monnier, *Histoire De La Mission Catholique Au Vanuatu. Ile Ambae: Nangire-Loné* (Imprimerie de Port Vila, 1987), 33, 45; Paul Monnier, *One Hundred Years of Mission, 1887-1987* (Port Vila: Imprimerie de Port Vila, 1987), 54; Margaret Jolly, *Women of the Place*, 37.

⁵⁷ Silas Buli, 14 Sep. 1999.

⁵⁸ William Miles, *Bridging Mental Boundaries*, 133.

⁵⁹ Madeleine Kanegae, 26 Feb. 2000.

Church of Christ in Vinangwangwe at this time of *politik*. They put a school there. It was hard for them to come back into the Church of Christ again, so they sung out to the French government to build them a school there’.]

Local oral histories about the Santo Rebellion, specifically those that deny French complicity or provocation, serve a secondary strategic end because they centre political events locally rather than in the actions and agency of colonialists. The apparent ambivalence or cautious marginalisation of the significance of colonial competition undertaken by Kanegae does not downplay the actual effect of the clash of French and British policies over decolonisation which evidently fomented dissent within communities and antagonised rivalries between political groups. Nor does taking this approach upturn the reality of national rivalry between key political groups that were demonstrably aggregated along francophone lines. However, focusing on colonial rivalry as the primary narrative serves to trivialise the important, if less immediately expedient, social and political divisions that shaped the rebellion. The encompassing irony is that those intensely local relations that have been central to the Churches of Christ to join Nagriamel, which are central to local oral histories, retain their salience in local oral histories of the period (see below). Thus, local division, vacuum-like, drew the colonial powers into local political struggles. To conclude, among the Churches of Christ, the creation of intra-community divisions based on education in English or French was a consequence, not a cause, of the rebellion. Such explanations offered few credible justifications for local people for the sequel events that the rebellion stimulated in Ambae, Pentecost and Maewo. In local oral histories, a different kind of rebellion is depicted.

The limits of the national hegemony: French complicity and the Churches of Christ

III

Local oral histories about the rebellion among the Churches of Christ

Having addressed the major themes in ‘public histories’ of the Santo Rebellion and the limits of national narratives in local oral histories, I turn now to reflect on local oral histories about the rebellion and place them within historical and ethnographic contexts. I seek to demonstrate that local historicities orbit around different sets of events, conditions and relationships. That is, I explore how participants in political economies of historical knowledge formulate and share ideas about the nature and significance of events. As I have argued, local historicities often revolve around nodes of experience, events or relationships dissimilar to those of, for example, national elites or the authors of colonial records (see Chapter 1).

Foremost in local recollections of the rebellion among Churches of Christ worshippers in Maewo, Ambae and Pentecost are accounts of the critical effects and implications of

the rebellion. Specifically, people stress investigations by the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) and the mopping up operations carried out by them and the Police Mobile Unit in late 1980. Accounts of the passage of the police are often slotted into local historicities, which represent the rebellion as predicated on and indicative of extant local conflicts. Among Churches of Christ people, therefore, the Santo Rebellion and the subsequent mopping up operations are conceived of and articulated primarily as extensions of the polarised clashes between *kastom* and *skul*, Nagriamel and Vanua'aku Pati, and lay church/Nagriamel leadership against the trained clergy and pro-state leaders, documented in the preceding chapters. While many of the conflicts that arose because of the Santo Rebellion have dulled with time, certain relationships and recollections presumably founded at independence suggest the establishment of hierarchies in the emergent nation-state and the subjugation of political dissent (see Conclusions). Clearly, the suppression of the rebellion has shaped local conceptions about the nature of the state because most of my interlocutors suggested that the natural response of a given government to regional disturbances was to send '*ol mobael*' (the Vanuatu Mobile Force) to settle any problems.

The mopping up operation

What is known publicly about the joint police operation after the rebellion is derived from a handful of contemporary media reports. While Joel Bonnemaïson has documented local conceptions of the rebellion in Tanna and the suppression of the uprising there, little has been written about the mopping up operations in northern Vanuatu. Significantly, none of the authors of public histories of the rebellion has detailed the joint police mission. To place oral histories of the mopping up operations in historical context, I provide now a summary of the suppression of the rebellion and the subsequent mopping up operations undertaken by officers of the Vanuatu Police Force (CID) and the Police Mobile Unit drawn from the aforementioned sources and augmented by church correspondence.

From the perspective of regional Churches of Christ worshippers, news of the rebellion had filtered intermittently back to the main church centres in Pentecost, Ambae and Maewo via the passage of people from Vanafo and via both rebel and government radio news. A handful of ships sympathetic to the secessionists serviced pro-Nagriamel communities, distributing food, medicine and materials stolen during the occupation of Luganville and transporting regional supporters of Nagriamel between Luganville and

the northern islands.⁶⁰ News of the imminent suppression of the rebellion no doubt spread quickly. Many Nagriamel supporters had returned to their homes before Papua New Guinean troops captured Vanafo.⁶¹ By the time the newly independent Vanua'aku Pati government began its push to reassert its authority throughout rebellious areas, many former Vanafo residents had returned to their homes in Malakula, Ambrym, Ambae, Maewo and Pentecost.

Beginning with the defeat of rebellion on Santo by troops of the Papua New Guinean Kumul Force and ending with the completion of the joint Police/Mobile Force mopping up operation, the suppression of the rebellion took just over three months. Between July and November 1980, Vanuatu Police, Mobile Unit Officers and soldiers of the PNG Kumul Force arrested 2,274 suspected rebels in Santo.⁶² Of these 583 were prosecuted by January 1981 and 207 were sentenced to prison terms.⁶³ Police later arrested a further 705 people on Santo, 101 on Pentecost, 50 on Maewo, 128 on Ambae, 507 on Ambrym and 728 on Malakula. The prisoners were incarcerated in one of Vanuatu's two meagre correctional facilities in Luganville and Port Vila or held in makeshift cells in the regional government headquarters before their transportation to a regional centre for sentencing. Santo's jail held double its capacity. In Tanna, 256 Jon Frum and Kapiel members faced court without legal representation and were given prison sentences of up to two years and/or given substantial fines.⁶⁴ Initially, cases were heard in Santo by a team of judges under the Chief Justice but once the backlog of charges was processed, the court hearings were reconvened in Port Vila where the Chief Justice sat alone. For his part in the rebellion, Jimmy Stephens was sentenced to 14-and-a-half years in gaol and was fined 220,000 FNH.⁶⁵

Yet the mopping up operation drew national and regional criticism for Vanuatu's nascent disciplined forces. An anonymous columnist for the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, for example, suggested: 'It appeared as if anybody ... suspected of being sympathetic to

⁶⁰ Thomas Tungu, Nagriamel supporter. Interview with the author, Bislama. 1 Mar. 2000, Saraenmaevo, north Ambae. Tape recording, notes.

⁶¹ Thomas Tungu, 1 Mar. 2000.

⁶² *Tam-Tam*, 10 Jan. 1981, 10.

⁶³ *Tam-Tam*, 10 Jan. 1981, 10.

⁶⁴ Joel Bonnemaïson, *The Tree and the Canoe* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1986), 300; *Tam-Tam*, 7 Feb 1981; *Voice of Vanuatu*, 23 Jan 1981.

⁶⁵ *Tam-Tam*, 29 Nov 1980, 1.

the “rebels”, was likely to be arrested’.⁶⁶ At the time, Richard Shears reported that in the blanket approach to arrests undertaken by Kumul Force and the Vanuatu police, more than rebels were captured. Among those arrested alongside Nagriamel supporters, he reported, was pastor Samuel Vula, a minister from Ambae, whose arrest had been carried out reputedly while he accompanied schoolchildren to Nduindui, fleeing the disorder in Luganville.⁶⁷ One expatriate radio technician arrested by the PNG troops claimed that the government representative, John Beasant, ‘fabricated certain reports to further his and the government’s cause. In his [Beasant’s] words, “rebels that weren’t rebels had to become rebels”’.⁶⁸

A government mission to further its claims to the unity of the islands followed the waves of arrests immediately. In late November 1980, Walter Lini led a delegation on a tour of the northern islands, ostensibly to advocate continued economic and agricultural intensification in rural communities but he paused to remind people of the causes of the rebellion.⁶⁹ To answer queries about the arrests that the government had sanctioned Lini responded: ‘*Ol waitman oli kam blong seraotem yumi nomo. Naoia oli go bak finis be yumi stap trabol yet long wanem oli mekem*’.⁷⁰ [Whites came to divide [seraotem] us. Now they have gone but we still have [to deal with] the trouble that they made.] Even after the cessation of arrests and police tours after 1980, the Lini administration toured the islands of Vanuatu advocating involvement in national projects.⁷¹

⁶⁶ “Vanuatu: May 1981 be the year of national reconciliation”, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 14.

⁶⁷ Shears, *The Coconut War*, 194.

⁶⁸ Robert J. Schnell, *Rebel Radio in Espiritu Santo* (1981 [cited 1 July 2003]); available from <http://radiodx.com/spdxr/Vemerama.htm>.

⁶⁹ The government delegation included the Minister of Education, Donald Kalpokas, the Minister of Natural Resources, Thomas Reuben, the District Commissioner for Central District II, Job Dalesa, and the Vanua’aku Pati’s African-American adviser, Dr Paulo Brown. The delegation visited Walaha and Redcliff on west Ambae, Kerebei and Asanvari in Maewo, Laone, Nazareth, Labultamata, Bwatnapne, Melsisi and Namaram in Pentecost, Olal, Limbul, Craig Cove, Port Vato and Sesivi in Ambyrm and South West Bay, Wintua and Brenwei in Malakula. *Tam-Tam*, 29 Nov. 1980, 4.

⁷⁰ *Tam-Tam*, 29 Nov. 1980, 4.

⁷¹ In 1982, Lini finally obtained an agreement from the Amok people in Malakula to work closely with the government and support its development programme in the islands: “Now it is clear the custom chiefs and people of the small nambas of Malekula [sic] have come to realise the importance of co-operation and development in the islands. Chief Nasai and the Prime Minister signed an agreement pledging this support for the betterment of the republic.” Radio Vanuatu local news bulletin, 24 Dec. 1982.

Government supporters, possibly at the behest of the government, initiated reconciliation exchange ceremonies.⁷² In Maewo, Churches of Christ supporters of the Vanua'aku Pati government attempted to enact reconciliation ceremonies with Nagriamel supporters from Nasawa. Kay Williams wrote:

Nasawa: On 4 October 1980, the Nasawa people met with the others [Churches of Christ worshippers] on the island and Walter and Luke Natu exchanged mats, pigs, kava in a custom peace-making ceremony. We do pray that the spirit of the Lord will move there and draw the people back to God.⁷³

Three weeks later, on 26 October 1980, Police Mobile Units and CID investigators arrived and, according to Kay Williams, arrested almost every man in Nasawa.⁷⁴ In local memories, Lini's tour and the overall policy of his government were predicated on rewarding longstanding Vanua'aku Pati supporters for their loyalty rather than allowing reconciliation with the defeated rebels. The imperatives of the elected Vanua'aku Pati government actively offset attempts to use national political office as a means to repair the damage inflicted on pro-Nagriamel communities. One early Vanua'aku Pati leader within the Churches of Christ recalled that his attempts to restore the damage done by the rebellion were quashed by the daily requirements of electoral politics. He recalled being held to account by the then Vanua'aku Pati whip, Barak Sope, for providing a copra-smoking pipe for the villagers of Nasawa. The Vanua'aku Pati hierarchy considered such activities contra to the need to reward loyal villagers for their unequivocal support, after having won the 1979 elections with a two-thirds majority. In his memories of political procedure, church reconciliation came a distant second to establishing and strengthening the Vanua'aku Pati's hold on Vanuatu. Suppression of dissidence rather than peacemaking and reconciliation appeared to be the doctrinal keystone of democracy.

The joint police mission had visited Malakula first, where they reportedly arrested almost the entire male populations of several pro-secession Roman Catholic villages. In addition, two Roman Catholic priests – one French and one Italian – were arrested but later released.⁷⁵ From Malakula, the police moved on to Ambrym, Pentecost and

⁷² See Beasant, *The Santo Rebellion*, 147-148.

⁷³ Kay Williams, Londua School, to Ron Mclean, President Overseas Missions Board, 2 Nov. 1980. OMB. Considering the Churches of Christ's principled aversion to *kastom*, the exchange of *kastom* objects (mats, pigs, kava) appears jarring. Plausibly, to make peace with Nagriamel, the church leaders sought to offer objects of recognisable meaning to the former Nagriamel members.

⁷⁴ Kay Williams to Ron Mclean, Nduindui, Aoba, Vanuatu, 2 Nov. 1980. OMB.

⁷⁵ "Vanuatu: May 1981 be the year of national reconciliation", *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 14.

Maewo. The joint mission arrived in west Ambae at first light on Thursday 29 October 1980, travelling on

the [British Residency Ship] *Euphrosyne* ... followed by the *Magaru* a few hours later... Abel Bani was preparing a *kai* [feast] for his daughter Olivia's betrothal ... They [the CID and Police Mobile Unit] were told they could arrest people easily if they came while the food was being prepared...Most of the NGM [Nagriamel] members were rounded up, some rather roughly and taken to Ambore...They were kept in the hot sun all day. They were made to run around the flag pole 10 times each and later some more made to dance with each other European style and were punched if they did not hold each other close enough or move fast enough. Two men were taken to hospital to have gashes in their faces stitched. They were escorted by members of the PMU [Police Mobile Unit]. In all about 16 people went to hospital after the rough treatment. Abel's son Vuiala, was taken onto one of the council rooms and beaten by about three members of the PMU. They let him out after he knocked one of them down. His face was rather swollen. They said they couldn't beat Abel up but would beat one of his sons instead...Most of the 'prisoners' were released towards dark and 10 of the NGM including Abel were taken to Santo.⁷⁶

Abel Bani sent a message to Kay Williams before his departure that 'He [was] happy to go to Santo but he [was] being persecuted like Jesus. Yet according to Williams, the timing of the arrival of the police units coincided with an attempt by Abel Bani to reassure Ambae's Nagriamel supporters that even though the rebellion had been suppressed, they should not lose faith in their movement. Immediately before the arrival of the joint mission, Abel Bani had addressed a gathering of Nagriamel supporters at a church service to encourage the 'NGM [Nagriamel] members to keep on as they were going, not to mention become discouraged or won over, because next year there is another big drive (rebellion?) coming up and they are to hold on until then'.

Fragmentary reports also appeared in local media that detailed police abuses during the operations. In a letter to the editor of the privately owned *Tam-Tam* newspaper, a Nduindui person reported incidents of police

booting [suspects] on the ground, spitting on the face, belting on the face or back and blood spurting out. Some were admitted to hospital for treatment... Old people were ordered to run round in the hot sun many times till [sic] they were out of breath but they were still forced to do it. The sporting which was enforced on them to do, to me is a completely uncivilised way of doing things. For instance, [suspects were forced] to repeat phrases (which were nonsense) to make themselves look stupid for people to laugh at them, or ordered to dance or do other things, young and old were being ordered to do so...some of the people who suffered on that day were innocent people.⁷⁷

Although the government set up a commission of inquiry into charges of prisoner abuse and wrongful arrest, no action was taken against Vanua'aku Pati members or police officers who had committed acts of violence against rebel suspects. The Vanua'aku Pati

⁷⁶ Kay Williams, Londua School, to Ron Mclean, President Overseas Missions Board, 2 Nov. 1980. OMB.

⁷⁷ *Tam-Tam*, 29 Nov. 1980, 11.

government had further cause to dampen reports about the joint mission's activities. While the suppression of the rebellion by Kumul Force was relatively rapid and widely commended, the drawn out process of mopping up afterwards undertaken by police attracted widespread condemnation of Vanuatu's disciplined forces from regional commentators, the Vanuatu Christian Council and (non-secessionist) opposition political leaders.⁷⁸ In its annual report for 1980, the Australian Churches of Christ Overseas Mission Board noted that, '[c]oncern has been expressed that the widespread arrests and treatment of rebel suspects throughout Vanuatu in the weeks following independence could cause bitterness and make divisions wider'.⁷⁹

The CID and Mobile force officers who undertook the mopping up operation appeared to have adopted the mantle of distant government authority that had characterised relations between colonial officers and local communities up to the late 1950s and the beginnings of decentralisation in the New Hebrides. However, contained among the ranks of police officers were Churches of Christ worshippers whose educations had permitted them employment in the colonial bureaucracy and who consequently had become officers of the post-colonial state.

They took them to the place where local government started: church, state and rebellion

According to Solomon Kamali, a Churches of Christ elder from Natalu, a clear trajectory can be traced between west Ambae people's involvement with Nagriamel and their eventual suppression by the Papua New Guinea Kumul Force and the Vanuatu Police Mobile Unit in 1980, framed by the notion that the contest was between different kinds of independence:

Tingting long independens i mekem i had we had from wan hafcas long Santo i mekem Nagriamel. Ating yu save storian. Nagriamel nao i mekem ol pipol long Ambae oli krangke. Oli ting gudfala samting we hafcas i fomem Nagriamel. Ol ting pas thru hem. Oli nao go sava. Bifo rebellion i kam long olgeta. Long olgeta long Ambae oli mov i go long Santo. Atig nao tataem ia yu pikimap storian finis. Walter Lini i karem Prime Minister be samting ia rebellion i strong. Nao Walter Lini i mekem ripot i go long Britis mo Franis bae ol army oli kam. Be olgeta oli slo nomo. Nao rebellion i strong yet. Walter Lini sendem nius i go long Niugini. Army oli kam. Nao long Nduindui ol man ia we i anda long Nagriamel oli fraet we oli fraet. Mobile oli kam. Festaem oli ronwe. Nao lukim ol man we oli anda long Nagriamel longwe go

⁷⁸ See *Tam-Tam*, 29 Nov 1980; P. Lechat, letter to the editor, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Feb 1981, 9-10; "Vanuatu: May 1981 Be the Year of National Reconciliation." *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Feb. 1981, 13.

⁷⁹ Australian Churches of Christ Overseas Mission Board Inc. Annual Report 1980. OMB.

*long Ambore. Long carrier blong polis. Oli tekem long ples we local gavman i stat. Hemia nao we i karem olgeta.*⁸⁰

The idea of independence made it hard [for us] very hard, because one half-caste from Santo founded Nagriamel. Maybe you know the story. Nagriamel made the people of Ambae foolish [*krangke*]. They thought it was a good thing that the half-caste formed Nagriamel. Everything passed through him. They suffered [because of this]. Before the rebellion came to them all, they [Nagriamel supporters] had all moved to Santo. Maybe now at this time you have picked up the story already. Walter Lini was prime minister but this thing, the rebellion, was strong. Walter Lini made a report to the British and French [asking] that their armies come [to put down the rebellion]. But they were slow. The rebellion became stronger. Walter Lini sent news to New Guinea. Their army came. Now in Nduindui all the men under Nagriamel were very frightened so they ran away. [The Police] Mobile [Unit] came. Now you could see that all the men who were under Nagriamel over at the Ambore [Aoba Local Council headquarters] in the police carrier. They took them to the place where local government started. That was where they carried them.

Inasmuch as Kamali suggested that the rebellion was enabled because of colonial inertia and that regional cooperation between Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea allowed for its eventual suppression, his account was consistent with the public histories mentioned above, which suggest that the suppression of the rebellion was a necessary condition of independence. But his account also coheres around locally significant sites, such as the local government headquarters in Ambore, and culminated with the capture of Nagriamel rebels. As I argued in Chapter 4, the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides openly advocated for involvement in local councils and most Conference supporters appeared more inclined to support the nationalist (and statist) Vanua'aku Pati rather than the preceding generation of lay Churches of Christ leaders, who primarily supported Nagriamel and opposed involvement in local councils. Moreover, the conflict between contending leadership groups within the Churches of Christ generated deep mutual suspicion within the nominal membership of the church. Because the PMU used the former local council government headquarters at Ambore as their base of operations and transported suspected Nagriamel members there for interrogation, west Ambae people often emphasised the fact that Nagriamel's opposition to the Vanua'aku Pati was equivalent to opposition to the emergent state. Moreover, by using the local government council headquarters, the police officers reinforced the defeat of the Churches of Christ's lay indigenous leadership, embodied in Abel Bani, who had opposed the involvement of worshippers in local government and therefore in the emergent state since the early 1960s. The trained clergy gravitated towards the cleric-leaders of the Vanua'aku Pati who were drawn primarily from the ranks of the majority Protestant denominations, specifically the Presbyterian Church and the Anglican Melanesian Mission. The increasingly close linkages between the

⁸⁰ Solomon Kamali, churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 22 Oct. 1999, Natalu Village, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.

Conference of Churches of Christ and nationalist politicians who sought to supplant the colonial powers at the apex of the state (accurately) fuelled a growing suspicion among Nagriamel supporters that the Churches of Christ's trained clergy were complicit with Vanua'aku Pati activists in their opposition to Nagriamel.

Many non-partisan Churches of Christ worshippers became trapped between these political poles, especially after the Vanua'aku Pati won the national elections in November 1979. Thereafter, the Churches of Christ's secular institutions, such as Nduindui Hospital, became sites of heated political contestation. In west Ambae, Nagriamel members feared that the government would use the Nduindui hospital records to identify them. In mid-February 1980, for instance, Nagriamel members petitioned the Nduindui hospital, fearing that hospital administrators would provide the government with information about Nagriamel members, or that the government would be able to extract the information independently from the hospital records. Kay Williams wrote to Ron McLean: '[t]hey carried axes, knives and nul-nuls [clubs]. They ... wanted all their patrol cards given to them as they didn't want the government to use them to find out their names, etc. The cards are pretty extensive showing all the families and children and ages'.⁸¹ Abel Vora Kwan, who ran the dispensary at Nduindui hospital, recalled the event: '*oli telem olsem sipos yufala i join long Vanua'aku Pati yufala i aot...mifala i wok olsem wan independen bodi. Vanua'aku Pati i kam mifala i treatem Nagriamel i kam mifala i treatem be mifala i wok olsem wan independen bodi. Mifala no man blong politik*'.⁸² [They said if you join with the Vanua'aku Pati, you [will be chased] out...we worked as an independent body. When Vanua'aku people came, we treated them. When Nagriamel people came, we treated them. We worked as an independent body. We were not political men.]

Whipped for one chicken: Reflections on state violence and collaboration

In the memories of Nicodemus Wai, collected, interpreted and documented by the anthropologist William Rodman, Kumul Force determinedly targeted key Nagriamel leaders in an effort to destroy resistance to its authority: 'Fr Walter Lini saw that the British and French troops [occupying the town of Santo] were acting more like our friends than our enemies. [Lini] sent in the PNG troops because he would know how they would act. They did as they were told; they destroyed everything'.⁸³ While the

⁸¹ Kay Williams, Living Link letter, 24 Feb. 1980. OMB.

⁸² Abel Vora Kwan, 2 Nov. 1999.

⁸³ Cited in Rodman, "Outlaw Memories", 153.

troops in Wai's account are represented as obedient and intentionally destructive, in the oral histories about the suppression of the rebellion I collected, they are depicted as ignorant of the local terrain and because of this local people were able to avoid them for a short time. A former Nagriamel leader and Churches of Christ worshipper from northeast Santo recalled that the troops, while passing through his community, had been unable to find any of the villagers who were hiding in the surrounding forest watching the troops. The troops bivouacked in the village and killed and ate the villagers' pigs and cows.⁸⁴ Many oral histories about the suppression of the rebellion in highlands Santo focus on local people's ability to outwit the troops; but their stories often serve only to highlight the brutality that they suffered at their hands when they were eventually apprehended. Like most former Nagriamel supporters who were subjected to violence at the hands of Kumul Force or later, at the hands of the CID and Police Mobile Unit officers, the former Nagriamel leader was proud to display the scars on his face and body from the beatings he received when captured.

Rodman has argued that from the perspective of Wai's personal narrative, leaders of the rebel movement in Santo were deliberately targeted and killed by members of the Papua New Guinean Kumul Force and at least one regional Nagriamel leader in west Ambae was beaten to death. Wai narrated:

He was an old man named James Garae from Nduindui [west Ambae] who had lived in Vanafo with Jimmy for a long time. The PNG troops found him and beat him badly. They threw him on the floor and kicked him with their army boots and even stood on him. When the troops were finished with him, he was in such bad shape that he was flown to the hospital in [Port] Vila. He died there.⁸⁵

Garae is remembered in west Ambae as among the first people to adopt Nagriamel there. Wai also suggested that particular local people were employed by the PNG soldiers to identify rebel leaders. He suggests that Jimmy Stephens' son was ambushed and killed in this way. Wai subordinated the agency of local people who helped the PNG troops and implied their subjective status as 'collaborators'.

However, for Churches of Christ worshippers who sided with the Lini government, rebels such as Nicodemus Wai had themselves annulled the values of the Christian community by siding with Nagriamel, and thereby facilitating apostasy as backsliders. Rodman attached a caveat to Churches of Christ membership of Nagriamel, stating that they 'showed little inclination to revive indigenous beliefs and practices after they

⁸⁴ Chief Matthias Lus, Interview with the author, Bislama. 5 Jan. 2000, Sara, north eastern Santo. Notes.

⁸⁵ Rodman, "Outlaw memories", 153-4. See Chapter 3.

joined Nagriamel'.⁸⁶ As I have argued and as Michael Allen has shown amply in west Ambae, Nagriamel supporters sought self-consciously to revive *kastom*.⁸⁷ Unquestionably, the revival of *kastom* is a major theme in the accounts given by Churches of Christ worshippers of the effect of the relationship between the church and Nagriamel (see chapters 3 and 4). Local recollections of the suppression of the rebellion among the Churches of Christ often orbit around this issue.

Former police officers verify that much of the success of their missions relied on local collaborators to inform on where Nagriamel members were hiding. As I suggested above, many educated ni-Vanuatu adherents of the Churches of Christ became members of the colonial British National Administration, including the British Constabulary. The partition of the Churches of Christ into pro-Nagriamel and anti-Nagriamel factions had contributed to tension within Churches of Christ communities since the late 1960s. Blame for the violence enacted by police officers against Nagriamel supporters in west Ambae in 1980 was directed towards local opponents of Nagriamel. After the departure of the joint mission from west Ambae, Kay Williams noted:

As you can imagine, this has stirred up quite a lot of bad feeling, with the Navitora people getting a lot of the blame for it. The PMU used a lot of the Navitora trucks. Sarai said that the PMU had been told to come here by the church leaders so that they could take the people without too much fuss while they were preparing for the *kai*.⁸⁸

A former policeman from west Ambae, who was asked to investigate and inform on his kin and co-parishioners who had joined Nagriamel, suggested that he subordinated his loyalty to his family in favour of his ultimate loyalty to his profession and the state. A British Constable and Special Branch officer between 1973 and 1978, who undertook a mission to Vanafo in the 1970s, he recalled that his training by British police officers instilled in him a sense of professionalism and national pride. I asked him whether he had found it difficult to inform on people who were arguably his own community: he answered, '*Olsem desisen we olgeta i go insaed long Nagriamel i no affectem mi nating. Tingting blong mi i telem se mi work long kaontri ia*'. [It was] like this, the decision which they all took to go into Nagriamel did not affect me at all. My thinking [was] that I worked for the [whole] country here'.

⁸⁶ Rodman, "Outlaw Memories", 145.

⁸⁷ See e.g. Michael R. Allen, *Ritual, Power and Gender: Explorations in the Ethnography of Vanuatu, Nepal and Ireland*, *Sydney Studies in Society and Culture* (New Delhi, 1998), 8fn.

⁸⁸ Kay Williams, Londua School, to Ron Mclean, President Overseas Missions Board, 2 Nov. 1980. OMB.

'Joe Arudonge', a Churches of Christ worshipper from Maewo who was a police officer involved in the mopping up operations in 1980, contrasted the violence enacted against Nagriamel members with his memories of the strict discipline enforced by Churches of Christ elders on students in church schools. His recollections of the suppression of Nagriamel after the rebellion were thus infused with references to the stern discipline he had received from church elders who had ironically joined Nagriamel.

Wan olfala blong mifala hemi wan tija long Londua. Mifala i yang yet olsem boe nomo. Mifala i no gud. Oltaem mifala i mekem nogud mi ting se se yu save finis. Mifala i aot long skul go long bus...ronwe...be blong mekem nogud blong stilim smol faol nomo blong kuk. I was always hungry. Anyway, mifala i tekem faol blong papa blong olfala Peter long Nanako antap. Mifala i tekem jas kukum. Mifala i jas mekem wan bikfala faea mo kukum faol ia be Johnson (pseudonym) hemi telem olgeta tija. Hemi kam wan bikfala insaed long jioj confrens. Hemi telem olfala Simeon. Afta trabol i kam. Oli whipem mifala mo finem mifala mebe 5 pounds ia kolosap 5000 vatu long tedei long wan faol. Oli karem mifala i go long kaonsel mo finem mifala for this little thing. Mifala i boes nomo. Allez mifala i tekem olgeta man Nagriamel i go daon long wan fil ia mekem wan laen long ol. Mifala i kolosap filem fil ia. Mifala i mekem nogud long ol...ol nogud samting...really terrible. Linem olgeta wipem gud olgeta. Olfala Simeon mi askem hem yu remeberem? Mi kilim hem long ples ia [indicates chin] ...flatem hem. Olgeta i go long Nagriamel? Blong wanem? Oli spoilem olgeta evrisamting.⁸⁹

This one old fellow he was a teacher at Londua. We were no good as boys. Always up to no good, you know what it is like. We were out of the school one night, we ran away. Not for good, just to steal some chickens to eat. I was always hungry. Anyway, we took old Peter's chicken from Nanako on top there. Took it and cooked it. We just made a fire and cooked it but Johnson (pseudonym) told on us. He became a big man of the Church Conference. He told old Simeon. Then we got in trouble [*trabol i kam*]. We were whipped and fined, nearly 5000 vatu today...maybe five pounds...for one chicken! Brought before the council and fined for this little thing. We were just boys...We took all the Nagriamel men down to the field there lined them up, filled the whole thing. We did terrible things, really terrible. Lined them up and whipped them good. Old Simeon ... I asked him, do you remember [me]? I hit him here [indicates chin] ... flattened him. Altogether they went to Nagriamel. What was it for? It really spoiled everything.

According to Arudonge, the punishment for involvement with Nagriamel was equivalent to the treatment he had received as a rebellious student except that the power relationship had been inverted. His recollections fed into a strong theme in local oral histories about the Santo Rebellion in which the rebels are constructed as almost child-like, like the police officer's younger self. In his account, the police officer suggested that he transgressed the rules of the church because he was always hungry. Denying any sense of responsibility – 'we were just boys' – he implied that Nagriamel supporters were similarly, albeit figuratively, immature. Arguably, his memories are inflected with a need to reconcile his actions as a police officer and his faithfulness to

⁸⁹ Joe Arudonge (pseudonym) former CID Officer. Interview with the author, Bislama. 10 Mar. 2000, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.

the Churches of Christ. Another former police officer suggested to me that the treatment of police officers during their imprisonment by Nagriamel militants in Luganville and the rape of the senior police officer's wife mentioned above were later used as justification for the violence exacted against Nagriamel supporters by police during the mopping up operations in October-November 1980.

The implication that Nagriamel members were backsliders always carried with it the implication that their return to *kastom* had delivered them access to *kastom* knowledge such as sorcery and poisoning (*lif meresin* – leaf medicine), which might be used against police officers. According to 'Arudonge', when the PMU and CID approached Maewo island: '*Win i kam strong. Mifala i luk se oli traem destabilisem mifala wetem kastom*'. [The wind became strong. We saw that they were trying to destabilise us with *kastom*.] For many Churches of Christ worshippers, the resurgence of *kastom* inspired by Nagriamel suggested apostasy and stirred comparisons with their heathen (*heten*) pre-contact ancestors. One church elder described Nagriamel as dirty (*doti*) and accursed. Considering the prevalence of the phrase *wasemaot sin* (wash out the sin) for repentance, *doti* connoted spiritual regression and sinfulness in addition to physical dirtiness. Indeed, in Baetora, Maewo, a spate of deaths after the rebellion validated fears that the resurgence of *kastom* had brought with it sorcery and facilitated the rejection of western medicines, long central to the Churches of Christ's secular activities. Mark Toa Siramanu, Baetora's highest ranked chief remained in the Churches of Christ despite having been a committed Nagriamel supporter. In 1987, most Baetora people, reportedly ashamed of their dalliance with Nagriamel, citing community disorder and spiritual confusion, defected to the Seventh-day Adventist Church because it represented 'a straight path' [*wan stret rod*].⁹⁰

The Churches of Christ also apparently distanced Nagriamel supporters. In 1980, Thomas Tungu, a Nagriamel leader in north Ambae who had been elected to national parliament in November 1979, was sentenced to two years imprisonment for his role in the distribution of goods stolen from Luganville during the rebellion. Tungu renounced the Churches of Christ during his stay in prison because no minister visited him. His only explanation was: '*Ating se oli kros from mifala i folem kastom*'.⁹¹ [Maybe they were cross because we followed *kastom*].

⁹⁰ Samuel Fred, Seventh Day Adventist. Interview with the author, Bislama. 20 Mar. 2000, Baetora SDA community, southern Maewo. Notes.

⁹¹ Thomas Tungu, former Nagriamel supporter. Interview with the author, Bislama. 1 Mar. 2000, Saraenmaevo, north Ambae. Tape recording, notes.

The distinction between the backwardness and immaturity of Nagriamel supporters and the modernity of the government is recast in local oral histories as the disparity of power between the CID and police and the rebels. In *Beyond Pandemonium*, Walter Lini lamented the fact that through the use 'of force accompanied by sophisticated European weapons' the rebels had threatened the authority of his legitimately constituted government.⁹² He asserted that the rebellion had been brought about by outside interference because it invalidated any real grievances the rebels had. Except for glimpses of sophisticated weaponry being used by rebels in Santo, most of my interlocutors who had been Nagriamel supporters emphasised the paucity of powerful weapons available to them.⁹³ No-one I spoke to in Ambae, Pentecost and Maewo could remember the use of weaponry more sophisticated than stolen dynamite, traditional clubs, bows and arrows and remaining rifles and shotguns, many of them relics of World War II. For example, when asked whether Nagriamel supporters in Nasawa, Maewo, had rifles, Willie Kona laughed and responded: '*Mifala i gat fulap be ol olfala masket long bifo nomo*'.⁹⁴ [We had many [fulap] but they were all just old muskets.] Taken in this light, Amon Ngwele's questioning aphorism from which this chapter takes its name suggests that the disparity between the technological superiority of the government forces (Kumul Force and the joint mission) and poorly armed rebels mocked the government's attempts to assert the seriousness of the secessionists aims: '*Jimmy [Stephens] hemi olsem wan pikinini we I stap kros wetem papa blong hem. Wanem kaen rebellion ia se yu go wetem bow and arrow? Wetem nulnul yu save brekem*'.⁹⁵ [Jimmy Stephens was like a child who was cross with its father. What kind of rebellion was this that you go [into it] with a bow and arrow, you can break it with a club [nulnul]]. By emphasising the superiority of the government's weapons and the ease with which the rebellion was broken, he downplayed the threat to the state posed by Nagriamel.

Yet, in Ngwele's memories, the internal divisions within the Churches of Christ were rendered meaningless by the blanket approach taken by the Police Mobile Units and CID: '*Tataem oli go long kalabus...Evriwan i go long kalabus. Mimi go kalabus, papa*

⁹² Lini, *Beyond Pandemonium*, 53.

⁹³ See for example, Shears, *The Coconut War*, 206-207. Shears asserts that Eddie Stephens, Jimmy Stephens' son, carried an automatic rifle the day he was killed by Papua New Guinean troopers.

⁹⁴ Willie Kona, Churches of Christ elder, former Nagriamel member. Interview with the author, Bislama. 18 Aug. 2002, Freswota, Port Vila. Mini disc recording, notes.

⁹⁵ Amon Ngwele, 20 Jan. 2000.

blong mi i go kalabus, ol lida long jioj...papa blong mi hemi wan mo Sale Bani...from oli talem se i Church of Christ olgeta ting se i Nagriamel'. [At this time they went to prison [*kalabus*]. Everyone went to prison. I went to prison. My father went to prison, all the leaders of the church...my father was like another Sale Bani...because they thought that everyone in the Churches of Christ was [in] Nagriamel.] The allegation that all Churches of Christ people supported Nagriamel has contributed to more recent assertions by church leaders that the Churches of Christ have been marginalised in national politics in Vanuatu; this belief has contributed to the depiction of the Churches of Christ as a subaltern church in addition to being a church of subalterns (see Conclusions).

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to outline the reasons that certain events figure prominently in local oral histories about the rebellion and others have been de-emphasised. In contrasting these accounts of the Santo Rebellion we can demarcate the deployment of certain dichotomies: for example, between disciplined state forces with sophisticated weaponry and disorganised rebels with bows and arrows. Undoubtedly both are ultimately simplifications which serve certain rhetorical purposes. Taken collectively, these histories speak to the construction of a Churches of Christ historicity, a political economy of historical knowledge, which casts the suppression of the rebellion as an extension and conclusion of the ongoing conflict between Nagriamel supporters and orthodox Churches of Christ worshippers. In so doing, the imperatives of national narratives, which foreground the influence of external forces in fomenting rebellion, have been subordinated. In Chapter 6, I seek to show how the creation of this political economy of historical knowledge has inflected local understandings of other events, most notably, a triple homicide in west Ambae in 1968. However, as I argue, recollections of those events are mediated via personal themes. That is, as discussed in Chapter 1, events and relationships represented as eyewitness accounts about *politik* gain significance because they fall within the ambit of local expectations of importance, even if these are structured by the experiences of the narrator's own life.

6.

CONTENDING CREDIBILITIES:

Explaining the Nduindui Murders.

In this chapter, I explore the connections and disjunctures between two sets of accounts relating a triple homicide committed by a local Churches of Christ teacher, Joseph Paul Kokovi, in west Ambae in 1968. I investigate two issues: first, I address the methodological and epistemological considerations of using oral testimonies and colonial archival texts as historical evidence by comparing these two genres of historical information; second, I explore the ways in which my interlocutors telescoped their memories of events to fit them within a narrative framework, to make events locally and historically credible. I seek to further the discussion of the epistemological and methodological considerations of my research as developed in Chapter 1, through an exploration of the nature of local historicities in west Ambae. Specifically, I seek to demonstrate how the doctrines, relationships and events outlined in the preceding chapters have influenced the memories of my interlocutors and to demonstrate the highly personalised themes with which they inflected their narratives. To this end, in Section I, I establish a linear narrative of events corresponding to the account presented in the Native Court of the New Hebrides and place the murders within the broader context of the colonial justice system and the issues the murders raised for colonial officers and Churches of Christ missionaries. In Section II, I discuss oral accounts of these events narrated by ni-Vanuatu members of the Churches of Christ.

Most ni-Vanuatu who remember Joseph Paul Kokovi say that he killed three Nagriamel men in anguish after his 'sweetheart' Susan became Nagriamel leader Jimmy Stephens' 'secretary' and second wife. Yet when John D. Field, the President of the Native Court of the Northern District, convicted him of a triple homicide in July 1968, no mention was made of Nagriamel or of Jimmy Stephens. Field sentenced Kokovi to consecutive life sentences for the three murders, said to have been motivated by the unresolved

suspicion of Susan's infidelity with a fourth man, David Bambahi, who escaped Kokovi's wrath unharmed.¹

Coined 'the Nduindui Murders' by the chief investigating officer Mike Dumper, Commandant of British Police for Northern District, the killings became *cause célèbre* among members of the New Hebrides British Service, because of their apparent randomness and brutality. During his preliminary investigations, Dumper could establish neither a credible motive nor any apparent connection between the slain men.² Kay Williams, the missionary teacher at Londua, testified that Kokovi was 'a good teacher' and that apart from unconfirmed reports of his drinking, she had no occasion to be dissatisfied with his teaching and was shocked when she heard what he had done.³ Although the Native Court admitted certain factors that had motivated Kokovi to murder the three men, there appeared to be great confusion about what these were, especially after the Joint Court of the New Hebrides reviewed the case.⁴ While admitting culpability immediately, Kokovi's only justification for killing the three men was his desire 'to create a big boil-up' so that there would be an enquiry into the surrounding circumstances and so that 'all the people of the various villages concerned would find out *the facts* about Susan's infidelity'. Thus, despite being 'open-and-shut' in terms of culpability, the case perplexed British officers, not least because none could initially posit compelling or credible reasons as to why the murders had occurred. As Field suggested, 'the affair [would] not fade from local memory in this generation'. The authors of local histories about the 'Nduindui Murders' often played on these ambiguities when re-ascribing explanations for them.

In representing accounts of the Nduindui Murders, I seek to contrast explanations of the motivations for the murders given by British officers of New Hebrides British National Service with the explanations now given by ni-Vanuatuan Churches of Christ people. I attempt to establish hierarchies of credible justifications for the murders

¹ Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides No. C.13/68 30 Aug. 1968. New Hebrides British National Service (Hereinafter NHBS) File 6/2/8a. Carton IV (Northern District). *Nasonel Arkaev blong Vanuatu* (hereinafter NAV).

² Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 Apr. 1968, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1 Carton IV (Northern District). NAV. Dumper maintains that this was always the case. Mike Dumper, personal letter, 01 Aug. 2002.

³ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District) 10 Jun. 1968, 26. NHBS 6/2/8a. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁴ Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides No. C.13/68, 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a. (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi) Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

analogous to what Ann Laura Stoler described as 'hierarchies of credibility'.⁵ Stoler differentiated between the various sets of motivations ascribed to the murder and mutilation of the wife and children of the Dutch planter Luhmann in Batavia in 1876, recorded in 'the dense corpus of correspondence and official missives' about those murders.⁶ Her project was to demonstrate the 'storeyed' levels (hierarchies) into which accounts of the murders should be fitted, the implications that these levels have for the kinds of stories people told in nineteenth century Batavia about violence and the kinds of cultural knowledge on which those accounts were based.⁷ Whereas Stoler compared contemporaneous accounts of the murder of Luhmann's wife and children, I juxtapose accounts of the Nduindui Murders separated by over 30 years and differentiated by their discursive logics. What I know of the 'Nduindui Murders' comes via a British National Service dossier held in the National Archives of Vanuatu (*Nasonel Arkaev blong Vanuatu*), a handful of fragmented accounts contained in the recent reflections of former British and French colonial officers,⁸ and memories of the murders called forth by people I interviewed between 1999-2002. Since 1968, there has been little apparent interaction between local people and former colonial officers over these affairs and during my visits to Vanuatu no local people acknowledged having sighted colonial documents pertaining to the murders.

In exploring the linkages between these two apparent categories of historical information (local/oral and written/colonial), I leave aside questions of the veracity of one source of information over another and choose instead to establish the relative political and social contexts from which these accounts were generated and in whose interests they were authored. In doing so, I also resist the temptation to polarise historical information into two clear categories of written/colonial and spoken /local categories. To do so would be to belie the multiplicity of genres of historical

⁵ cf. Ann Laura Stoler, "In Cold Blood: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives," *Representations, Special Issue: Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories*, no. 37 (1992), 151-189.

⁶ Stoler, "In Cold Blood", 151.

⁷ Stoler, "In Cold Blood", 151-152.

⁸ John D. Field solemnised Kokovi's case, albeit parenthetically, in his contribution to a recent collection on the experiences of colonial officers. John D. Field in Brian J. Bresnihan and Keith Woodward, eds. *Tufala Gavman, Reminiscences from the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies and University of the South Pacific, 2002), 229-250. Based on the testimony of Keith Woodward, Margaret Rodman refers to Kokovi's employment in the British National Service during his prison sentence. Margaret Rodman, "My Only Weapon Being a Pencil: Inscribing the Prison in the New Hebrides," *Journal of Pacific History* 33, no. 1 (1998), 44.

information. It would also gloss over the shared characteristics of written and spoken forms of information. Although the kinds of information used in the production of this thesis often appeared to fall into these categories, spoken accounts can be colonial and written accounts, such as missionary correspondence written from the field, can be very local in outlook.⁹

Because colonial and missionary texts are relatively coeval, they offer contemporaneous insights lacking from oral accounts recalled in the present. Moreover, trying to establish categorical distinctions between oral and written, colonised and colonial genres of texts is often counterproductive. Colonial police officers' accounts of the Nduindui Murders were based on interlocutors' testimony as well as on their own observations. Once committed to the colonial archives, these testimonies supplanted the ongoing spoken words of local people and took on the artificial authority of written texts.¹⁰ While no consensus on causation emerges from the colonial record, colonial officers – in particular, judges and police officers – authorised certain causative, coherent accounts of these events for forensic purposes.

The murders comprise a pivotal moment in the 'history' of the west Ambae Churches of Christ. Most ni-Vanuatu who remember the murders in April 1968 now unambiguously justify Kokovi's actions as being inspired by the anguish caused by Susan becoming Jimmy Stephens's second wife. While the temptation is great to take detailed local oral narratives as privileged records of past events because they offer compelling and locally credible explanations for the murders, such narratives do not constitute transparent accounts of the past. Local oral accounts of the murders collected in west Ambae differ markedly from the events that were recounted to the Native Court of the Northern District in 1968. While many 'facts' contained in the colonial account are validated by oral testimonies about the murders, they are distinguished by their reliance on different discursive logics, in Stoler's phraseology 'storeyed levels'.¹¹

⁹ See e.g. Margaret Rodman, *Houses Far from Home, British Colonial Space in the New Hebrides*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

¹⁰ For accounts of the fertile traces of orality in colonial and missionary texts see Carl Loeliger, "Oral Sources and Old Testament Texts," in *Oral Tradition in Melanesia*, ed. Donald Denoon and Roderic Lacey (Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1981).; and Wulf Oesterreicher, "Types of Orality in Text," in *Written Voices, Spoken Signs - Tradition, Performance, and the Epic Text*, ed. E. Bakker and A. Kahane (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997)..

¹¹ Stoler, "In Cold Blood", 151.

In local oral narratives, the murders have become emblematic of the political division that engulfed the Churches of Christ in the 1960s and 1970s. For most people in west Ambae, therefore, the murders mark the beginning of over a decade of internecine feuding within the Churches of Christ, stimulated by the increasing influence of Nagriamel and its interplay with worshippers aligned to the Conference of Churches of Christ in the New Hebrides. Thus the murders are now depicted as politically and religiously motivated, in addition to being motivated by the anguish of Kokovi at losing his 'sweetheart'. Justifying the murders in this way means that they make perfect sense to ni-Vanuatu members of the Churches of Christ today but they do not correlate to the events as described by local people to colonial officers in 1968. I seek, therefore, to document for each account of the Nduindui Murders by whom the story was told, in what context the story was told and to what agendas their testimony spoke.¹²

I

To place stories about the Nduindui Murders in context, it is necessary to outline the issues raised in the course of Joseph Paul Kokovi's murder trial in the Native Court of the Northern Districts and in the Joint Court of the New Hebrides. The account as constructed for the benefit of Kokovi's murder trials was often ambiguous but established a linear trajectory of the events that resulted in the murders. From the transcripts of the Native Court we can demarcate the strategies of colonial officers, in particular the Native Advocate, to justify the murders in terms of the incomprehensibility of 'native custom', the drunkenness of the accused, or Kokovi's questionable mental stability caused by his extreme jealousy.

The preliminary investigation

Outside Nduindui, the first indication of trouble in west Ambae came on 19 April 1968 when William Boe of Natakaro village presented to the French Hospital in Santo suffering severe gunshot wounds to the abdomen.¹³ Boe had undergone triage at the Churches of Christ mission hospital in Nduindui that evening, from where the missionary doctor, David Coulter, had organised his transfer to Santo, suspecting correctly that his injuries were more serious than Coulter could remedy. Two men, Marcel Takapali from Natalu and Abraham Vatu from Navuti, lay dead in Nduindui already. Willie Boe died three days later.

¹² Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn, "Introduction," *Representations Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory* 26 (1989), 1.

¹³ Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 April 1968, Mike Dumper, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

On the afternoon of 19 April 1968, a joint police task force under the Deputy Commandant of British Police for Northern District, Mike Dumper, was mobilised and flown to Walaha airfield, on the western tip of Ambae. Included in Dumper's detachment were the French Gendarme Masoy, five British constables and two French police.¹⁴ After establishing his base of operations at the Ambae local government headquarters in Ambore, Dumper requested police reinforcements from Santo and local leaders were approached to aid in the search for Kokovi. Soon afterwards, word arrived that he had been sighted nearby his home in Lovanualikotou. Advised by locals that Kokovi was probably still armed with 40 rounds, the police approached the suspect's last known whereabouts cautiously. Dumper reported that he advised his senior NCO, Sgt Wilfred, that 'if the suspect was armed, could be identified without doubt and there was no risk of hitting anyone else[,] they should attempt to wound him'.¹⁵ Dumper divided his detachment into three smaller patrols: the first unit was deployed near Kokovi's house in the hope that the suspect would return there; the second cordoned off the house of storekeeper Enoch Tungu, who had tussled with Kokovi the previous evening; the third guarded Nduindui hospital. Despite sightings of Kokovi approaching his house at about 1.30 a.m. on 20 April, he evaded arrest until after daybreak that morning, when he was apprehended leaning against a tree near Lovanualikotou in a state of extreme exhaustion. He made no attempt to resist.

To avoid incident, Kokovi was transported directly to the government vessel *Mangaru*, moored in Nduindui passage near Limagke. Janet Bule, who was at the time a trainee nurse at Nduindui hospital, recalls that Kokovi stood up and waved to the massed crowd as he was driven to the Nduindui anchorage.¹⁶ Kokovi's naivety was in contrast

¹⁴ Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 April 1968, Mike Dumper, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV. Masoy is mentioned only once in the dossier on the Nduindui Murders contained in the NAV. However, Camille Gloannec, the French Assistant District Agent for Northern District at the time, recalled Masoy's inclusion in Dumper's detachment as the sole instance of the British District Agency in Santo passing information received from mission stations to its French counterpart. Gloannec wrote: "I came across only one exception to this unwritten rule - the day in April 1968 when a young Church of Christ teacher from Nduindui, Ambae, had shot three of his neighbours with a rifle during a fit of fury or madness. Hearing the report on the radio and that the culprit had fled, my dear colleague at once asked me for the help of the French *gendarmerie* in mounting a joint expedition." Brian J. Bresnihan and Keith Woodward, eds. *Tufala Gavman, Reminiscences from the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies and University of the South Pacific, 2002), 258.

¹⁵ Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 April 1968, Mike Dumper, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

¹⁶ Janet Bule, former nurse, Nduindui Hospital. Interview with the author. 14 Aug. 2002, Port Vila. Mini disc recording, notes.

to the grisly ambivalence he showed to the murders. Once aboard the Mangaru, he stated: 'I shot those three men because I got angry with my sweetheart'.¹⁷

Despite their apprehension about colonial intercession in their communities, west Ambae's local Christian leaders welcomed Dumper's detachment. By 1968, Abel Bani, as leader of the Churches of Christ, had waged an eight-year campaign against involvement in the Aoba (Ambae) Local Council, which was established at Ambore, near Nduindui, on the grounds that any interaction with government always ended in disaster (see chapters 2 and 4).¹⁸ Yet the sheer magnitude of this event invalidated such scruples and justified mobilising colonial forces.

Dumper's preliminary investigation report conveyed a clear sense that order was returned to west Ambae with his arrival.¹⁹ He stated that his detachment was welcomed, even though local leaders had not requested it but that mattered little at the time: a pragmatic response was required to contain an armed man who had already shot three men and who remained at large in a densely populated area. The colonial administrations were well versed in the dynamics of their relations with rural communities. A visiting British delegation, investigating the New Hebrides' penal arrangements, had remarked: 'The local population [of the entire New Hebrides] enlists the aid of [colonial] authority only in extreme situations when it is unable to deal with the problem itself'.²⁰ As I argue in Chapter 4, this practical recognition worked well to obscure the history of administrative ambivalence in the Anglo-French Condominium regarding local affairs.²¹ Ironically, it generally fitted well with the ideals of west Ambae's Churches of Christ leaders too.

¹⁷ Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 April 1968, Mike Dumper, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

¹⁸ See also Michael Allen, "The Establishment of Christianity and Cash-Cropping in a New Hebridean Community", *Journal of Pacific History* 3 (1968), 37-38, 44; cf. Michael Allen, "Report on Aoba" (Port Vila: British Residency, 1961); Michael R. Allen, "Innovation, Inversion and Revolution as Political Tactics in West Aoba", in *Vanuatu-Politics, Economics and Ritual in Island Melanesia*, edited by Michael Allen (Sydney: Academic Press, 1981), 127.

¹⁹ Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 April 1968, Mike Dumper, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

²⁰ Report of the Advisory Mission on the Treatment of Offenders, New Hebrides Anglo-French Condominium, 1969, 12. File: Reports on Prison Conditions and Arrests. NAV

²¹ Cf. William Rodman, "The Law of the State and the State of the Law", in *Contemporary Pacific Societies, Studies in Development and Change*, edited by Victoria S. Lockwood, Thomas G. Harding and Ben J. Wallace (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), 55-66.

Yet serious acts of violence committed by ni-Vanuatu against one another were generally sufficient motivation for local leaders to default to colonial authority. Certainly, Dumper felt that without his intervention the Nduindui Murders could have provoked fighting in west Ambae. He feared that 'some [local people] felt it was the responsibility of Joseph's own villagers to apprehend him and if they failed to do so, [they] should be made to suffer'.²² Despite Dumper's fears, no payback violence was exacted against the people of Lovanualikotou. According to Dumper's preliminary report, Kokovi's arrest removed the *casus belli* from the area and ameliorated any brewing discontent. He noted that the Churches of Christ missionary doctor

[David] Coulter and a little later [Elder] Abel Bani...were grateful for our prompt appearance on the scene and were anxious for us to be seen by as many people as possible in order to raise the morale of the area. The villagers would not leave the precincts of their houses or else huddled together in the meetinghouses.²³

Before the murders, no problems had been brought before the Churches of Christ council in west Ambae – the foremost form of local government for Churches of Christ people – for arbitration. Undeniably, the murders were underscored by a pervasive sense of astonishment and trauma, not least for the fact that there was no known personal enmity between Kokovi and his victims. Local systems of governance had failed to prevent the events and local people had no success in halting Kokovi's progress. Mike Dumper emphasised the gratitude of west Ambae people for capturing Kokovi. Dumper recently recalled that once Kokovi was seized calm returned: 'there was no community unrest after the arrest. Villagers were stunned at the tragic waste of life but were content that justice would afterwards be done'.²⁴ Perhaps most importantly, he recalled: 'There was no overt call for a death penalty and the need for any follow up action was not apparent'.²⁵

The Native Trial: establishing the 'facts' of 19 April 1968

The Condominium brought charges against Kokovi for offences against the Native Criminal Code: specifically, for three counts of intentionally causing the premeditated

²² Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 April 1968, Mike Dumper, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

²³ Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 April 1968, Mike Dumper, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

²⁴ Mike Dumper, personal letter, 01 Aug. 2002.

²⁵ Mike Dumper, personal letter, 01 Aug. 2002.

deaths of Abraham Vatu, Marcel Takapali and William Boe.²⁶ Thus, he was brought before the Native Court of the Northern Districts presided over by John D. Field, the British District Agent for Northern District, on 10 June, although the case was thereafter adjourned until 9 and 10 July 1968.

The Native Courts constituted the lowest tier of the Condominium judicial system. As a consequence of the New Hebrides' Condominium Agreement, two systems of courts operated in the colony, namely the Condominium Courts and the National Courts. The Condominium Courts consisted of the Joint Court, the courts of First Instance and the Native Courts. The National Courts consisted of the French National Court, the High Court of the western Pacific and the British Magistrates Courts. The Court of First Instance held jurisdiction over all matters concerning the interpretation of the Protocol, the document that established the legal framework for the Anglo-French Condominium. The Joint Court held jurisdiction over cases in which a ni-Vanuatu was charged with an offence against a European, all land claims and suits over registered land. Both the French and British Administrations maintained Native Courts that held jurisdiction over cases in which both claimants were ni-Vanuatu or in cases of one ni-Vanuatu committing an offence, such as murder, against another.

In theory, native courts were presided over by either the local British or French District Agent alternatively and monthly, although throughout the New Hebrides both agents held court within the same month.²⁷ In practice, the nationality of the President of the Native Court was determined by whether British or French constables had arrested the accused but there was no discernible systematised approach in this regard.

The maximum punishment for premeditated murder under the Native Code, enacted in 1962, was death but sentencing for murders varied greatly. Under the Native Code Native Courts were granted three sentencing options: fines, imprisonment and death.²⁸ In cases warranting more serious penalties than one year's imprisonment, the President of the Native Court was required to refer judgements to the Joint Court of the

²⁶ Schedule of Charges, NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi) Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

²⁷ Report of the Advisory Mission on the Treatment of Offenders, New Hebrides Anglo-French Condominium, 1969, 8. (Reports prison conditions and arrests). NAV.

²⁸ Joint regulation No. 12 1962, The Native Code (Consolidation 18 October 1973) 5(i) Pacific Manuscripts Bureau Doc. 445; until 1962 Native Courts were sanctioned only to impose fines and imprisonment and were required to confer all punishments "more serious than confinement for one year" to the Joint Court. Protocol respecting the New Hebrides, Art. 8 s.12. PMB Doc. 438. See Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides No. C.13/68 of 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a. (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi) Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

New Hebrides for review. No New Hebrideans had been executed in the New Hebrides since the hanging of 3 Santo men charged with the brutal shooting murder and dismemberment of the British planter Reginald John Clapcott in 1923.²⁹ Generally, murders committed by one ni-Vanuatu on another resulted in life sentences, which were often commuted after a few years.

In lieu of a prosecutor, the President of the Native Court undertook interrogation of witnesses and the accused. In retrospect, it appears to have been an uncomfortable arrangement for John Field: 'it was, of course, entirely inexcusable that an untrained magistrate could impose any penalty up to and including execution on New Hebrideans [ni-Vanuatu], while their judicial powers vis-à-vis all others were more restricted'.³⁰

In principle, the Native Advocate was responsible for representing the interests of the people of the New Hebrides against those of the Anglo-French Condominium. Initially, the position was nationally defined: under the Protocol the position of Native Advocate was to be held by a Belgian.³¹ In practice, that was probably never the case. The first incumbent, Dr Borgesius, named as a Dutchman in colonial records, might in fact have been Belgian.³²

In 1968, Maitre Pujol, 'a jovial little man from the South of France', nominally held the position of Native Advocate.³³ In his regular absences, the controversial Australian lawyer Harry Wilshire-Webb acted as the Native Advocate *ad hoc*.³⁴ Although Pujol advised during the case, Wilshire-Webb undertook the majority of Kokovi's defence.

²⁹ Judgements of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides, 1911-1977, Criminal Case no. 465. Supreme Court of Vanuatu PMB 1145; Jeremy MacClancy, *To Kill a Bird with Two Stones* (Port Vila: Vanuatu Cultural Centre, 1980), 99. Six men – named as Ronovuro, Asepele, Lolorave, Alo, Lepvele and Tavoni – were charged with Clapcott's murder although only three of them were eventually executed. Furthermore, in 1931 six Tonkinese labourers were guillotined for the murder of a settler.

³⁰ Field, in Bresnihan and Woodward, *Tufala Gavman*, 247.

³¹ Pierre Anthoniosz in Bresnihan and Woodward, *Tufala Gavman*, 74.

³² Rodman, *Houses Far from Home*, 44.

³³ Jacques Herry in Bresnihan and Woodward, *Tufala Gavman*, 287.

³⁴ In the early 1970s, Wilshire-Webb was banned from the British National Court after an altercation with the Irish judge over the applicability of divorce based on adultery for New Hebrideans. David Hudson, in Bresnihan and Woodward, *Tufala Gavman*, 297; Judgement, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jul. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV. Wilshire-Webb was eventually appointed Queens Counsel for his role as Native Advocate. Hudson, *Tufala Gavman*, 299n3.

Although death sentences were handed down rarely, Kokovi clearly feared receiving the death sentence. Almost immediately after his arrest he had admitted to the three murders and had suggested that had he been able to do so he would have killed more people.³⁵ Yet only a few days later he began to exhibit signs of contrition, albeit occasionally in prosaic tones: 'I am very sorry indeed because I shot my three friends. In addition, I am ready to carry any punishment, even death'.³⁶ Arguably, he had been advised that statements that detailed his intention to kill more people would not help in his defence against premeditated murder. During a supplementary statement to Mike Dumper, Kokovi forcefully reiterated his belief that he was about to die: 'I know I am at the point of death'.³⁷ In another statement taken by Mike Dumper on 24 April 1968 Kokovi detailed his request to Dumper for a Bible. Dumper agreed, although he suggested that because it was almost dark, Kokovi would not be able to read it. Kokovi documented that afterwards a guard named Kalmenu informed him why Dumper was so ambivalent to his request: 'you see Mr Dumper is one heathen man'.³⁸ He continued: 'When I was in prison I started to ask myself 'I'm [sic] ready to die but am I ready to meet Jesus? What about my spirit when I die?' Kokovi looked to the account of the Crucifixion (Luke's Gospel 23:13-43) for inspiration. In light of the resurgence of his explicit Christian beliefs after the murders, it appeared necessary for him to document his belief about his imminent reception in heaven. Taken together, the two sections of his statement flagged that Kokovi believed that *his* Lord had forgiven him, while ironically his chief incarcerator, Mike Dumper, remained a heathen. 'These verses made me think about my sins and I could see that my Lord forgave the malefactor on the night because he repented of his sins. [If] I repent, Jesus would forgive me too. So I repented from my sin and now I know that Jesus gives me peace, joy and happiness in my life'.³⁹ Without cause to establish culpability for the murders,

³⁵ Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 Apr. 1968, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

³⁶ Copy, Statement to police by Joseph Paul Kokovi, n.d., 1-2. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

³⁷ Certificate, Signed Statement taken from Joseph Paul Kokovi by Mike Dumper, n.d. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

³⁸ Exhibit L, Record for Joseph Paul Kokovi's Bad Decision, Statement to police by Joseph Paul Kokovi, 24 April 1968, 1-2. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

³⁹ Copy, Statement to police by Joseph Paul Kokovi, n.d., 2. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

the court resolved only to establish the degree of premeditation and ultimately Kokovi's responsibility for the killings. Field had the authority to deliver the death penalty. Plainly, Kokovi had cause to consider his fate.

Compelled by an irresistible force

Excused of the need to establish Kokovi's culpability by his immediate admission of guilt, Field noted only two issues for the court's consideration: first, that the court ascertain whether the killings were premeditated; second, that the court establish whether the responsibility of the accused was reduced in any way by the provisions of Section 2 of the Native Criminal Code which allowed for pleas of diminished responsibility because of compulsion by an irresistible force.⁴⁰ Specifically, during the trial, Wilshire-Webb argued that Kokovi's actions were mitigated on the grounds of excessive alcohol consumption, his questionable sanity occasioned by the incredible suspicion of Susan's infidelity and the dictates of ill-defined 'tribal custom'. The accounts of the murders and the contexts in which they were committed presented to the court were manipulated to this specific end. The murders, he argued, appeared 'to be [a] completely panic or emotion-ridden series of acts [which] must surely remove the nature of this crime *from the most severe penalty of death to one of unpremeditated homicide* (my emphasis)'.⁴¹

The 'facts' of the trial were derived from the three statements made by Kokovi to Mike Dumper taken between Kokovi's arrest on 19 April 1968 and the beginning of his trial in the Native Court of the Northern District 10 June 1968, augmented and clarified by testimony presented the court. By no means were all the pieces of evidence Dumper collected in west Ambae conclusive and nor did all the testimonies presented to the court by witnesses agree in points of fact or interpretation. Yet the sweep of Kokovi's murderous odyssey across west Ambae is as remarkable for the frankness with which it was recounted as it is for its apparent anomalies. As recounted to the Native Court, Kokovi's actions between 19 April and 20 April 1968 can be summarised as follows.

Beginning on Easter Sunday 1968, Joseph Paul Kokovi came to suspect his fiancée Susan of infidelity with a man named David Bambahi and after 'a week of morbid

⁴⁰ Judgement, Native Court (Northern District) 10 July 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a. (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi) Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁴¹ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District) 9 Jul. 1968, 92. NHBS 6/2/8a. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

introspection' had decided to kill him.⁴² Accordingly, on the afternoon of Thursday 19 April 1968, at approximately 12:30 pm he had left his place of employment at Londua School for Lovanualikotou, his home community. At 1:00 pm he purchased fifty .22 rounds from an unspecified store and visited his friend James Vira, from whom he borrowed a .22 rifle and tested it by shooting at a coconut.

After testing the rifle, Kokovi most likely left immediately to confront David Bambahi in the store where he worked. Kokovi found his quarry easily but there were several other men present. He claimed to the court that he did not kill Bambahi then because there were too many people about.⁴³ Instead, the group purchased wine and a small bottle of liquor – later identified as gin – and proceeded to the house of Abraham Vatu in Navuti.⁴⁴ Kokovi claimed that by the time he arrived at the ensuing party the group had already finished two bottles of wine.⁴⁵ The party participants who gave evidence to the Native Court denied that Kokovi was drunk. Simeon Toga stated, however, that Abraham Vatu was drunk.⁴⁶ Apparently, Kokovi's possession of a rifle did not disrupt plans for the continuation of the drinking party.

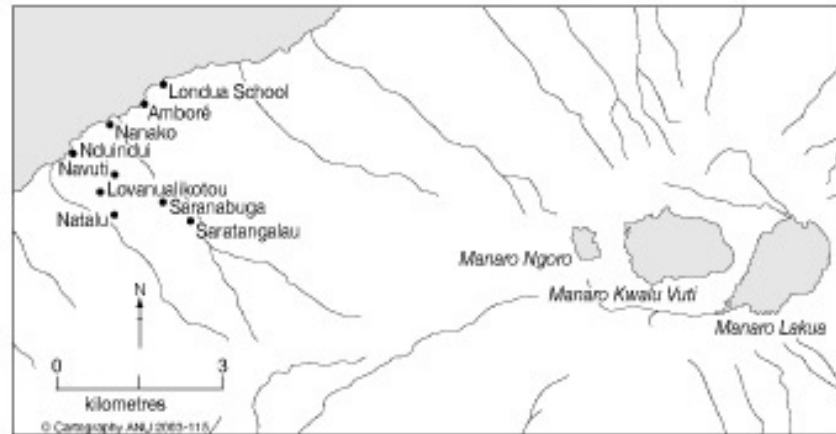
⁴² Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides, No. C.13/68, 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁴³ Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 Apr. 1968, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.; Kokovi also claimed that he did not kill David after they left the store because "we were passing through a village." "Certificate", Signed Statement taken from Joseph Paul Kokovi by Mike Dumper, n.d. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁴⁴ Throughout the case, the amount of alcohol witnesses claimed was consumed varied. The joint court recorded the amount consumed as four bottles of wine and one bottle of gin. Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides, No. C.13/68, 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV. David Bambahi claimed to have given Kokovi money to purchase one bottle of wine and two bottles of gin and afterwards purchased a further four bottles of wine. Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jun. 1968, 8. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV. Alick Quan later verified Bambahi's claim and stated that Joseph had bought four bottles of wine and he one bottle. Simeon Toga stated that the party drank four bottles of wine and only one of gin.

⁴⁵ Exhibit L, Record for Joseph Paul Kokovi's Bad Decision, Statement to police by Joseph Paul Kokovi, n.d., 1-2. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁴⁶ Testimony of Simeon Toga, Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jun. 1968, 16. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.



Map.04 West Ambae communities visited by Kokovi, April 1968.

Once they had finished the liquor, the men moved on leaving only Kokovi and Vatu behind. According to Kokovi, he asked Vatu what he knew about Susan's infidelity but Vatu refused to answer, at which point Kokovi threatened to shoot him. In the court transcript, Kokovi told how Vatu then approached him in an aggressive manner, whereupon Kokovi shot and wounded him. By Kokovi's reckoning, it was about 6:00 pm.⁴⁷ About two minutes later, Kokovi shot for a second time and killed Abraham Vatu. Wilshire-Webb argued that Kokovi had killed Vatu in self-defence, recognising that Lombaha men, like Vatu, were reputed for their fierceness and savagery.⁴⁸ Kokovi, he argued, had shot Vatu in fear and self-defence, although Wilshire-Webb failed to elicit from the members of the drinking party whether Vatu had at any time during the drinking party acted in an aggressive manner towards Kokovi.⁴⁹

Kokovi then visited the Navuti store and spoke with a group of men about Susan. The court records do not identify whether this was the same store where Kokovi initially confronted David. One of the men, identified as Wilfred Vohe, offered to act as a peacemaker between Susan and Kokovi. Some time later, Kokovi and Vohe met with a woman from Navuti identified only as Reenie. According to Reenie, Kokovi approached her at a festival in Navuti and told her that he had wanted to 'humbug' with

⁴⁷ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 69. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁴⁸ Judgement, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jul. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁴⁹ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 67-69. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

Susan but that she had refused him.⁵⁰ Reenie told the court that she and Joseph had had sexual relations previously, including at least once during his engagement to Susan and again engaged in sexual intercourse that night.⁵¹ Furthermore, Kokovi stated that Vohe had also 'humbled' Reenie previously, although he did not state whether they had sex again that night.⁵²

Reenie's testimony was pivotal to the case for arguing that Kokovi's actions had been motivated by his extreme suspicion of Susan's infidelity. Reenie recounted to the court how she had told Kokovi that night that in addition to David Bambahi, Susan had had sexual intercourse with 'Wilson, Philip, Daniel and James'.⁵³ According to Kokovi's testimony to the court, while he and Reenie were having sex she told him that Charley Ngoli – Susan's natal paternal uncle and adoptive father – had also attempted to have sex with Susan.⁵⁴ Wilshire-Webb gave the allegations of incest little additional critical examination during the trial but Reenie's testimony served to sustain the argument that Kokovi was compelled by his anguish to further atrocities.

Wilshire-Webb subsequently emphasised Kokovi's ultimate good intentions by detailing his next actions – Kokovi's attempts to annul his engagement to Susan. Near Lavaturusa, Kokovi encountered a group of choristers that included Susan's 'sister', Alice Ngoli. Kokovi asked her to convey a message to her natal father, Shem Banga Roroa, stating that Kokovi wished to annul his engagement to Susan. Alice refused to carry out his missive. Consequently, Kokovi went to Banga Roroa's house to tell him in person. According to Kokovi he found it empty, forced entry and scattered Susan's belongings throughout the house in anger, frustration and the possibility that he might

⁵⁰ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 32. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁵¹ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 34. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁵² Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides, No. C.13/68, 30 Aug. 1968; NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.; Copy, Statement to police by Joseph Paul Kokovi, n.d. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁵³ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jun. 1968, 32. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁵⁴ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 86. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

uncover further evidence of Susan's betrayal.⁵⁵ But he claimed to the court that he found a collection of letters, many from Susan's adoptive father Charley Ngoli, undoubtedly allowing the seed of suspicion planted earlier by Reenie to germinate.

Susan and her natal father, Shem Banga Roroa, returned some time later and encountered Kokovi. Susan told the court that Kokovi was preoccupied by his discovery of letters from Charley Ngoli, which she stated distilled his belief that she had been 'humbugging'. Susan testified to the Native Court that Kokovi had become fixated on thoughts of her infidelity, especially with members of her own family.⁵⁶ Susan denied his accusations but recalled Kokovi's reply: 'you don't know your family'.⁵⁷

Alice Ngoli claimed that the drunken Kokovi approached Banga Roroa with his rifle in hand to demand back the £50 bride price he had paid Banga Roroa, which was considered very high by west Ambae standards at the time.⁵⁸ After a brief discussion, Banga Roroa refused to return the bride price but acquiesced when Kokovi discharged his rifle into the air. According to Kokovi, after this action Banga Roroa freed both parties to the engagement from further obligation.⁵⁹ After the tense standoff with Banga Roroa, Kokovi returned the bride price to his mother in Lovanualikotou. While at his mother's house, Kokovi collected a torch and then returned to the store, where he had purchased cartridges earlier that evening. However, when he arrived the storekeeper, Enoch Tungu, possibly alerted to Vatu's murder, grappled with Kokovi and shouted for assistance, causing Kokovi to flee. In his confession Kokovi admitted that he would probably have shot Tungu but for fear that the scuffle would attract further attention.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 70. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁵⁶ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jun. 1968, 41. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁵⁷ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jun. 1968, 41. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁵⁸ Testimony of Amon Ngwele, Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 57. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁵⁹ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 55. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁶⁰ Copy, Statement to police by Joseph Paul Kokovi, n.d., 2. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

Instead, he escaped to Natalu, where he murdered his second victim. Arriving in the village, Kokovi chose a random house and attempted to kick open its door. Marcel Takapali – investigating the commotion – opened his front door to find Kokovi standing about nine feet away. Kokovi confessed: ‘I just shone my torchlight ... aimed at his forehead and shot him’.⁶¹ Solomon Kamali claimed to have sighted Takapali’s dead body first at 7:00pm after being called away from feeding his goat.⁶²

From Natalu, Kokovi fled to the Anglican village of Saranabuka where he left an enigmatic confessional note affixed to a mango tree. It was presented to the court to demonstrate that Kokovi had tried to confess to the murders during the night but its meaning was ambiguous.⁶³ While the note was not included in the dossier on the Native Court Case, it is referred to in Dumper’s preliminary report and in the court transcript. Dumper reported initially that Kokovi had admitted in the note to two murders and flagged his intention to commit a third murder, probably in Saranabuka.⁶⁴ However, the note read out to the court read: ‘One man from Lovanualikotou and one man from Lavaturusa killed one man from this village [presumably Saranabuka]. I am a brave and cruel man’.⁶⁵ Kokovi’s reference to the guilt of ‘one man from Lavaturusa’ plausibly referred to the cause of his anguish, rather than an actual accomplice. If Kokovi was distressed at the annulment of his engagement to Susan and the difficult circumstances of retrieving the bride price from her father, the man from Lavaturusa was most likely Banga Roroa. If however, his distress was founded on Susan’s perceived incestuous relationship with Charley Ngoli, Charley was probably the subject of the note. The note presented in this form offered some explanations as to the base level of Kokovi’s emotional tumult. No possible alternate meanings were explored during the case in the Native Court or in the Joint

⁶¹ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 73. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁶² Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jun. 1968, 52-54. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁶³ Judgement, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jul. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁶⁴ Preliminary report on Nduindui Murders 22 Apr. 1968, District Headquarters Santo. NHBS f.9/7/1 Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁶⁵ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 73. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

Court.⁶⁶ At no point were further investigations initiated against Ngoli and Banga Roroa based on the accusations of incest, principally, it appears, because Wilshire-Webb's line of interrogation elicited a spirited response from the predominantly west Ambae crowd which had gathered to watch the court case (see below).

In Kokovi's account, he made a detour to the village of Saratangalau, after leaving Saranabuka he walked to nearby Saratangalau looking for a man named Sam Lenghe, whose bearing on these events was explicated neither during the investigation nor during the trial. Not knowing of Lenghe's whereabouts, Kokovi paused to ask directions from an unnamed old woman. Kokovi claimed that he would have shot the old woman too had he been able to see her in the darkness. It is not recorded whether Kokovi still possessed the torch he used when he killed Takapali.

Kokovi's final stop that night was at the small community of Natakaro, less than a kilometre inland from Saratangalau, where he approached at random the house of Willie Boe who lay inside, asleep next to his wife who was identified in the court transcript as May Kwelivukonkonh.⁶⁷ Kokovi recounted to the court how he scouted around the building, shone his torch through the window and shot the prone Boe through the stomach. Apparently, after shooting Boe, Kokovi's anguish dissipated. He climbed towards the twin volcanic lakes atop the peak of Ambae's dormant volcano, known as the *manaro*, where he slept the night. On 20 April 1968, Kokovi was arrested by Dumper's police detachment, as he lay exhausted near his home in Lovanualikotou.

Wilshire Webb's strategy throughout the trial was geared towards establishing Susan's infidelity as the foremost issue for establishing Kokovi's motivation to commit the murders, even though David Bambahi, who was the subject of Kokovi's intense suspicion, escaped unharmed. Principally, he manipulated the witnesses into depicting a situation in which Kokovi's initial suspicions of Susan's infidelity grew with each encounter. He had killed Vatu in self-defence after Vatu refused to answer Kokovi's questions about Susan. His encounter with Reenie inflamed his anger by suggesting that in addition to 'David, Wilson, Philip, Daniel and James', Susan had apparently had

⁶⁶ Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides, No. C.13/68, 30 Aug. 1968. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.; Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jun. 1968, 73. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁶⁷ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District) 10 Jun. 1968, 54. NHBS 6/2/8a. (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi) Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

sex with her paternal natal uncle and adoptive father, Charley Ngoli.⁶⁸ This had thrown Kokovi into 'greater upset' and 'deeper panic', which precipitated his next actions, the random killings of Marcel Takapali and Willie Boe.⁶⁹

Wilshire-Webb and, briefly, Pujol's defence of Kokovi rested on construction of 'natives' – principally Kokovi but also his victims – as the passive instruments and victims of 'tribal custom'. In one of his few interjections, Pujol stressed that the accused believed that his honour had been grossly offended 'in a way which in *tribal custom* would warrant heavy retribution'.⁷⁰ The statement ironically flagged the disparity between Pujol's conceptions of west Ambae communities and the testimony of west Ambae community leaders, who emphasised that the final local arbiter of such matters should have been the church council; it should have been church doctrine rather than tribal custom which Pujol suggested Susan had offended against.⁷¹ Nonetheless, Pujol and Wilshire-Webb's intentions were to lead the magistrate towards the conclusion that Kokovi was compelled by an irresistible force at the time of the murders, specifically that he was motivated to murder by the incredible depths of his emotional tumult, was possibly drunk at the time and was compelled by an undefined 'tribal custom'. To this end, Pujol contended that Kokovi's unstable state was demonstrated by the fact that he had intercourse with Reenie shortly after killing Abraham Vatu.⁷² Overall, Wilshire-Webb argued that Kokovi's actions were motivated by the desire to draw attention to his plight. Kokovi wished to shoot a person from each of these villages 'to create a big

⁶⁸ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District) 9 Jul. 1968, 85. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.; "Certificate", Signed Statement taken from Joseph Paul Kokovi by Mike Dumper, n.d. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁶⁹ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District) 9 Jul. 1968, 21. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁷⁰ Judgement, Joint Court of the New Hebrides, No. C. 13/68, 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁷¹ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jun. 1968, 64-65. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁷² This event lodged in Mike Dumper's memory: "The only other strange incident in this affair, which lingers in my memory, was his admission that he stopped and had sex with a girl that he casually met between committing two of the murders." Furthermore, he recalled talking to Kokovi on the journey from Nduindui passage to Luganville: "I spent a large part of the seven hour sea voyage back to Santo talking with Kokovi and he was full of remorse but no hint of bitterness. He seemed surprised that he would *not* eventually receive the death sentence and talked about making atonement. The enormity of his crime had clearly sunk in but he made no attempt to shift blame. Bear in mind he spent 24 hours hiding in the bush, before being taken into custody, to contemplate his actions." Mike Dumper, personal letter, 01 Aug. 2002.

boil-up' so that there would be an enquiry into the surrounding circumstances and so that 'all the people of the various villages concerned would find out *the facts* about Susan's infidelity' whatever they might have been.⁷³

Without question, the patriarchal discourses of the colonial and local men whose testimony dominated the court records designated its own kind of 'storeyed level'. Wilshire-Webb, for example, did not explore further the issue of Kokovi's sexual proclivities the night of the murder or during his engagement to Susan. That Kokovi could have had sex with other women leading up to the night of the murders, yet have his jealousy about Susan's infidelity accepted almost without question, highlights the intense double standards at play in the court.

Wilshire-Webb had specific reasons to assume that diminished responsibility based on alcohol consumption would oblige Field to lessen Kokovi's sentence. Cases involving the selling of alcohol to 'natives', public drunkenness and other offences against the Native Code were commonplace for colonial magistrates and judges. A visiting British advisory team on the penal system and the treatment of prisoners had reported in 1966 'an appreciable consumption of alcohol.... Drunkenness and assaults associated with it appear to be increasing rather than diminishing, and there is a serious lack of adequate provision for constructive leisure'.⁷⁴ During her testimony, Kay Williams had suggested that Kokovi was one of the few imbibers of alcohol in west Ambae, which Field suggested 'was an entirely inaccurate impression'. According to Field, 'the amount of alcohol sold legally or illegally in Nduindui [was] very considerable'.⁷⁵

In 1967 Field, acting in his capacity as the British District Agent, Northern District, had named Nduindui as an area with worsening law and order problems because of the relatively high levels of alcohol consumption there:

in Maewo, the Churches of Christ leaders had virtually succeeded in convincing their followers of the evils of drink but the more tempestuous elements in Ndui-Ndui were not amenable to the obiter dicta of their elders. Ndui-Ndui was presenting an

⁷³ Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides No. C.13/68, 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a. (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi) Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁷⁴ Report of the Advisory Mission on the Treatment of Offenders, New Hebrides Anglo-French Condominium, no date (probably about 1966), 5. Carton (Reports prison conditions and arrests). NAV.

⁷⁵ Judgement, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jul. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). NAV.

increasingly interesting example of the conflict between the elder and responsible elements of church authority, and the younger, well-educated youth.⁷⁶

After hearing the evidence, Field concluded that Kokovi was 'an immoderate drinker'. However, he judged that the amount of alcohol Kokovi had consumed was 'by Melanesian standards' small.⁷⁷ Moreover, in light of the fact that Kokovi had acquired the rifle and bought the .22 cartridges before he had had anything to drink, Field decided that 'the element of drink and subsequent drunkenness [were] of no real significance'.⁷⁸

Despite Wilshire-Webb's argument for diminished responsibility, the forensic psychiatrist for the Native Court, Dr. Sell verified Kokovi's sanity. Sell told the court that: 'By the exclusion of the signs and symptoms of mental disorder the accused did not then and does not now, suffer from any of the twelve or so recognised psychiatric disorders in which violence commonly occurs'.⁷⁹ The court considered that Kokovi 'was at the time of his actions aware of their nature and quality, knew that what he was doing was wrong and was not suffering from any delusion'.⁸⁰ Thus, Field argued, at no time had Kokovi demonstrated 'irresistible compulsion' to commit the murders.

According to the President of the Court, considering that Kokovi had spent three or four days in 'morbid introspection' he could be considered to have premeditated the killings. He made no move to alert the 'Church of Christ Mission Council [sic], which [was] his primary employer, to Susan's "moral laxity"'. Field judged that under the literal translation of the Native Code Kokovi:

was not acting in lawful defence of himself or of another person. In so far as the accused was or was not constrained by a force he could not resist, the free wording of the subsection presumably is meant to cover some form of tribal compulsion, resulting from native custom as was the more sophisticated form of provocation.... In this case the principal point of defence is that the accused was constrained to commit murder

⁷⁶ New Hebrides Condominium Northern District Report for the Year 1967, 2. NHBS ANR/17 (Annual Reports on Administrative Districts, 1967-1971). Foreign and Commonwealth Records Division (Hereinafter FCORD).

⁷⁷ Judgement, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jul. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). NAV.

⁷⁸ Judgement, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jul. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). NAV.

⁷⁹ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jun. 1968, 56-57. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁸⁰ Judgement, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jul. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

because his mental state was disturbed by the suspicion that his fiancée had been unfaithful to him.

Considering his admission that Kokovi had had sexual relations with Reenie at least once during his engagement, Field considered the suggestion of Kokovi's upset at Susan's infidelity unconvincing. Kokovi, according to this judgement, carried the full weight of responsibility for his actions. Moreover, Field claimed that there clearly was evidence of 'premeditation to commit a serious offence from the moment the accused acquired the cartridges'.⁸¹ The second and third killings were also premeditated because Kokovi, having shot Vatu, declared an intention to kill others. Moreover, several hours elapsed between the first and last shootings and Kokovi walked several kilometres over the course of the night of the murders. Furthermore, Field suggested that it was implausible that an educated and experienced man such as Kokovi would have shot Vatu fearing his 'savagery'. Thus, while 'the court has the utmost sympathy for the accused, obsessed as he was by the terrible suspicion of his fiancée's fidelity' Field found Kokovi guilty on each charge.

Insofar as sentencing was concerned, Field stated that Kokovi should be imprisoned for 15 years but 'further [recommended] that the sentence should be reviewed after five to ten years and that the intelligence, training and capabilities of the accused be employed to the maximum extent possible during his incarceration'. By convention, British magistrates were not inclined to impose the death penalty, preferring an informal system of indentured labour for prisoners. Margaret Rodman has suggested that British administrators wished to take advantage of the pool of free labourers constituted by unthreatening New Hebridean prisoners. Since the time of Edward Jacomb, the Condominium's first Native Advocate, sentencing had followed the logic that 'Melanesians neither deny their guilt nor understand why they commit culpable acts, ranging from the crime of murdering one's wife to minor mistakes about what seems natural and obvious'.⁸² The native criminal, Jacomb suggested, 'while guilty of the act, is innocent of the crime. Because he does not know why what he did is wrong, he is not really responsible for his actions'.⁸³ This conceit, Rodman argued, was crucial to the project of establishing a space for prisoners under the British penal system as prison labour.

⁸¹ Judgement, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jul. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a File: Judicial and Legal, Courts (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). NAV.

⁸² Edward Jacomb cited in Rodman, "My Only Weapon Being a Pencil", 30-31.

⁸³ Rodman, "My Only Weapon Being a Pencil", 31.

Field found in Kokovi a skilled worker for the British Administration. Moreover, Kokovi's cause was taken up by a senior administrator within the British Residency: 'One colonial officer ... took a lot of interest in the case because he considered it a problem – we didn't want to keep [Kokovi] in prison forever, [but] we were beginning to understand that it would be dangerous for him to go back to Ambae'.⁸⁴ Joseph Paul Kokovi worked as an administrative assistant with the New Hebrides British National Service on and off during his stay in prison for several years. Keith Woodward recalled that by the time he left the New Hebrides in March 1978 he had not heard from Kokovi in some time, but presumed that he had eventually benefited from remission and been released from prison after serving 10 years of his 15 year sentence.⁸⁵ At present, Kokovi is reputed to live in a warehouse in Luganville but was not interviewed during my field research.

Throughout the Native Court proceedings, Field alluded to the chaotic and aggravated tenor of the west Ambae crowd that had gathered to observe proceedings. In summing up, he had paused to 'record the very deep and intense feelings that have been aroused in the Nduindui area of Aoba by the actions of the accused and the scarcely suppressed anger among some of the witnesses and spectators in the court'.⁸⁶ In his contribution to a recent collection of reminiscences of the Condominium Administration, Field recalled that at Kokovi's arrival in Santo aboard the *Mangaru* 'we needed some fancy footwork to stop the crowd that had gathered at the gates from attacking him'.⁸⁷ Moreover, Field noted that had the court proceedings been conducted in Nduindui there would have been 'the probability, if not certainty, of serious public disorder. As it was[,] the atmosphere in the court house at Santo was very tense at times'.⁸⁸ Field's recollections were no doubt influenced by his intimate knowledge of what he had observed from the President's bench as the west Ambae crowd was buoyed by the spectacle of a murder trial, its local consequence for them and their vicarious gratification that the murderer would be brought to justice. Yet, several issues were raised in the course of the case that infuriated the predominantly west Ambae crowd.

⁸⁴ Rodman, "My Only Weapon Being a Pencil", 44.

⁸⁵ Keith Woodward, personal letter, 15 Nov. 2002.

⁸⁶ Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides, No. C.13/68, 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a. (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi) Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁸⁷ John D. Field in Bresnihan and Woodward, *Tufala Gavman*, 247.

⁸⁸ J.D. Field to British Resident Commissioner Colin Allan, Confidential Memo. NHBS No. 311/68 f.1/11/12. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

Specifically, the implication that Charley Ngoli and Shem Banga Roroa had had incestuous relations with Susan elicited from Field the response: 'Mr Webb's position was entirely misunderstood and had he come to Aoba, I could not have been certain of his safety'.⁸⁹

The veracity of Field's comments is difficult to establish. His memo was drafted in response to a complaint mounted by the French Resident Commissioner that the investigation had been carried out piecemeal and that undue expense was incurred by holding the trial in Santo, rather than in west Ambae itself.⁹⁰ Field was asked to justify the expenditure of Condominium funds in the course of the investigation when Mike Dumper chartered a private vessel, the *Neptune*, to return to Nduindui after his initial investigation to interrogate about 30 witnesses to the events and then had organised for witnesses to be ferried to Santo in an unidentified vessel in preparation for the first case in the Native Court of the Northern District. Two European witnesses (Dr Coulter and Kay Williams) were flown to Santo and returned to west Ambae two days later by air. Field defended the costs and stated that had the trial been conducted in west Ambae as a cost-saving measure, no peaceable outcome would have been possible.⁹¹

As stipulated in the native code, the Joint Court, the New Hebrides highest domestic court, was required to review Kokovi's case given that he had been sentenced to more than one year's imprisonment.⁹² While the Joint Court of the New Hebrides upheld Field's judgement, great scepticism amongst senior colonial justiciars was evident as to how these constituted credible explanations for the murders.⁹³ The Joint Court judges were clearly perplexed by Field's ruling. While the co-presidents of the Joint Court acknowledged Kokovi's very great upset at Susan's infidelity, they took issue with key

⁸⁹ J.D. Field to British Resident Commissioner Colin Allan, Confidential Memo. NHBS No. 311/68 f.1/11/1 12. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁹⁰ J.D. Field to British Resident Commissioner Colin Allan, Confidential Memo. NHBS No. 311/68 f.1/11/1 12. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁹¹ J.D. Field to British Resident Commissioner Colin Allan, Confidential Memo. NHBS No. 311/68 f.1/11/1 12. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁹² Protocol respecting the New Hebrides, Art. 8 s.12. PMB Doc. 438; Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides No. C.13/68 of 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a. (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi) Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁹³ Judgement, Joint Court of the New Hebrides No. C.13/68, 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a. (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi). NAV. Kokovi's eventual conviction by the Joint Court was delayed by wrangling between the British and French Residencies concerning the expenditure of Condominium finances during the initial investigation. J.D. Field to British Resident Commissioner Colin Allan, Confidential Memo. NHBS No. 311/68 f.1/11/1 12. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

points of the case. Undeniably, given that Wilshire Webb's case was founded on the supposition that Kokovi was motivated to kill Vatu, Takapali and Boe by his extreme jealousy, the Joint Court judges were baffled that the real target of Kokovi's anger, David Bambahi, had escaped unscathed. These facts, suggested the Commandant of British Police, David Walford, acting as Public Prosecutor, indicated that the killings were premeditated, even if the victims had not been pre-selected. Walford argued that had the Native Court accepted the plea of diminished responsibility based on subjection to an 'irresistible force', which it had not done, it should have acquitted Kokovi but he contended that there was no evidence to suggest that Kokovi had acted in such a limited capacity.⁹⁴ He was therefore confused as to why the court had been so lenient. While the Joint Court judges accepted that there might have been extenuating circumstances at play, they admitted that they found it 'extremely difficult to establish where they exist'.⁹⁵ The implication was clear; Kokovi had escaped the most serious sentence of death despite being convicted on three counts of premeditated murder. Yet despite attaching extreme caveats to the ruling of the Native Court of the Northern District, they neither overturned nor amended John Field's ruling.

II

Eyewitness accounts: privileged information; collapsed memories

In this section, I discuss local oral narratives about the Nduindui Murders. Contrasting written colonial records and local oral narratives highlights the dangers of accepting either written or oral accounts of the past as transparent records of fact. Allowing the 'facts' to recount history without mediating their comparative value or establishing the political and social contexts in which they were made elides the historian's key disciplinary consideration: no matter whether they are written or spoken *all* accounts of the past are contingent. Clearly, there is great value in using oral testimonies to document 'history' because they may throw light on actions and events that have happened after the colonial gaze has shifted to other matters in other locales. Moreover, they are uniformly more intimate, informed by local aetiologies, cultural assumptions, texture and knowledge of personalities, settings and landscape.

Undeniably, eyewitness accounts require the historian to keep in mind the hazards of uncritical or atheoretical approaches to memory. Some of the most provocative

⁹⁴ Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides, No. C.13/68, 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a. (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi) Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

⁹⁵ Judgement of the Joint Court of the New Hebrides, No. C.13/68, 30 Aug. 1968. NHBS 6/2/8a. (Condominium v. Joseph Paul Kokovi) Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

methodologies available to oral historians have been worked out in response to discrepant accounts of events. For example, the oral historian Luise White has demonstrated that both oral narratives and colonial texts contain patent falsehoods.⁹⁶ I consider all oral narratives to be dependent on the teller's memories or imagination. Despite being highly textured and offering compelling explanations for what has occurred in the past, oral narratives about the 'Nduindui Murders' do not constitute factual accounts of what actually happened although they always throw light on the relationships involved. More importantly they demonstrate the contemporary valence of the past, represented in 'history'. Like all accounts of the past, oral narratives require that close attention be paid to the agenda of the teller.

By contrasting these genres of historical information – local/oral versus written/colonial – I have attempted not to examine accounts for the factual correctness. Rather, I seek to demonstrate the strategies which motor accounts of these events. Because local oral accounts of the Nduindui Murders represent a set of events that deviate markedly from the opinions of colonial officers and police investigators when ascribing causation and justification for the murders, I have kept in mind that in oral testimonies 'factual recollection merges with symbolic imagination to an extent unequalled by other sources' (see Chapter 1).⁹⁷ Oral narratives about the Nduindui Murders provide a corpus of privileged information about the murders but also reveal the ways in which ni-Vanuatu Churches of Christ people have reconstructed their memories of the murders to fit with local historicities. That is, the ni-Vanuatu people I have spoken to rationalised the Nduindui Murders in such ways as to make them locally and historically credible. In turn, stories about the murders have been used to make other conflicts locally credible and to emphasise the high cost of *politik*: so high it includes murder.

Clearly, there are many social forces at work in shaping narrative practices. Given that this is an historical and ethnographic, rather than a linguistic, study *per se*, I have not addressed fully the issues surrounding local 'discourse', which constrain the production of oral accounts. Narratives about conflicted events, such as the Nduindui murders, are often beholden to narrative practices that determine who may and who may not speak

⁹⁶ White, "Telling More", 13

⁹⁷ Alessandro Portelli, *The Text and the Voice, Writing, Speaking, and Democracy in American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 53.

about certain topics on certain occasions with certain persons.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, certain dynamics related to these issues have been addressed already (see Chapter 1). Moreover, secular academic readers need to take seriously the notion that their ideas about 'oral history' as a certain sort of discourse practice might not map cleanly on to the multiple, diverse and often apparently conflicting modes of representation found in Melanesian societies.

With these qualifications in mind, what bearing the Nduindui Murders have had on the construction of the 'history' of the Churches of Christ and what bearing the history of the Churches of Christ has had on memories of the murders can be charted in oral accounts. The murders are now uniformly constructed as essentially political killings, that is killings triggered by and characteristic of *politik*. They have become infused with thematic references to church doctrine and the emergence of the Nagriamel movement, even if these were arguably not the primary issues at the time. To elucidate the personal qualities of oral narratives, I have foregrounded three accounts of the Nduindui Murders: that of Bill Bulelam, the current Principal of Banmatmat Bible College but from 2000-2002 the Minister of Sarabetu Church of Christ in Port Vila; that of Janet Bule, a former nurse at Nduindui hospital (who is married to Bill Bulelam); and that of Willie Toka, a Churches of Christ elder who resides in Port Vila. I have referenced several other people who told me stories about the Nduindui Murders collected during my stay in west Ambae in 1999-2000.

The common thread which links all oral accounts of the Nduindui Murders and distinguishes them collectively from the written colonial record is their underlying shared logic of causation: Joseph Paul Kokovi murdered three nameless Nagriamel men because he learned that his sweetheart was to become one of Jimmy Stephens 'secretaries', the local gloss for the wives Stephens took after he embraced polygyny.

The influence of Nagriamel for west Ambae people constitutes one of the principal historical 'events' to which conceptions of *politik* are anchored and has been telescoped to include the Nduindui Murders. Some reflections, while truncated or distilled over time, are clear on this point of causation. For example, a former student from Londua recalled: 'That boy went like that from *politik*. Joseph Paul went on top [to the inland villages] to a Nagriamel dance and shot three men'.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Lamont Lindstrom, *Knowledge and Power in a South Pacific Society*, Washington; London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990.

⁹⁹ Paul Ren Tari, 9 Apr. 2000.

As part of this process, key protagonists and events foregrounded in the court transcripts have subsided in importance, or been removed entirely. Discussing the Nduindui Murders with people who were in west Ambae the night they occurred has raised several discrepancies of varying magnitudes between accounts: Who was where? Who did what? What, precisely, motivated the killings? What greater significance did they have? Rather than smooth these discrepancies into a single, more-or-less coherent narrative, I have allowed various differences of opinion to demonstrate the ways in which local people make sense of their specific pasts.

Oral narratives about the Nduindui Murders present a set of events much removed from the random homicides Dumper initially described or the paradoxical premeditated murders without pre-selected victims for which Kokovi was ultimately sentenced to consecutive life sentences. However, most oral narratives share key details with their written colonial counterparts. Generally, ni-Vanuatu Churches of Christ people acknowledge that in 1968 Joseph Paul Kokovi killed two men over the course of a night and wounded another who died later in hospital in Santo. Furthermore, many 'facts' recounted in the course of oral history interviews are replicated in the court transcript, although generally people have ascribed different causes or motivations. For example, Wilson Vira remembered that Kokovi was drunk the night of the murders but that this did not detract from the political motivations for the murders: *'yes Joseph Paul hemi drang be hemi mas drang blong mekem ol samting we hemi mekem'*.¹⁰⁰ ['Yes Joseph Paul was drunk but *he had* to get drunk to do all these things he did'.] In addition, in the course of authoring histories about the Nduindui Murders, my ni-Vanuatu interlocutors have figuratively effaced several protagonists from the Native Court case. At no point were Reenie, Willie Boe, Marcel Takapali and Abraham Vatu named by people who recounted their memories about the Nduindui Murders. The later three were construed solely as instruments of Nagriamel.

The witness to the rights of the Mother

Susan's significance in local conceptions of Nagriamel plays on Stephens attempts to create a royal family for Nagriamel. In 1967, Stephens was baptised into the Churches of Christ and took Moses as his baptismal name. In December 1967, moreover, west Ambae people had established an enclave in Vanafo. However, there is little evidence to suggest that at the time of the murders Susan was already betrothed to Stephens or that she had met him. Indeed, at the time of Kokovi's trial in the Native Court of the

¹⁰⁰ Wilson Vira, west Ambae man. Interview with the author, Bislama. 28 Aug. 2002, Sarabetu Church of Christ, Port Vila. Mini-disc recording, notes.

Northern District, Susan claimed that she resided solely in Lovanualikotou, west Ambae.¹⁰¹

Susan's depiction as Charley Ngoli's adoptive daughter is central to establishing that Kokovi was in fact incensed to violence because his sweetheart had been betrothed to Jimmy Stephens, in a political alliance brokered by Ngoli.¹⁰² Oral histories about the Nduindui Murders include circumstantial evidence to offer plausible explanations for Kokovi's upset at the loss of Susan to Jimmy Stephens. The identities of the *dramatis personae* of the court transcripts have merged in the historical imagination of west Ambae people and strengthened claims that the Nduindui Murders were politically and religiously, as well as personally, motivated.

Because of the combination of classificatory kinship terms in west Ambae and the inordinately high incidence of adoption there, establishing kinship relations and even identifying the individuals named accurately from archival sources, even when validated by the stated relationships of witnesses to one another in the court records, is highly problematic.¹⁰³ However, some suggestions about the identities of the key protagonists in the Nduindui Murders can be made. According to Michael Allen's genealogical data from west Ambae, Charlie Ngoli had three daughters named Kwenunu, Kwelevu and Kwetasi. In 1960, both Kwelevu and Kwetasi were unmarried. However, all three women were adopted out of Ngoli's direct family. Ngoli's sister Janette married Aaron Toa of Lovanualikotou. They had two daughters: one was named Mary Kwevira Mangemu and the other Kwevira Kikivi. Both women were unmarried in 1960, at the time of Michael Allen's initial field research. In transcripts of the Native Court Susan is named as Susan Quelep of Lovanualikotou. This is most likely the Kwelevu mentioned in Michael Allen's data. 'Alice', whom Kokovi identified as Susan's sister, identifies herself as the first daughter of Charley Ngoli and Susan as her first cousin, the natal daughter of Ngoli's brother, Shem Banga Roroa but the adoptive daughter of Charley Ngoli. In oral histories about the Nduindui Murders, Charley Ngoli and Shem Banga Roroa are both referred to simply as Susan's 'father'.

For most of the people I interviewed about the murders, credible justifications were found in the encompassing political atmosphere. Charley Ngoli, Shem Banga Roroa and Aaron Toa are recalled among the most senior Nagriamel leaders in west Ambae.

¹⁰¹ Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 10 Jun. 1968, 40-41. NHBS 6/2/8a. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

¹⁰² Bill Bulelam, 14 May 2001.

¹⁰³ Michael Allen, personal letter, 02 Aug. 2002.

Moreover, Susan became the first of Jimmy Stephens' secretaries, probably in late 1968 or 1969 (although no-one posited the precise dates). Charley Ngoli of Lavaturusa became a senior leader of the Nagriamel Movement in west Ambae and from 1968 onwards resided periodically in Vanafo, the headquarters of Nagriamel, although little evidence exists of his active Nagriamel membership at the time of the murders in April 1968.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, Aaron Toa's daughter became Jimmy Stephens' third secretary/wife, after Susan.¹⁰⁵ The connections between Toa, Ngoli and Banga Roroa sustain the plausibility that Susan became one of Stephens' secretaries – her possible personal motivations were never discussed – and that this drove the Churches of Christ teacher, Joseph Paul Kokovi mad with rage. The case that Joseph Paul Kokovi calculatingly murdered three Nagriamel men is compelling but for the fact that at no point during *any* of the contemporaneous accounts of the Nduindui Murders is Nagriamel or Jimmy Stephens mentioned. Susan's first meeting with Stephens probably occurred after the Native Court case; plausibly, she did not return to west Ambae after Kokovi was sentenced through shame or she came to reside there after her natal and classificatory fathers moved there.

Few detail of Stephens' 'marriage' to Susan are available and those that exist – a lengthy interview between Stephens and the former Curator of the National Museum of Vanuatu, Kirk Huffman – are extremely cryptic. According to Stephens, he had searched for a 'partner' and a 'witness', since the inception of Nagriamel.¹⁰⁶ He stated that he first laid eyes on Susan 'just before Christmas', as she walked between her father's house near Vanafo and *skul* (church).¹⁰⁷ By Jimmy's reckoning it was on the eve of his first trip to Port Vila, New Caledonia and Fiji, which occurred in April 1970.¹⁰⁸ However, Keith Woodward recalled being introduced to Susan in 1969, as the

¹⁰⁴ Jimmy Stephens, leader of Nagriamel. Interview with Kirk Huffman. N.d. Mini-disc copy of reel-to-reel recording. Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta audio archives, Port Vila, 86/31. I thank Steven Zagala for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁰⁵ Janet Bule, 14 Aug. 2002; Willie Toka, grandson of Willie Vutigele, Churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 12 Aug 2002. Tape recording, notes; Amon Ngwele, Son of Abel Bani, Churches of Christ Elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 20 Jan. 2000, Luganville. Tape recording, notes.

¹⁰⁶ Stephens n.d. 86/32.

¹⁰⁷ Jimmy Stephens, 86/31.

¹⁰⁸ Stephens met with the Fijian lawyer, K.C. Ramrhaka, to discuss the validity of his claims for independence for the New Hebrides. See Van Trease, *The Politics of Land*, 148.

‘witness for the mother’s right’.¹⁰⁹ All Stephen’s attempts to make a Santo woman his ‘partner and witness’ had resulted in those women being chased away by Nagriamel people who had ‘some problems’ with the women he had chosen, primarily suggesting they were practitioners of sorcery or poisoners. In Stephens’ account, he was approached by the elders of Nduindui, James Garae, Aron Toa and Charley Ngoli, who lived in Moru village, nearby Vanafo, to discuss both Nagriamel’s aims and to clarify Stephens’ intentions with Susan. According to Stephens, the three Elders asked him what Nagriamel fought for. He answered: ‘We are fighting for our land, land is our mother. We like to say that we must fight [to] stand up for peace but who will sign the peace? You member[s of Nagriamel] are sending me out overseas fighting for the land and the material come back to work [I bring back?] but where is my witness?’¹¹⁰ The West Ambae people, he claimed, had never done anything for him. [‘What is wrong with you people? Where is our friendship?’. His search ended when ‘God chose out one girl who came out from Nduindui, her name was Susan’.¹¹¹

Stephens’ claim to the divine revelation in relation to Susan, came into play later when he claimed royal Tongan heritage and asserted the foundation of his own ‘Royal Family’ at Vanafo, followed shortly afterwards by the formation of the Royal Nagriamel Mother Church (see Chapter 4). Susan’s ‘marriage’ to Stephens so soon after Kokovi’s conviction suggested that indeed the events were causally linked; the marriage offered compelling evidence that Kokovi’s rage was indeed motivated by Susan’s betrothal to Jimmy Stephens.

Susan was pregnant

Situating Kokovi’s actions within an atmosphere of charged church politics provided the most compelling local explanation for the Nduindui Murders. In 1967 the first cadre of trained local ministers had graduated from the Churches of Christ Bible College at Banmatmat, South Pentecost. At about the same time, the indigenous leader of the Churches of Christ, Abel Bani, had baptised the principal leaders of Nagriamel, Jimmy Stephens and Tari Buluk, into the church (see Chapter 4). Bill Bulelam, a 1968 graduate from Banmatmat Bible College, claims a pivotal role in the expulsion of Jimmy Stephens from the church because of his polygyny, especially because Bulelam now depicts the Nduindui Murders as fundamental to the eventual decision by church

¹⁰⁹ Keith Woodward, taped personal letter, 15 Nov. 2002.

¹¹⁰ Stephens n.d. 86/31.

¹¹¹ Stephens n.d. 86/31.

leaders to take a stand against the implicit apostasy of Nagriamel supporters. Although not local to west Ambae, Bulelam had schooled at Londua between 1962-1965 and knew the staff and missionaries there well. On the night of the murders, he was aboard a vessel moored in Nduindui passage, bringing the school fees of Pentecost children to Londua. In the court records, Kokovi names the *M.V. Konanda* as the ship moored at Nduindui Passage on the night of 18 April 1968.¹¹² Bulelam cannot remember which ship it was. In Bulelam's recollection, Nduindui was pitch black while the 'District Agent' and his men searched for Kokovi. Whether Bulelam's erroneous memory about who was undertaking the manhunt – it was the Commandant of Police, not the District Agent – suggests a general uncertainty about which colonial officers had responsibility for such tasks is debatable. (He might just have been wrong). Yet he was explicit about what motivated Joseph Paul Kokovi to his murderous rage: '*Paul hemi blokem Susan be afta papa blong hem [Susan] hemi betrothem hem long Jimmy long 1968 samples. Charley Ngoli hemi akri se Susan hemi blocked blong Jimmy. So Paul hemi sutum tri men ia*'.¹¹³ [Paul had blocked Susan [was engaged to] but afterwards her father betrothed her to Jimmy Stephens in 1968, or thereabouts. Charley Ngoli agreed for Susan to be blocked by Jimmy so Paul killed those three men.]

Like most stories about the Nduindui Murders, Bulelam's account of events shares certain characteristics with the account contained in the court transcripts – for example, Bulelam suggests that Kokovi was motivated to murder by his extreme jealousy. But what differentiates his account is its framing in political terms. Bulelam renders Ngoli's betrothal of Susan to Stephens as a strategy of alliance building. Susan's agency, exerted in the court transcripts through her infidelity, is in Bulelam's account subverted to political ends. In effect, Susan is rendered as an object used to broker an alliance with Jimmy Stephens.

In most oral narratives about the murders, Kokovi's position as a teacher in the Churches of Christ is foregrounded. According to Bulelam, Kokovi was one of the best teachers in the Churches of Christ, evidenced by the fact that he had attended teacher training at Kawenu Teachers College in Port Vila. Moreover, because Kokovi was a teacher holding a relatively high position within the Churches of Christ's school, Bulelam characterised him as a good Christian, in contrast to the reports of Kokovi's

¹¹² Transcript, Native Court (Northern District), 9 Jul. 1968, 3. NHBS 6/2/8a. Carton IV (Northern District). NAV.

¹¹³ Ps. Bill Bulelam, Churches of Christ minister, Pastor Sarabetu Church of Christ, former missionary to Papua New Guinea. Interview with the author, Bislama. 4 May 2001, Sarabetu, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.

drunkenness and lechery with Reenie as recounted in the Native Court transcripts. Thus, by emphasising the salience of Susan's betrothal to Jimmy Stephens, Kokovi's compulsion to murder is subsumed within the broader political atmosphere. Indeed, to strengthen this case, narrators often shift the magnitude of Susan's relationship with Jimmy Stephens for emphasis. For example, one west Ambae man told me that the murders were committed when Kokovi 'discovered that Susan carried Jimmy's child'. No mention is made in the court transcripts about whether Susan was indeed pregnant, although this has become one of the major axes upon which local oral narratives about the murders turn. Indeed, Susan's pregnancy to Jimmy Stephens forms the kernel of Bill Bule's story about expelling Jimmy Stephens from the Churches of Christ. In his recollection, he expelled Jimmy Stephens from the Churches of Christ in 1968 for his polygamous marriage to Susan, prompted by the murders.¹¹⁴ The onus of responsibility is shifted to Jimmy: the entire affair is thus symbolic of the distancing by the Churches of Christ's leadership of Nagriamel. Taken in this light, the murders are constructed as nascent acts of political and religious violence, undertaken on behalf of church principles, albeit not in line with church practices. For Bill Bulelam, then, because Jimmy Stephens was the arguable cause of Kokovi's rage *and* a practitioner of polygyny, the murders provided the pretext for removing a troublesome, albeit prominent, convert to the Churches of Christ, who appeared to most conventional church adherents to be a pagan backslider.

His woman, Susan, should have married him

Janet Bule was also in west Ambae on the night of the murders, training as a nurse at Nduindui hospital under Dr David Coulter. Foremost in her memories of 19 April 1968 were the fears that she and her colleagues felt, having a detachment of police 'camped outside their door'. The presence of armed police underscored Janet Bule's sense of danger, although she did not distinguish between her fear of the police or of the still-armed Kokovi. Janet Bule collapsed Kokovi's political and personal motivations: 'They [Susan and Joseph] were already engaged but afterwards she went and stayed with Jimmy Stephens. Paul heard that Susan too would go and live with Jimmy. He got cross and shot three men one night'.¹¹⁵ She remembers that Kokovi was a good man, not 'at all a strong head'. Yet he had killed three men. Bule re-emphasised Kokovi's qualities when she gave an account of his arrest and transport to the waiting British Residency ship, *Mangaru*. In her recollection, he stood up and waved to the amassed

¹¹⁴ Bill Bulelam, 4 May 2001.

¹¹⁵ Janet Bule, 14 Aug. 2002.

crowd before he was driven to the Nduindui anchorage: 'it was like he was leaving on holiday'.¹¹⁶

For Janet Bule, the Nduindui Murders marked the beginning of resistance to Nagriamel leadership by the Churches of Christ leaders, in particular her husband, Bill Bulelam. Bule's testimony is unique because it she was the only woman to speak to me explicitly about the Nduindui Murders. Like all oral personal accounts, her recollections of the murders brought a sense of tension and lived experience to stories about the murders. More importantly, they evoked for her the ramifications of Nagriamel's influence for Susan in particular and women in general.

JB: Susan hemi gat bel.

MM: Pikinini blong hu ia?

JB: Blong Jimmy Stephens ia. OK. Taem ia i stap long Vanafo wetem Jimmy nao. [Susan hemi] Namba tu waef blong Jimmy. Bill hemi go hemi go luk hem from ol Christian i stap tokabaot. Taem we Bill i kasem ples ia i go luk hem hemi askem hem. Be hemi se i no tru be woman i gat bel finis. Toktok blong hem i difren lelebet we Susan i gat bel blong hem i no long wan man hemi olsem Mary bin i gat long Jesus. Allez taem we pikinini i bon oli colem hem 'Jesus'. Wan boe colem nem blong hem Jesus – allez few days nomo pikinini i jas ded. Pikinini i ded nomo. So Bill hemi disaplenem hem se save mipela stap tekem communion evri Sandei hemi telem long hem Sandei be yu stap festaem from problem we i stap. Be afta hemi kros. Jimmy hemi kros nao. Hemi telem se taem man ia i kam askem kakae long hem bae yuyu no givim. Stap kros nao. Kamaot nao i go nomo narawan. Hemi tekem yu save olfala Aron Toa long Lovanualikotou gel blong hem i namba tri waef long Jimmy Stephens. Fulap man Church of Christ!

JB: Susan was pregnant.

MM: Whose child was it?

*JB: It belonged to Jimmy, here. OK. At this time she stayed in Vanafo with Jimmy now. [She was] number two wife for Jimmy. Bill went to see her because all the Christians were talking about her [pregnancy]. At the time when Bill arrived at the place here I went to see her, ask her [what was going on]. She said it was not true but said she was pregnant already [before she arrived in Vanafo]. Her talk was different [She told us differently] about how she got pregnant. [She said] it was not by a man but like Mary was [when] she had Jesus. Allez, when the child was born they called him Jesus, a boy named Jesus. Allez, a few days later the child was dead. It was just dead. So Bill, he disciplined Susan, [he] said she could not take communion. He said [you] know that we take communion every Sunday he told her Sunday but said she should [not come] for a while because of the problems [she] had. But afterwards [Jimmy] he was cross. Jimmy was cross now. He said that when this man [Bill] comes asking for food for himself *you* [speaker's emphasis] will not give it. He stayed cross now. It came out now that he [Jimmy] just goes and takes another one. He took – you know [that] old fellow Aron Toa from Lovanualikotou – his girl was [the] number three wife for Jimmy Stephens. [Nagriamel] was filled up with Churches of Christ people.*

Very little information about the role and status of women in Nagriamel is available. The majority of information collected here about the experiences of women in

¹¹⁶ Janet Bule, 14 Aug. 2002.

Nagriamel comes via missionary sources or from the testimony of Christian women like Janet Bule, which both emphasise that women were effectively disempowered in Nagriamel areas; in most oral histories collected from Churches of Christ people Nagriamel women are represented as passive instruments of Nagriamel. For example, Madeleine Kanegae, a leading church women's organiser in west Ambae, informed me that women whose husbands were involved with Nagriamel *bin stap nomo* [just lived].¹¹⁷ Thus, she also flagged the perception of Nagriamel women as passive agents. For Churches of Christ women, women in Nagriamel were detached from the empowerment of organisations such the Christian Women's Fellowship and, like Nagriamel men, are considered to have spiritually regressed; they are archetypal 'backsliders', regressing ignorantly regressing towards apostasy and possibly paganism. Janet Bule's recollections of the Nduindui Murders therefore served as an entrée to stories about her pity for Nagriamel women:

*Ol woman we Jimmy i tekem olsem oli servem hem nomo olsem king or bigman or samting. Mebbe mifala i luk [hem i] olsem King Solomon we i gat ol concubines i gat ol wives olsem lukluk generally mifala i luk olsem. Plande oli wokabaot. Ol pikinini i folem hem. Mifala i sori from oli anda control. Even though oli no laekem oli mas go because papa blong olgeta wanwan i telem se mas go. Plande oli ronwe. Oli go stap longwe oli ronwe. Tufala ia blong Narua oli ronwe. Wan we i ronwe i ronwe kam long ples ia. Stap yet. Narawan i go bak long Narua. Wan blong mifala Bessie i stap yet hemi go wael olgeta hemi no attendem eni jioj.*¹¹⁸

All the women whom Jimmy took, they just served him [Jimmy] like a king or a big man or something. Maybe we saw him like King Solomon or something who had all [those] concubines. Many of them walked about [after him]. All the children followed him. We were very sorry for them, because they were under his control. Even though they did not like it they had to go, because each of their fathers told them they must go. Plenty ran away. They went and lived there and then ran away. Two from Narua [central Pentecost] ran away. One ran away and came and lived here [in Vila]. She still lives here. The other went back to Narua. One of us [Central Pentecost Churches of Christ], Bessie still lives here. She went [completely] wild. She does not attend any church.

By prefacing her statements about 'Bessie' with the biblical reference to Stephens as King Solomon, Bule highlighted the ongoing importance and relevance of Christian symbols to explain the events surrounding the murders. The story of King Solomon offered her some analogies to draw upon to describe the events surrounding the Nduindui Murders, especially because as narrated in the Bible, King Solomon's downfall was brought about by polygyny (Deuteronomy 17:14-17). Bule was no doubt aware of the salutary warning offered by God to the Israelites against marrying outsiders: 'You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn

¹¹⁷ Madeleine Kanegae, Christian Women's Fellowship leader, Churches of Christ deacon. Interview with the author, Bislama. 10 Feb. 2000. Tape recording, notes.

¹¹⁸ Janet Bule, 14 Aug. 2002.

away your hearts after their gods (Kings 11:1-8)'. In this instance, however, the dynamic was inverted. As told by Janet Bule, it was not Jimmy whose heart was turned from Christianity by idolatrous wives but the reverse.

Janet Bule's account of the Nduindui Murders and the virtual indenture of women to satiate Jimmy's intensifying polygyny is telling for the values she ascribed to monogamous Christian marriage. Embedded in Bule's account is a parable of proper Christian practices. She emphasised that women often had little choice but to become one of Jimmy's secretaries despite being unhappy about it. Furthermore, her reflections on Jimmy Stephens' secretaries offers key insights to her construction of agency which overtly supports the woman Bessie's right to run away from Stephens while qualifying it by saying that she did not return to the church but went completely wild. The picture Bule presents of Kokovi is that of a man whose murder of three men was completely out of character. Depicted in this way, Kokovi's apparent ingenuousness on arrest – he waved goodbye to the crowd that had amassed – contrasts with the callousness of the murders but as a rhetorical device it emphasised his amiability. Such a nice man would presumably not kill three men without justification. Because the murdered men are depicted as Nagriamel members, the movement which would ultimately bring so much damage to the Churches of Christ, the personal cost to Kokovi of losing his sweetheart has become embedded in an emergent Churches of Christ history. To make them locally and historically credible, the murders have been made exemplars of the conflict between the orthodox Churches of Christ embodied in the cadre of trained clergy and Nagriamel, embodied in Jimmy Stephens. Kokovi was implicitly, then, following Christian principles. According to Janet Bule, Kokovi's murderous rampage could have been averted by a simple act by Susan: 'His woman Susan should have married him'.¹¹⁹ That is Susan should have shown personal agency by opposing her fathers (classificatory and natal).

Infinite possibility in oral history

Taking personal testimony seriously requires the oral historian to acknowledge that the differences in interpretation of events are granted appropriate importance, even if the relative emphasis placed on motifs may morph between successive renditions of events between interlocutors or over time. Because oral accounts are so personalised, they provide explicit demonstrations of how people conceptualise history and place themselves within it, *en route* to making sense of what happened and why. Thus, even when memories are called forth that are erroneous, truncated, apparently peculiar or

¹¹⁹ Janet Bule, 14 Aug. 2002.

clearly fabricated, they are ultimately useful historically because they uncover the meanings of the past for the people who live with their consequences.¹²⁰ Similarly, they uncover infinite possibilities in people's minds for actions and outcomes; for the past, as it should have been. They show us how individuals author and authorise 'history'.

In Willie Toka's recollection, the Nduindui Murders were a pivotal moment in west Ambae local politics and threatened the leadership of Abel Bani. Toka recalled to me a meeting at which all the major denominations were represented and at which the future direction of the Churches of Christ was to be chosen:

Long taem ia, taem long politik blong mifala. Olfala Abel hemi involved insaed (Nagriamel) bambae mas colem wan bikfala miting. At that meeting se Abel Bani hemi involv tumas insaed be sam taem tu bambae Abel i step daon long jiaman i givim long wan narafala man. i gat ol bikman olsem Jo Lulu hemi stap, Bihu hemi stap, Onneyn hemi stap, bikman long Nagriamel i stap. Shem Banga hemi stap papa long gel we Jimmy Stephen hemi tekem, Charley Ngoli hem tu i stap. Mi no save nemem olgeta evriwan i stap. Miting hemi stat i go hed oli tok gogogo, askem huia givim olgeta woman long West Ambae i go long Jimmy Stephen. i no gat one ansa kasem Gideon Oni hemi tok strong tumas long lanwis blong mifala hemi telem olgeta taem hemi [Jimmy] kam las taem kasem yu osusu wis long Bislama i minim se kasem taem we hemi kamtru kok blong yufala everiwan i slak. Sam taem tumi bon long taem finis—mi save toktok—hat blong mi faerap mi girap blong ansarem kok blong hu i slak? Mi nao mi wantem sutum Jimmy Stephen be i gat tufala olfala i stap...Lulu wetem Bihu...oli stopem mi. So taem olfala Abel i harem toktok blong mi olsem i girap I admit hemi telem se mi nao mi givim rael blong Jimmy Stephen blong tekem ol woman. Mi girap ansa long Abel longfala waet kaliko long ples ia hu i sitsit long hem. Mi comperem wok long jioj wetem kaliko. Waet kaliko i stap, hu bae i klinim? Abel i girap i wok awei. Miting hemi inaf hemi [Abel] i go long vilej blong hem Nanako sendem wan boe i kambak kam telem mi se go tekem ples blong Abel. Olsem we mi telem mi Willie Vutigele. Mi sendem i gobak se no. Mi telem se yu mekem wok blong yu. Yu bae finisim wok blong yu.¹²¹

At this time of *politik* of ours, old Abel was involved in the movement (Nagriamel), it was necessary to call a big meeting. At that meeting it was suggested that Abel was involved too much with Nagriamel but at the same time too some men suggested that he step down as chairman of the council and give it to another man. All the big men came, Bihu [from Vilakalaka] was there, all the local big men from Nagriamel were there. Shem Banga was there – the father of the girl that Jimmy Stephens took. Charley Ngoli was there too. I cannot name all the people there. The meeting began. It was going ahead. They spoke on and on, asking 'who amongst us gave this young girl, for these young women of west Ambae to go to Vanafo?' There was no answer until Gideon Oni spoke very strongly in our language. He said: when Jimmy came through last time to get you, you were *osusu*, which in our language means that your cock is slack. At the same time too I had been born for a long time [I was old enough] – I could speak out –

¹²⁰ cf. David Paul Nord, "The Uses of Memory: An Introduction", *Journal of American History*, 85, no. 2 (1998), 410.

¹²¹ Willie Toka, 12 Aug. 2002.

my heart fired up. I got up to answer. I shouted, 'whose cock was slack?' I was so angry I wanted to shoot Jimmy Stephens myself then and there but two of the old men – Lulu with Bihu – they stopped me. So when old Abel heard my talk he got up. 'I admit,' he said, 'it was me who gave the right to Jimmy Stephens to take these women'. I got up to answer him. I grabbed one of the white sheets from the church. 'This long white sheet, who has shitted on it?' I compared the work of the church to this sheet. Do you understand me? I told them all: 'The sheet is dirty. The dirty sheet is here, with us now! Who will clean it now?' Abel got up to walk away. The meeting was over. Abel went to his village, Nanako, and he sent back a boy who came to tell me to take his [Abel's] place. As I told you, I am Willie Vutigele. I sent back word saying no. I did not make this [trouble]. Finish your work, I told him. Finish what you have started.

Willie Toka's reflections on the Nduindui Murders are striking for several reasons. The murders were emblematic for him, as for most people who remember them, of the forces that Nagriamel unleashed, often by proxy, on the Churches of Christ. Toka analogised the church as 'the white sheet' [*longfala waet kaliko*] that had been shitted on. He established Gideon Oni as a voice accusing Abel Bani of impotence (*osusu*) and who asked why no one stood up to Jimmy Stephens when last he came, no-one, that is, except in this account for Willie Toka. For Toka, the figurative despoliation of the Churches of Christ, marked by his reference to the white sheet from the church was the result of Abel Bani's leadership.

As I have argued, the principal arbiter of secular affairs for Churches of Christ people in Nduindui was the church council. Toka's inclusion of Bihu and Lulu at the meeting was significant for the fact that neither was a Churches of Christ worshipper. Bihu from Vilakalaka was a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church; Lulu the leader of the Apostolic denomination from Walaha. Both men were characterised for their staunch opposition to both customary practices and Nagriamel and therefore provided foils to Abel Bani's ambiguous position as the leader of the Churches of Christ *and* a supporter of Nagriamel. Possibly Toka described a meeting of the Aoba Local Council, accounting for Bihu and Lulu's presence. I was told no other stories about this particular meeting.

Toka foregrounded his own importance to local politics by claiming that he was a contender for the chairmanship of the church council based on being a descendent of Willie Vutigele, his maternal grandfather and the originator of Churches of Christ in west Ambae (see Chapter 2). In fact, he claimed he *was* Willie Vutigele. Clearly, Toka claimed for himself many of the qualities that made Vutigele such a potent leader. Yet he refused to take the leadership of the Churches of Christ, thereby exonerating himself from what happened to the Churches of Christ over the next decade. As I have argued, the effect of Nagriamel on the Churches of Christ was profound. Willie Toka's account of the after effects of the Nduindui Murders has become a parable of the fall of Abel Bani from the leadership of the Churches of Christ. He ascribes fault for the social division symbolised by the murders – *politik* – to him.

Conclusions

Given the great variation between justifications for the murders between and within the genres of local, oral narratives and written, forensic, colonial ones, we can demarcate certain contending hierarchies of credibility between accounts. The contrast in emphases between colonial archives and oral histories is clearly laid out in the comparison between categories of credible explanations for the Nduindui Murders. When matched against one another, the record of events documented in the colonial record and oral accounts can contribute to reconstructing the ethnographic past and the historical past: How do the *dramatis personae* in these narratives relate to one another? Who did what to whom? What remain contested between the court records and local oral accounts are the meanings and causes of the Nduindui Murders, the questions of why. Certain elements or 'facts' of the Nduindui Murders are verified by all accounts: over the evening of 19 April 1968 local Churches of Christ teacher Joseph Paul Kokovi killed three men, in anguish over the loss of his 'sweetheart', Susan. Moreover, the effects of the murders also often appear ambiguous. The sentence handed down by the Court of the Northern District, queried but ultimately validated by the Joint Court, was vague. In none of the oral histories that I collected were the effects of the Nduindui Murders on Jimmy Stephens, Susan, Nagriamel or the Churches of Christ explored. Largely, it seems, this was because the stories were recounted from particular present circumstances and the narrators had particular agendas at heart.

In the absence of conclusive explanations for the Nduindui Murders, the Native Advocate *ad hoc*, Harry Wilshire-Webb defaulted to 'irresistible force' and posited that Kokovi's mental state, alcohol consumption and jealousy offered the most credible explanations for the murders. The pressing issue reflected in the court transcripts was Kokovi's suspicion of Susan's infidelity with several men, including Charley Ngoli. Despite being inconclusive, the transcripts of the Native Court of the Northern District are utterly devoid of references to Nagriamel and to Jimmy Stephens. Presumably, had the murders been prompted by the growing relationship between west Ambae's Churches of Christ people and Nagriamel, some trace of it would have been sedimented in the colonial archives. While the murders were later collapsed by ni-Vanuatu into a single historicity to establish credible explanations for them, at the time no credible connection between the murders and Nagriamel was apparent nor was one conveyed to the Native Court.

What emerges from oral accounts of the Nduindui Murders are the grounds used by Churches of Christ leaders such as Bill Bulelam to justify the distancing of Nagriamel by the Churches of Christ's younger leaders and church conference. To counter the appeal of Nagriamel, credible justifications had to be found. Little re-imagination of the

Nduindui Murders needed to be made to allow for this transition of historical memory to take place. Relations between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ existed at the time. Local histories about the Nduindui Murders that suggest Kokovi knowingly killed three Nagriamel supporters are vague. What emerge are clear depictions of who was involved: Charley Ngoli, Shem Banga Roroa were known Nagriamel members by the 1970s but we have no indications about their affiliations at the time the murders took place. This does not detract from the ideological significance of the events. The shift in emphasis of importance since the Nduindui Murders were committed and between narrative perspectives in all likelihood suggests that novel causes and effects have been mapped on to the events to grant them credibility retrospectively. The homicides makes more sense for ni-Vanuatu Churches of Christ people as a starting point for the interplay between the Nagriamel Movement and the Churches of Christ and its perceived effects. Most people who recounted the Nduindui Murders used their memories in pragmatic ways to throw light on certain aspects of the relationship between the Churches of Christ and Nagriamel. Bill Bulelam's later expulsion of Jimmy Stephens fuelled his recollection of the events. The personal tragedy of Paul Kokovi's case, in turn, bolstered the case against Nagriamel, which was grounded in general concepts of the incompatibility of Nagriamel's tenets with the Churches of Christ's, especially regarding polygyny. Read in this light, the Nduindui Murders were symbolic of the overall rejection of Nagriamel by the church's leaders. Joseph Paul Kokovi's personal heartbreak was collapsed into the Churches of Christ's – and Christianity's, in general – interdiction of polygyny. The irony of all these oral histories is the notable absence of references to the murdered men. No stories were told to me about them; they have been figuratively effaced from history and are mentioned only as the victims of Kokovi's wrath.

For Bulelam, the events were a turning point in relations between the Churches of Christ in west Ambae and Nagriamel. Bill Bulelam's emphasis on Kokovi's position as an excellent teacher within the Churches of Christ's educational institutions and a good Christian contrasts the contemporary colonial reports of his drunkenness and lechery with Reenie. I suggest that this is a device to emphasise Kokovi's anger at Susan's betrothal to Jimmy Stephens and generally to Stephens' polygyny. Kokovi is symbolic of church practice and the church itself. The onus of responsibility is shifted to Charley Ngoli, who brokered the relationship and Jimmy Stephens for adopting polygyny: the entire affair is thus symbolic of the distancing by the church's leadership of Jimmy Stephens and *ipso facto* Nagriamel, which they thought tended towards heathenism. Similarly, Janet Bule cast the murders within the framework of the interplay between Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ. She also emphasised the positive aspects of Kokovi's personality: he was, in her words, not at all a 'strong head'. However, he *had*

killed three men. For Bule, Kokovi's justification for doing so was similarly grounded in his personal anguish and opposition to polygyny. Ironically, Janet Bule thus apports blame to Susan – she could presumably have averted the disasters by marrying Kokovi, rather than becoming one of Stephens' secretaries – and her father, Charley Ngoli – who told her she had to do it. Overall, the murders fitted into Bule's framework of the effects of Nagriamel on women. Thus, Nagriamel women were disempowered by their detachment from organisations such as the Christian Women's Fellowship and simply followed Jimmy Stephens around like King Solomon's concubines. Willie Toka also framed the Nduindui Murders as essentially caused by the interplay of Nagriamel and the Churches of Christ. For him, however, they represented a pivotal moment in west Ambae history, in which the leadership of Abel Bani was challenged. Thus, the story had merged with an underlying theme in many Churches of Christ histories: Abel Bani was responsible for the Churches of Christ involvement with Nagriamel. For Toka, then, the murders represented the possibility that he might have become the leader of the Churches of Christ but he refused because Abel Bani's support for Nagriamel had indirectly resulted in the murders.

What unifies these interpretations of West Ambae's recent political history is that each of the people I interviewed foregrounded the political and social aspects of involvement with Nagriamel as the causative factors for the murders and cast Joseph Paul Kokovi as an ambiguous hero (although clearly no-one condoned what he had done) who in certain ways personified the broader political conflicts facing the Churches of Christ. The Nduindui Murders were retrospectively slotted into the cantilevers of local oral narratives about political conflict, about *politik*. In short, *politik* is divisive and destructive; because they embodied these exact qualities, the Nduindui Murders came to symbolise *politik* and were thus collapsed into the same historicity.

CONCLUSIONS

In the conclusion, I draw together my discussions of oral historical methodology and explore what conclusions my interlocutors have made about the nature of *politik*. Drawing on the substantive chapters of this thesis, I suggest that despite the individuated nature of personal testimonies, we can demarcate political economies of knowledge about the nature of *politik* as recounted by my interlocutors. Beginning with a summary of the methodological and epistemological considerations of my oral historical fieldwork, I discuss the ways my interlocutors structured their oral histories to account for the contemporary conceptions of *politik*. First, in illustrating how ideas about *politik* are used to comment on the parlous nature of national sovereignty for Churches of Christ worshippers, I suggest that church leaders asserted an aggrieved history in which the Churches of Christ are seen to be disadvantaged by democracy. Second, I suggest that *politik* connotes conflict between ni-Vanuatu, specifically, in the case of the Churches of Christ, in contestations over the resurgence of *kastom* deriving from the influence of Nagriamel and the perceived effects this has had on the defection of certain communities to rival denominations. Conflicts deriving from *politik*, moreover, are seen to disadvantage ni-Vanuatu vis-à-vis foreigners and are thought possibly to augur warfare in Vanuatu. Lastly, I address the conception that embedded in local conceptions of *politik* is the manifestation of hierarchies between ni-Vanuatu, by situating conceptions of *politik* alongside conceptions of *kastom* and *skul*.

Methodological and epistemological considerations

Before I begin my discussions of contemporary local conceptions of *politik* I shall briefly summarise my discussion of the epistemological and methodological considerations of using oral histories. Oral histories about *politik* were often laden with appraisals of independence, democracy and the state (among other topics) and for this reason they represented a vital store of information about past political actions; they showed alternate ways of viewing the past. While these oral histories were not always consistent in point of fact or interpretation, certain political economies of historical knowledge were visible in which Churches of Christ people appeared to have formulated coherent ideas about the nature and significance of past political events. Local historicities revolved around nodes of experience, sites, events or relationships dissimilar to those represented by, for example, national elites or the authors of colonial records. These narratives acted as forceful ideological weapons for church leaders, for example, but they were also clearly influenced by localised disputes. As I

suggested in chapter 1, representations of singular group history often contained the potential to mask localised hegemonies. The past is always contested.

As I argued in Chapter 1, while the narrative forms of eyewitness accounts about *politik* are, like all oral narratives, bounded by the conventions of language, personal testimonies are inherently more individuated. In the ordering, structuring, omitting and explaining of memories pivotal to people's reconstructions of the past, discrepancies between their accounts and those recounted by other people appeared as to what actually happened and why. Taking seriously several personal accounts of the recent past – personal constructions of 'history' – I have consciously foregrounded the differences between people's recollections. Recognising the heterogeneity of people's memories emphasised the variety of means by which people authored and authorised accounts of the past. In exploring the interplay between personal and collective memory, I have not presupposed assertions of a single, universal truth, seeking rather to situate all accounts of the past in historical and ethnographic context.

In chapters 5 and 6, I explored these issues through comparisons of genres of historical information, giving special attention to how and why events or relationships granted significance in national 'public histories' or in the accounts of colonial officers were rendered irrelevant in local oral histories, and vice versa. Slippages occurred in the memories of my interlocutors, often influenced by personal experiences and possibly by expectations of what would constitute a 'good story'. When events fell within the ambit of local expectations of importance or were seen to cause or inflect other significant events and relationships they were retrospectively fitted into inclusive narrative frameworks. Events that were seemingly inexplicable when they transpired were represented in oral histories as logical components in overarching narratives. Local memories of the Santo Rebellion, for example, showed how the emphasis on foreign intervention documented in public histories was subordinated in local oral histories; a different kind of rebellion was represented. Similarly, with the advantage of retrospection, my interlocutors perceived broad archetypes in their histories. Events such as the Nduindui Murders made more sense as part of an overarching sequence of events, which incorporated the effects of decolonisation and the contending political and social perspectives in Churches of Christ communities deriving from the influence of Nagriamel, than did the events as represented at the time to colonial officers.

With these qualifications in mind, I turn now to discuss what *politik* connotes for the people who narrated their experiences to me.

Taem bifo I kam taem nao

Put simply, in the processes of reordering past events for narration, they were made useable. Oral histories about *politik* explained the transition from 'then' to 'now' (*taem bifo I kam taem nao*). The divisions that emerged within the Churches of Christ during the *taem blong politik* retain their salience in contemporary political settings. For example, one central Pentecost man characterised the trajectory between the events of the *taem blong politik* and the present: 'Nagriamel men are now UMP (Union of Moderate Parties) *politik* men. Vanua'aku they stay the same. Only thoughts of the past remain but the division is still here'. In fact, since independence the number of political parties vying for support among Churches of Christ worshippers has proliferated. Politically, the Churches of Christ are now divided between supporters of the Vanua'aku Pati (VP) (predominantly in Maewo and Ambae), the Union of Moderate Parties (UMP) (predominantly Ambae and Santo) and, more recently, the National United Party (NUP) (Ambae, Maewo and Pentecost). Indeed, adherence to NUP, formed by Father Walter Lini in 1991, has allowed Churches of Christ worshippers to attain high office within the state. Namely, James Bule from east Ambae became deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Trade in the administration of Barak Sope in 1999-2001. Paul Ren Tari from Maewo became the Speaker of the Parliament of Vanuatu during the same period. In short, oral histories about *politik* accounted for the corrosion of church unity by contending, objectively political, ideologies.

Yet nostalgia for the lost innocence of the Churches of Christ is a prevalent theme in oral histories about *politik*. As I argued in Chapter 1, when ni-Vanuatu reminisce about the ascendancy of the Churches of Christ, they suggest the existence of an earlier, exquisite moment – halcyon days – in which possibilities were infinite and in which local Christians had the bright future of salvation to look forward to.¹ In this respect, positive accounts of the mission past amount to implicit critiques of the modern state of Vanuatu. In certain contexts, therefore, my interlocutors defined *politik* simply as the way of government (*rod blong gavman*) although they often envisaged government (*gavman*) in generally negative terms. That is, *politik* described the way that government is constituted and the way that power is maintained under conditions of democratic elections, irrespective of whether secular government (*gavman*) was considered the most appropriate form of governance. References to the virtue of church leadership are underpinned by the practical recognition that independence has

¹ cf. Jeffrey Clark, "Imagining the State", in *Narratives of Nation in the South Pacific, Studies in Anthropology and History*, edited by Ton Otto and Nicholas Thomas, 65-90. (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 1997), 79.

brought few benefits to them. Thus, oral histories about the effects of *politik* reflect the gaining of knowledge by experience; they reflect the transition from optimistic naivety under the leadership of the church to cynicism about the present. Under these conditions, *politik* also reflects an ongoing anxiety about a particular form of modernity. The damage done to the Churches of Christ because of *politik* is seen to undermine the value of national sovereignty. The ignominy of the impartial state for the Churches of Christ is exemplified in the belief that after independence their hospitals were downgraded and hospital equipment, funded largely through local programs (see Chapter 2), was transported to hospitals operated by other churches. Connotations of shared identity and group ownership of institutions related more strongly to the foundation narratives of the Churches of Christ and shared ownership of mission schools and hospitals than to identification with, for example, the national narrative of indigenous struggle against Anglo-French colonial control or shared citizenship of Vanuatu. Negative reflections on independence are constructed to contrast the church's history against the national narrative – and those of contending denominations – as history's arguable losers. The institutions around which church identity was formulated, and which local Christians could claim as their own, were depleted.

That Churches of Christ people represent the majority denominations as having benefited more from independence reflects an emergent 'tragic' narrative, which depicts the waning influence of the Churches of Christ. Despite disproportionately high representation in national parliament and a number of high-profile parishioners, the Churches of Christ is still considered disadvantaged by many of their adherents. Partly, this is an extension of the self-definition of the Churches of Christ as the church of the poor. Yet Churches of Christ people claimed that their church has been marginalised from the state and is therefore now unable to defend itself from the inroads into nominal Churches of Christ communities made by newer conservative evangelical sects and Pentecostal Christian denominations. Indeed, the tragedy of this situation is more pronounced because the Churches of Christ are venerated as one of Vanuatu's mother churches, one of the denominations that carried 'the light' of the Gospel to Vanuatu. But their inclusion in this select group alongside the Presbyterian Church, the Melanesian Mission, Catholics, and less popularly, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, has done little to compensate for the handicaps of its relative small size. William Miles conjured complex webs of religious rivalries between the established Presbyterian, Catholic and Anglican churches but he suggested an implicit alliance among these churches in opposition to the newer sects. Indeed, mainstream churches have attempted to prevent the establishment of newer churches in Vanuatu, because 'there

are too many religious sects in this country'.² Yet democracy has offered few tangible benefits for the Churches of Christ, despite its status as a 'mother church'.

During a visit to central Pentecost by the Head of State, President John Benneth Bani in 1999, Silas Buli, the Principal of Ranwadi Senior Secondary School, a Churches of Christ run school, recounted: 'It is as if we [the people of the Churches of Christ] are victimised by the processes of government and gain no benefit at all from political will or democracy'.³ For many church leaders, their apparent marginalisation is part of the litany of religious and ecumenical corollaries of involvement in Nagriamel, and ultimately, the rebellion. More generally, many Churches of Christ people suggest that the defiance of the colonial state that characterised the leadership of Abel Bani, the church's pre-eminent evangelist and indigenous leader, ultimately contributed to the disadvantaging of the Churches of Christ. For example, Abel Bani's son, Amon Ngwele, suggested that Churches of Christ people must discard the mantle of absolute church autonomy in order to harness state institutions:

Church of Christ I mas gat wan polisi. Mifala I mas go insaed long politik blong defendem yumi yet agensem ol samting we I stap happen bifo mo tu blong defendem olgeta wok long church ia. Mifala mas defendem mifala yet agensem devil ia gavman.

The Churches of Christ must have a policy [about how it deals with political involvement]. We must go into politics so we can defend ourselves against what happened before and [defend] the works of the church. We must defend ourselves against this devil, the government.

But as the setting of Silas Buli's comments suggests, these sentiments represent important strategies for political mobilisation and are usually played out only in orthodox political arenas.

We fight

Despite the amount of criticism ni-Vanuatu launch against the system of democracy extant in Vanuatu, when talking about *politik*, it is their own actions – as much as the system in which they operate – that are being evaluated. Rather than foregrounding division between groups, local oral histories of *politik* place primary emphasis on internal discord within the church and within local communities.

Partly, the conflicts implied by *politik* among Churches of Christ worshippers relate to the upsurge in *kastom* (those practices believed to be traditional by local people)

² Miles, William F. *Bridging Mental Boundaries in a Postcolonial Microcosm, Identity and Development in Vanuatu*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 113.

³ Silas Buli, Principal's Speech - Visit Head of State, His Excellency John Bani, Ranwadi High School, Central Pentecost, 21 Sep. 1999, personal copy.

arising from Nagriamel's influence among the Churches of Christ. Given that Nagriamel members sought self-consciously to revive *kastom*, practices considered by conventional Churches of Christ worshippers to be tantamount to apostasy, and possibly satanic, were recuperated. Pagan religious rituals such as spirit worship, the use of traditional medicines and poisons (*lif meresin*) and *kastom* dancing and singing were reinvigorated, kava drinking became more explicit and Nagriamel's leader, Jimmy Stephens, adopted polygyny. Moreover, increasing reliance on *kastom* knowledge facilitated the rejection of western medicines in certain areas, long central to the Churches of Christ's secular activities. The vigorous interplay between conventional worship and resurgent *kastom* is now seen to be one of the major aspects of the conflict inherent in *politik*.

Few Churches of Christ worshippers denied that in the aftermath of the rebellion the Churches of Christ were so weakened that other denominations were able to convert disenchanted former worshippers. For example, one west Ambae woman suggested that the 'confusion' created by Nagriamel's great appeal among the Churches of Christ and its subsequent suppression by the newly independent state allowed for other sects to capitalise on the church's weakness. Former Nagriamel supporters cited the need to make a new beginning as their reason for defecting from the Churches of Christ. For example, Baetora people in south Maewo, evidently humiliated by their support for Nagriamel, citing community disorder and spiritual confusion, defected to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the mid-1980s, which had presumably not been affected so heavily by *politik*. In west Ambae, Vinangwangwe's Church of Christ worshippers defected to the neighbouring Assemblies of God in the mid-1980s. Indeed, one Vinangwangwe man suggested that their defection from the Churches of Christ was predicated on the perduring resentment for them in coastal communities where Christianity was first established in west Ambae, because they had not followed the conventional leaders of the Churches of Christ into the Vanua'aku Pati.⁴ He suggested that the leaders of the Churches of Christ blamed them (Nagriamel supporters) for the divisions that took place because of *politik*.

Samson Bue, elected as the Union of Moderate Parties MP for Ambae in 2002, yoked the damaging consequences of independence to his own belief in the political and cultural impediments to development for grassroots people. This factor, more than any other, compounded the divisive impact of *politik*: '*Mifala I faet. Nao ol frut blong leba*

⁴ Jacob Tanga, former Nagriamel member, Joseph Viralingalana, former Churches of Christ minister, Assemblies of God minister. Interview with the author, Bislama. Vinangwangwe, west Ambae. 1 Nov. 1999. Tape recording, notes.

blong mifala long saed long independens I go long han blong ol foreigners'.⁵ [We fight and now the fruits of our labours for independence are in foreigners' hands.] For many ni-Vanuatu, the ubiquitous Chinese merchants whose economic power is a salient reminder that most ni-Vanuatu do not 'eat the fruits of independence' [*kakae frut blong independens*] as they should, are the primary villains, but increasingly in urban settings 'Australian advisors' or other conceptualisations of exploitative expatriates are seen to sustain the subjugation of local people.

In certain circumstances, the divisions created by *politik* are seen to replicate the penultimate events in an unfolding Judaeo-Christian narrative. Pessimistic forecasts about the outcomes of *politik* have been harnessed to messianic or millennialist prophecies. For many – but not most – local people, the conflict implicit in *politik* may augur the final conflict, Armageddon. At a minimum, the divisions created by self-government are such that many local people fear that Vanuatu will eventually succumb to warfare, like its Melanesian neighbours:

we don't know the future. New Guinea has a fight...a war, Solomon [Islands] has a war, Fiji tries in the last few years. Vanuatu is heading for war, with itself or with some others. If we have a gun like the white man we will do it that way [use guns]...I can see that we are heading for war. *Politik* has made too much [many] strong heads.⁶

Kastom and politik: chiefs, statehood and the creation of new hierarchies

The most common theme in the oral histories I was told about *politik* is the creation of new hierarchies in the post-colonial state. I began this thesis with excerpts about the nature of *politik* made by two of my west Ambae interlocutors. In one, Cyrus Mue observed: '*Bifo ol man blong jioj oli talemaot mifala se yufala bae yu no folem tumas kastom bambae yufala yu karem nakaimas o wan poison. Oli telem se yuyu stap kilim one another. Yu stap poisonem yufala yet*'.⁷ [Before, all the churchmen told us that, 'you fellows 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'.] His comments depicted both the position of orthodox Churches of Christ worshippers who have historically sought to stamp out *kastom* and flagged his own satisfaction that *kastom* was increasingly respected in Churches of Christ areas.

⁵ Samson Bue, businessperson, MP (UMP) for Ambae, 1991-1995, 2002-. Interview with the author, Bislama. Limagke, west Ambae, 23 Feb. 2000. Tape recording, notes.

⁶ Nelson Bulinock, former elder, Churches of Christ. Interview with the author, English. 30 Aug. 1999. Tape recording, notes.

⁷ Chief Cyrus Mue, subversive holder of *kastom*, former Churches of Christ worshipper. Interview with the author, Bislama. 24 February 2000, Lombanga, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.

Indeed, he suggested further that Christianity and *kastom* were in effect complementary: '*Taem we mifala i go thru long independens hemi openem ae blong mifala. Mifala i luk se i gat sam kastom blong yumi we yumi liv tru long hem fasen blong wok long hem olsem rank blong hem we yumi stap kilim pig blong mekem pis long kastom hemi olsem Baebol*'. [When we went through independence our eyes were opened. We saw that we were able to live through our *kastom*. The way of working through *kastom* such as [taking] rank by killing pigs and [thereby] making peace was like the teachings of the Bible'.]

For Cyrus Mue (pictured, left), his attitudes to *kastom*, church and *politik* were



Photo.04 Cyrus Mue (Photo: the author)

historically and locally contingent as they were tied up with his involvement with Nagriamel and the rebellion. Mue had subversively maintained knowledge of traditional songs, dances and medicines against the prevailing doctrine of the Churches of Christ until the late 60s when, according to him, Nagriamel provided an avenue for practicing his traditional

knowledge.⁸ In 1980, Police Mobile Unit (PMU) officers had incarcerated Mue alongside his Nagriamel comrades. Irrespective of the challenges to state integrity that Nagriamel entailed, for local ni-Vanuatu separated from the elite agendas for secession, the suppression of the rebellion amounted to the suppression of discrepant views derived from their attempts to revive *kastom* and highlighted the inherent danger of political action. Thus, for Mue, *politik* contained implicit threats of violence based on the reaction of the Vanua'aku Pati government against Nagriamel's activities. Concisely, it carried the implication that discrepant views may be quashed forcibly.

Mue's statements served as an entrée to his ideas about the establishment of new hierarchies in Vanuatu after the rebellion. Mue marked out the boundaries between what he believed the missionary depiction of pre-contact society to be and the damage that ni-Vanuatu inflict upon each other in the course of politicking. His analogy drew

⁸ Cyrus Mue, 24 Feb. 2000.

on Christian symbolism as much as it reflected pre-contact or traditional sanctions against social disorder. But the implication was clear: just as ‘church men’ thought that the ultimate outcome of traditional practices would be the inescapable annihilation of local people, *politik* would also end in tragedy for ni-Vanuatu. To explicate his point, Mue situated his ideas about *politik* alongside *kastom* and Christianity (*skul*), symbolised by reference to the Bible:

*Mi bae comperem politik wetem kastom mo afta wetem baebol. Long kastom sipos wan man hemi wan jif hemi save sidaon long saed long tabu faea. Olgeta man I stap ananit long hem. Taem we hemi kilim wan pik hem bae serem ol kakae wetem ol man oli kakae. Hemi namele salala which means namele long ol grasrut. Gavman I no olsem. Ol bik lidas blong mifala taem oli sidaon long Nasara blong yumi long parlemen oli no trae had long ol grasrut. Baebol I telem se I no stret blong sidaon kakae wetem ol hae lidas. Jesus hemi telem ‘mi kam not for the rich but for the righteous people or the believers mi kam blong sevem ol sinners’. Hemi nao polisi long Jesus Kraes. Ol hae lidas blong yumi ol tok long hae level nomo be yumi ol grasrut oli no kakae wetem yumi.*⁹

I will compare *politik* with *kastom*, and afterwards with the bible. In *kastom* a man who is a big chief [may] sit by the taboo fire: all men are under him. When he kills a pig he shares the food with everyone, they eat. He is as the *namele salasala*, which means the namele of the grass-roots people. The government does not do this. [All] of our big leaders of government, when they sit around the table because Nasara [dancing ground] of ours at parliament there [in Port Vila] they do not make much effort for the grass roots. The bible says of religious leaders it is not straight to eat with [high political leaders]. Jesus said, ‘I come not for the righteous people or the believers; I come to save the sinners’. This is the policy of Jesus Christ. Our high leaders, they speak at the national level only, but we who live down here at the grass roots, they do not eat with us.

His comments framed the relationship of church, state and traditional leadership for grassroots people and his triad constituted a major discursive framework for discussions of *politik*, *kastom* and church, here marked by references to the ‘Bible’, but elsewhere analogised as *skul* (school/church) or described in straightforward fashion as Christianity. The *namele*, or black cycad, is a symbol of chiefly rank in Ambae and marks the site of a pig-killing ceremony, the principal *kastom* means by which peace-making ceremonies are consecrated. Thus, Mue analogised chiefs as *namele salasala* (in his phraseology, peace-maker of the grass roots) in contrast to opportunistic and antagonistic politicians. In this respect, the attitudes of former Nagriamel members and conventional Churches of Christ worshippers converge. Most people agree that the most visible progeny of independence are profligate and opportunistic politicians. Men who know *politik* are reputed for the intricate [*smolsmol*] ways in which they are able to propagate falsehoods. Indeed, the ability of politicians to seduce (*switem* – to sweet-talk) voters while simultaneously failing to deliver on their promises is widely commented on (although the basis of the continuing political support granted to the

⁹ Cyrus Mue, 24 Feb. 2000.

same politicians is rarely discussed). Thus, as one disillusioned Churches of Christ minister stated: 'We elected these people to free us and all they do is oppress us'.¹⁰ While these oral histories never reflected the sense that a civic consciousness had arisen in Vanuatu, they represented *politik* as something that was endemic in Vanuatu.¹¹

Mue's evocations of traditional authority tallied with the national pronouncements of chiefs about their role in state affairs. Exemplifying themselves as peacemakers is a major point of legitimacy for chiefs and is regularly reiterated by past and present presidents of the Malvatumauri (the National Council of Chiefs) in the course of criticisms mounted against politicians. Indeed, politicians are often accused of devaluing *kastom* by disrespecting chiefly-sanctioned peace-making ceremonies.¹² According to Willie Maldo Bongmatur, the foundation President of the Malvatumauri, 'Chiefs are the backbone of peace and unity in the islands [of] Vanuatu'.¹³ Mue's paraphrasing of Jesus ('I come not for the righteous people or the believers; I come to save the sinners') identified one of the guiding doctrines of the Churches of Christ as evinced in Matthew (9:13, 18:11) and Luke (15:1-10). The parallels between Mue's specific biblical references and *kastom* strengthened and emphasised the injustice of the new elite, constituted by politicians.

The apparent failure of key state agencies in Vanuatu has fostered a public debate about the role of chiefs in Vanuatu. In contemporary Vanuatu, chiefs play a significant, albeit ambiguous, role in national affairs. The Vanuatu National Council of Chiefs, now more commonly known as the Malvatumauri, was established in 1977. It was intended to form an institution capable of advising democratically elected governments on 'custom and tradition and ... make recommendations for the preservation and promotion of ni-Vanuatu culture and languages'.¹⁴ Throughout contemporary Vanuatu 'chiefs' constitute an informal tier of local governance, although how chiefs are defined is

¹⁰ Samuel Vusi, Principal, Banmatmat Bible College. Interview with the author, English. 16 Aug. 1999, Banmatmat Bible College, south Pentecost. Tape recording, notes.

¹¹ cf. Ton Otto and Nicholas Thomas, eds. *Narratives of Nation in the South Pacific*. Vol. 19, *Studies in Anthropology and History* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), 1.

¹² For example, in 1996 a Malakulan chief criticised politicians for their ongoing charade of respect for customary values. By performing pig-killing ceremonies designed to ensure peace between aggrieved parties and later breaking their agreements, "pigs, kava and mats were beginning to lose their value". Radio Vanuatu, 09 Nov. 1996.

¹³ Willie Maldo Bongmatur, President of the Malvatumauri, Radio Vanuatu, 7 Apr. 83.

¹⁴ Republic of Vanuatu, *Constitution*, s.30 (1).

contested on local, regional and national levels. Ironically, in Churches of Christ areas chiefs had been dispensed with as community leaders in favour of church councils, although these were also often dominated by strong, eloquent, and/or monetarily powerful characters analogous to big-men or chiefs, such as Abel Bani.

Mue's hierarchy of legitimacy (chief-church-politician) impressed upon conceptions of *politik* in two ways. In stark contrast to notions of Westminster democracy, the perceived virtue of chiefs whose leadership is founded on reciprocal relations and inclusiveness is juxtaposed against the assumed ascendancy of national politicians. The perduring irony of democratic politics for most ni-Vanuatu is that politicians are seen to benefit from their position as national leaders, while failing to reciprocate to the people who elected them to office. *Politik*, therefore, is emblematic of the newly established hierarchies in Vanuatu – there cannot be the assumptions about basic similarity between all ni-Vanuatu, as were possible during the colonial period. New forms of oppression involving the subjugation of ni-Vanuatu by other ni-Vanuatu have replaced the shared mantle of colonial oppression. In these ways, *politik* also connotes the apparent failure of traditions of reciprocity among local people.

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Throughout this thesis I have often skirted the issue of the veracity of one source over another. Instead, I have chosen to establish the relative political and social contexts from which accounts of the past were generated and in whose interests they were authored. If we acknowledge that history is merely 'an unstable pattern of remembered things redesigned and newly colored to suit the convenience of those who make use of it'<sup>15</sup> then oral histories about *politik* amount to useable pasts for their narrators. They help people explain the transitions required by colonisation and decolonisation and the tensions that arose between different local strategies conceived and enacted to deal with these forces, between cultural assertion and cultural interaction.<sup>16</sup>

In introducing this thesis, I situated my research within the broad academic discourses on nationhood and the state in Melanesia. My undertaking was to make some 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.<sup>17</sup> I have

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<sup>15</sup> Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian", *American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (1932), 235.

<sup>16</sup> Cooper, "Conflict and Connection.", 1544.

<sup>17</sup> Florencia E. Mallon, "The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History", *American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994), 1504.

sought to consider the ways in which these relationships are constructed and reflected on by local people, to explore the emergence of political economies of historical knowledge about modernity among the Churches of Christ in which 'ideology', 'state', 'citizenship', 'church', 'Christianity' and 'tradition' are discussed. If we are to meditate on the nature statehood and citizenship in Vanuatu, conceivably the best point of departure is the stories ni-Vanuatu tell about their effects and nature, through their dependent condition, *politik*.

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## APPENDIX: ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

### *Interviews conducted by the author, cited in text*

1. Alatoa, Hannington, Ombudsman, former police officer. Interview with the author, English. 1 Mar. 2000. Notes.
2. Arudonge, Joe (pseudonym), Maewo man. Interview with the author, Bislama/English. 10 Mar. 2000, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.
3. Bakeo, Tom, former First Secretary Ministry of Home Affairs, former Director of Local Government, former British District agent, Central District II. Interview with the author, English/Bislama. 25 Jan. 2000 & 15 Feb 2000, Port Vila. Tape recordings, notes
4. Bangga, Amos, UMP MP Ambae, 1991–1995. Interview with the author, Bislama. 27 Feb. 2000, Losaiwiru, east Ambae. Notes.
5. Bani, Barnabus, former Nagriamel member, voice of Radio Vanafo, Vanuatu Christian Fellowship elder and Simeon Tari, Chief of Nasawa, Vanuatu Christian Fellowship Member. Interview with the author, Bislama. 24 Mar. 2000, Nasawa, Maewo. Tape recording, notes.
6. Ben, Pastor August, former missionary (PNG), Banmatmat Bible College graduate (1967). Interview with the author, Bislama. 18 Jan. 2000, Teproma Village, Palekula. Tape recording, notes.
7. Bue, Samson, businessperson, MP (UMP) for Ambae, 1991–1995, 2002–. Interview with the author, Bislama. Limagke, west Ambae, 23 Feb. 2000. Tape recording, notes.
8. Bule, James, Churches of Christ elder, MP Ambae (NUP) Minister of Finance, Trade and Investment, Deputy Prime Minister (2000–2001), Interview with the author. 5 May 2001. Tape recording, notes.
9. Bule, Janet, former nurse, Nduindui Hospital. Interview with the author, Bislama. 14 Aug. 2002, Port Vila. Mini disc recording, notes.
10. Bulelam, Ps. Bill, Churches of Christ minister, Pastor Sarabetu Church of Christ, former missionary (PNG), Banmatmat Bible College graduate (1968). Interview with the author, Bislama. 4 May 2001, Sarabetu, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes
11. Buleron, Titus, rural agriculturalist. Interview with the author, Bislama. 17 Sept. 1999, Lebbenlegge, Central Pentecost.
12. Bulinock, Nelson, former elder, Churches of Christ. Interview with the author, English. 30 Aug. 1999. Tape recording, notes.
13. Fred, Samuel, Seventh-day Adventist. Interview with the author, Bislama. 20 Mar. 2000, Baetora SDA community, southern Maewo. Notes.
14. Kamali, Solomon, churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 22 Oct. 1999, Natalu Village, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.
15. Kanegae, Madeleine, Christian Women's Fellowship leader, Churches of

- Christ deacon. Interview with the author, Bislama. 10 Feb. 2000. Tape recording, notes.
16. Kona, Willie, Churches of Christ elder, former Nagriamel member. Interview with the author, Bislama. 18 Aug. 2002, Freswota, Port Vila. Mini disc recording, notes.
  17. Kwan, Abel Vora, former mission worker, Nduindui Hospital. Interview with the author, Bislama. 2 Nov. 1999, Nanako, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.
  18. Liu, John, President of the Vanuatu Regional Development and Training Colleges Association (VRDTCA), Banmatmat Bible College graduate (1967). Interview with the author, English. 17 Aug. 1999, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.
  19. Lus, Chief Matthias. Santo man. Interview with the author, Bislama. 5 Jan. 2000, Sara, north eastern Santo. Notes.
  20. Moli, Josias, UMP MP, Malo. Interview with author, Bislama. 15 January 2000, Luganville. Tape recording, notes.
  21. Molisa, Grace Mera, women's advocate, poet, public servant. Interview with the author, Bislama. 16 Dec. 2000, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.
  22. Mue, Cyrus, west Ambae man. Interview with the author, Bislama. 24 Feb. 2000, Lombanga, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.
  23. Natu, Aron, Churches of Christ elder, former Secretary Maewo Local Council. Interview with the author, 26 Mar. 2000. Beterara. Tape recording, notes.
  24. Ngwango, Ps. James, Churches of Christ minister, Banmatmat Bible College graduate (1967). Interview with the author, English/Bislama. 15 Oct. 1999, Amata, west Ambae. Tape recording, notes.
  25. Ngwele, Amon, Son of Abel Bani, west Ambae man. Interview with the author, Bislama. 20 Jan. 2000, Luganville. Tape recording, notes.
  26. Siramanu, Chief Mark Toa, chief of Baetora, Churches of Christ worshipper, ex-Nagriamel member. Interview with the author, Bislama. 26 Mar. 2000, Baetora, Maewo. Tape recording, notes.
  27. Solomon, Kathy, Churches of Christ worshipper, Women's Officer Vanuatu Rural Development and Training Colleges Association (VRDTCA). Interview with the author, English/Bislama. 15 Feb. 2000, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.
  28. Spooner, Franklin, west Ambae man former member, Special Branch. Interview with the author, Bislama. 25 Feb. 2000, Nanako. Tape recording, notes.
  29. Tabi, Frank, Churches of Christ deacon, elected chief of Waterfall. Interview with the author. 15 Sep 1999, Waterfall. Tape recording, notes.
  30. Tabi, Graham, Churches of Christ worshipper, medical professional. Interview with the author, Bislama. 11 Aug. 2002, Port Vila. Notes.
  31. Tabi, Pastor Jos. Interview with the author, Bislama. 16 Sep. 1999, Wujunmel. Tape recording, notes.
  32. Tabinock, Elder Eli, Churches of Christ elder, church historian.

- Interview with the author. 16 Sep. 1999, Wujunmel. Tape recording, notes.
33. Tanga, Jacob, west Ambae man, Joseph Viralingalana, former Churches of Christ minister, Assemblies of God minister. Interview with the author, Bislama. Vinangwangwe. 1 Nov. 1999. Tape recording, notes.
  34. Tari, Chief Marcel, chief, Luvonvili, east Ambae, Churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author. 26 Feb. 2000, Luvonvili, East Ambae.
  35. Tari, Paul Ren, former speaker of Parliament. Interview with the author, Bislama. 18 Aug. 2002, Port Vila. Mini Disc recording, notes.
  36. Tari, Peter, north Ambae man. Interview with the author, Bislama. 29 Feb. 2000, north Ambae. Tape recording, notes.
  37. Toka, Willie, grandson of Willie Vutigele, Churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author, Bislama. 12 Aug 2002, Sarabetu Church, Port Vila. Tape recording, notes.
  38. Tor, Charley, south Pentecost man. Interview with the author, Bislama. 28 Aug. 1999. Tape recording, notes.
  39. Tor, Peter, teacher, former Secretary, South Pentecost Local Council. Interview with the author, English/Bislama. 20 Sep. 1999, Baravet, central Pentecost. Tape recording noted, notes.
  40. Tungu, Thomas, north Ambae man. Interview with the author, Bislama. 1 Mar. 2000, Saraenmaevo, north Ambae. Tape recording, notes.
  41. Vira, Wilson, west Ambae man. Interview with the author, Bislama. 28 Aug. 2002, Sarabetu Church of Christ, Port Vila. Mini-disc recording, notes.
  42. Vusi, Ps. Samuel, Churches of Christ minister, Principal, Banmatmat Bible College, Banmatmat Bible College graduate (1967). Interview with the author, English/Bislama. 16 Aug. 1999 & 20 Aug. 1999, Banmatmat Bible College, south Pentecost. Tape Recording, notes.
  43. Vuti, Ps Alick, Churches of Christ minister, church oral historian, Banmatmat Bible College graduate (1967). Interview with the author. 27 Oct. 1999. Tape recording, notes.
  44. Tor, Charley, former assessor, VP commissar, Churches of Christ elder. Interview with the author. 28 Aug. 1999, Panlimsi, south Pentecost. Tape recording, notes.
  45. Wilson, David, Santo man. Interview with the author, Sara Wan, northeast Santo. 5 Jan. 2000, Sara, northeast Santo. Tape recording, notes.

### *Other interviews cited in text*

1. Jimmy Stephens, leader of Nagriamel. Interview with Kirk Huffman. N.d. Mini-disc copy of reel-to-reel recording. Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta audio archives, Port Vila, 86/31. I thank Steven Zagala for bringing this to my attention.

### *Churches of Christ Missionaries, Australia*

1. Baker, Alan, former missionary, Ranmawat, central Pentecost. Interview with the author, English. 29 Apr. 1999, Mobile Mission Maintenance, Whittlesea, Victoria. Tape recording, notes.
2. Edwards, Jack, former missionary, Ranwadi School, central Pentecost. Interview with the author. 26 Apr. 1999, Churches of Christ Theological College, Mulgrave, Victoria. Tape recording, notes.
3. Ludgater, Keith, former missionary, west Ambae (1961–1977). Interview with the author, English. 14 Apr. 1999. Preston, Victoria. Tape recording, notes.
4. McLean, Ron, former missionary Londua Training School, west Ambae, former-President, Overseas Mission Board. Interview with the author, English. 10 May 1999, OMB, Adelaide. Tape recording, notes.
5. Warne, Graham, former Principal, Ranwadi Technical College. Interview with the author, English. 28 Apr. 1999, Churches of Christ Theological College, Mulgrave, Victoria. Tape recording, notes.

### *Focus group interviews*

1. **Banmatmat Bible College, south Pentecost:** 16 Aug. 1999. Notes. (7 men, 4 women, 3 youths).
2. **Vanafo, Espiritu Santo:** 20 Jan. 2000. Tape recording, notes. (63 Nagriamel men).
3. **Narua, central Pentecost:** 17 Sep. 1999. Tape recording, notes. (Two separate meetings: 12 men/4 women).
4. **Nasawa, Maewo:** 24 Feb. 2000. Tape recording, notes. (1 woman, 7 men).
5. **Nduindui, west Ambae:** 1 Nov. 1999. Tape recording, notes. (6 men)
6. **Nduindui, west Ambae:** 21 Feb. 2000. Tape recording, notes. (5 women).
7. **Ranwas, south Pentecost:** 26 Aug. 1999. Tape recording, notes. (7 men)
8. **Rotal, north east Santo:** 14 Jan. 2000. Tape recording, notes. (8 men/3 women).