

CHAPTER 1

THE LANGUAGES OF ERROMANGO

Erromango is the third most southerly of the major islands of Vanuatu (see map 1). Known in the mission literature as 'The Martyr Isle', Erromango saw not only the violent deaths of a number of Presbyterian missionaries, but also massive depopulation of the Erromangan people themselves. This depopulation has had a drastic effect on the Erromangan linguistic situation, as this chapter will show.

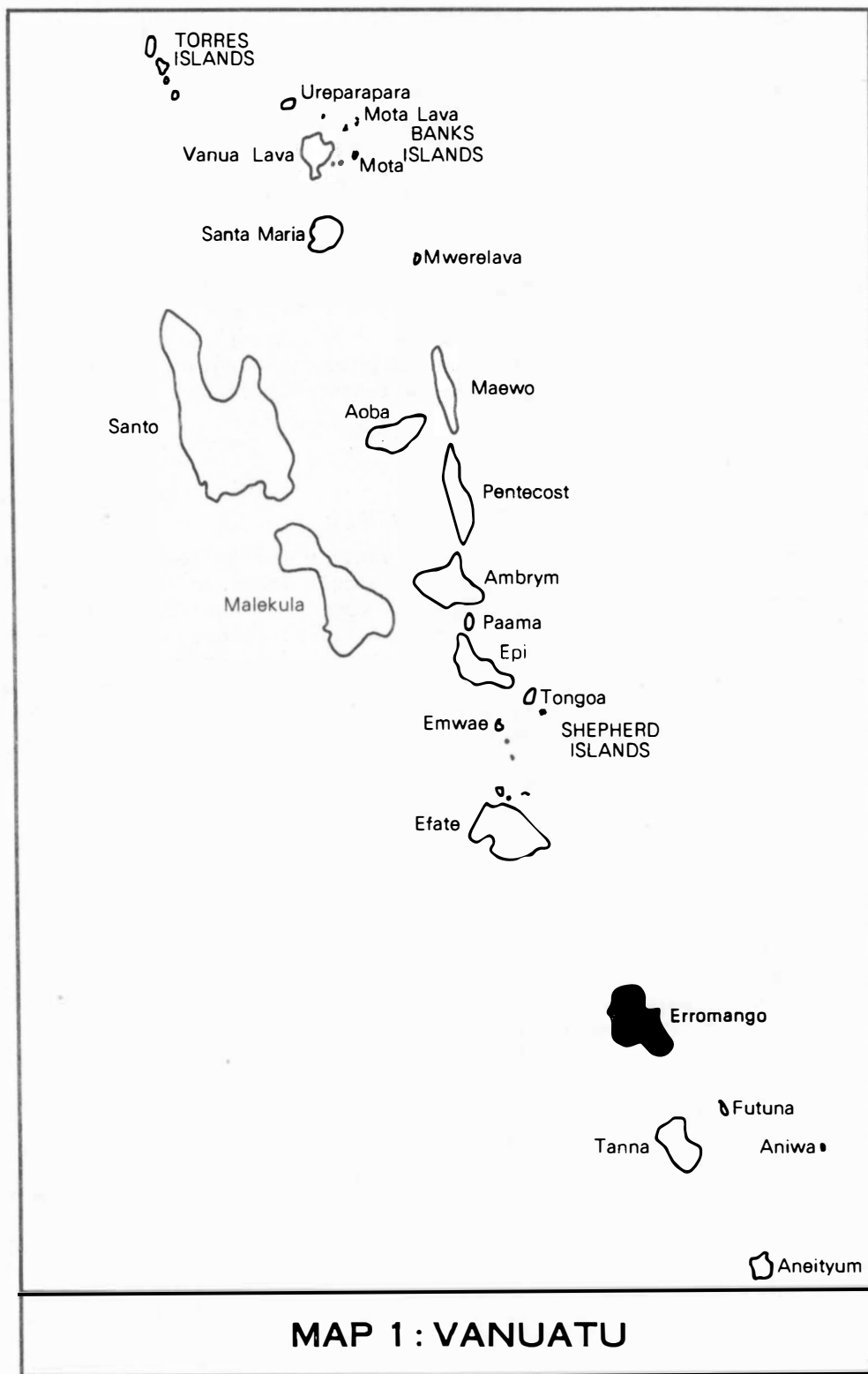
1. THE ERROMANGAN LANGUAGES AT EUROPEAN CONTACT

The Southern Vanuatu region has been settled for at least three thousand years and possibly considerably longer.¹ A single language ancestral to the present-day languages of Erromango, Tanna and Aneityum began to diversify as its speakers dispersed among these three southern islands, though at what date this dispersal took place – and, in particular, at what date Erromango itself was first settled – is not known. Man has probably been living on Erromango for at least two thousand years, however, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century the population of Erromango may well have been in excess of five thousand (see below).

1.1. Depopulation

The relative tranquility of life on Erromango was shattered on 27 July, 1774, by the visit of James Cook, who landed on the north-east coast.² Cook almost began the massive slaughter of the Erromangans, but his "Musquet at the critical Moment refused to perform its part" (Beaglehole 1961:479). However, the discovery of sandalwood on Erromango by Peter Dillon in 1825, and the arrival (and subsequent death at the hands of the Erromangans) of the Presbyterian missionary John Williams in 1893, initiated the process of close contact between Erromangans and Europeans, a contact which was to have disastrous effects on the people of Erromango.

The story of the sandalwooders, labour-traders, and missionaries in southern Vanuatu has been told elsewhere, and need not be repeated here.³ What is of particular concern here is the effect of this outside contact upon the population of Erromango itself. In the report of the first census of Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides) in 1967, McArthur and Yaxley (1968:4) give the following figures, from various sources, for the population of the island:



1850:	5,000	1910:	800
1860:	c.6,000	1921:	484
1865:	4-5,000	1924:	513
1872:	1-2,000	1926:	474
1875:	2,000	1927:	463
1889:	2,550	1929:	439
1893:	c.1,000	1930:	421
1898:	1,500	1931:	381

The figure of 381 in 1931 was the all-time low: the population climbed back over 400 in the mid-thirties, and reached 500 in the sixties. The 1967 census gave a population of 595 for Erromango; however, only 436 of these were born on Erromango, although there were an additional 72 Erromangan-born people enumerated on other islands in the group, giving a total of 508. The most recent census (1979) gives a population of 945.⁴

1.2. Languages

Although the Presbyterian missionaries, for practical purposes, concentrated their linguistic efforts on only one speech-form⁵ — that spoken around Dillon's Bay on the west coast — most early writers noticed some linguistic diversity. Gabelentz (1861) recorded data from two speech-forms, 'Erromango' and 'Nord-Sprache'. Turner (1861:494) stated that

there are two dialects on the island, differing widely from each other, but the one is only partially known on the north-east end of the island, and among a tribe which numbers but a few people.

Robertson (1902:2) was at the same time less specific and more accurate in his estimate of the linguistic diversity, noting that, although on Aneityum "there is only one language, for the island is small, ... on each of the other two (i.e., Tanna and Erromango) there are several".

Most later published accounts (e.g. Ray 1893, 1926; Capell 1972) list five named speech-forms, and this statement derives from data provided by the missionary J.D. Gordon. His 'Sketch of the Erromangan Grammar' (1889: 61-84) listed the following 'dialects' and approximate populations in the 1860s or early 1870s:

1. Yoku or Enyau	1,000?
2. Sorung or Sie	2,000?
3. Ura	500?
4. Utaha	50?
5. Novul-Amleng	Extinct

Yoku, Enyau, and Sorung are all terms meaning 'my, mine'; Sie means 'what?'. The others are, apparently, names for the speech-forms themselves; the novul in Novul-Amleng probably means *word, language* (cf. Ura novul *language*, novulu *word*). Yoku was the major mission language, spoken in the Dillon's Bay region — Gabelentz' 'Erromango'. Ura is virtually identical with Gabelentz' 'Nord-Sprache' and is probably Turner's partially-known north-east dialect.

Humphreys (1926), however, gives both a partially different set of names and a different number of speech-forms. He states that

there are six or possibly even seven dialectal groups in the island, but there is no evidence of more than one fundamental linguistic stock in Eromanga, and no reason to believe that the survival of an early non-Austronesian tongue may be found today. The native names for six of the dialects are Eniau, Etio, Adiau, Sorung, Seimo, and Tanempenum. There is a seventh, but no one recalls the name of it. (Humphreys 1926:191).

Humphreys' Eniau and Sorung clearly correspond to two of Gordon's speech-forms; Etio and Adiau are respectively Utaha and Ura (cf. Utaha *etiyo*, Ura *ari-yau*, both meaning *my, mine*). The others I am unable to explain, although one at least may be the same as Gordon's Novul-Amleng.

It seems clear, then, that there were at least five named speech-forms spoken on the island around the middle of the last century. There may have been more than five, as Humphreys suggests. However, although Gordon backs up his distinction between the various speech-forms with data, Humphreys does not, and at this stage I would be unwilling to accept Humphreys' Seimo, Tanempenum, and the seventh 'dialect' without c

What is not completely clear is whether these speech-forms were distinct languages. On this question, we have two kinds of evidence which we can use: the terms used by early writers to describe the speech-forms, and the linguistic data available.

Gordon (1889:78-84) labels his section on Ura, Utaha and Sorung 'Eromangan Dialects', and nowhere discusses their linguistic status. Robertson, however, clearly refers to several 'languages' on both Tanna and Erromango (in contrast to one 'language' on Aneityum), and since both the Tanna and Aneityum situations are reported correctly, it is my contention here that the five named speech-forms were in fact different languages. Humphreys' (1926:191) reference to 'dialectal groups' but only 'one fundamental linguistic stock' corresponds to similar remarks of his about neighbouring Tanna: "there are two distinct dialects in the island, so different in fact as to lead one to think that they may be really distinct languages" (Humphreys 1926:102). Humphreys, then, appears to use the term 'dialect' to refer to distinct, though closely related, languages. His statement that there are (or were) six or seven dialectal groups on Erromango is thus not inconsistent with the view expressed here that these were in fact distinct languages.

Later writers are not particularly clear as to the status of the different speech-forms. Ray (1926:172) discusses them under the heading 'Dialects', and makes no comment on the degree of differentiation. Capell (1972:49, 51) refers to "more than one form of Eromangan", and suggests that Ura, at least, "differs so widely from the others that it may prove to be worthy of language status". Again, these remarks, though inconclusive, do not invalidate the hypothesis.

An examination of the available data on the various speech-forms also tends to confirm the hypothesis. Although there is not a great deal of information available on Ura, and very little indeed on Utaha and Sorung, the following statements can be made with reasonable certainty:

- (a) Modern Ura has been compared with Modern Sie, the descendant of the earlier Yoku (see section 2 below), by Tryon (1976) and myself (Lynch 1978a). Tryon, using a 300-word list, computed a lexicostatistical cognate percentage of 59%; using a slightly modified Swadesh 200-word list, I found a cognate percentage of 44%. In either case, Ura and Sie can be classed as lexicostatistically quite distinct languages.

- (b) Fifty-two words found on Gordon's Utaha list are found on most basic vocabulary lists. Comparison of these with Ura gives a percentage of around 65-70%, while comparison with Sie (i.e. Yoku) gives around 68-72%. Thus again, at least on lexicostatistical evidence, Utaha is linguistically distinct from both Ura and Sie.
- (c) Available structural data suggest that Sie, Ura, and Utaha, show grammatical differences which are not merely dialectal, although they are clearly languages of a similar type.
- (d) The little information available on Sorung suggests that the variations between it and the other speech-forms are, as far as I can tell, too great to be classed as differences between dialects of the same language.

This somewhat impressionistic approach tends to confirm the view that Gordon's and Humphreys' 'dialects' are in fact distinct, though reasonably closely related, languages. I conclude therefore that there were at least five distinct languages spoken on Erromango at the time of European contact.

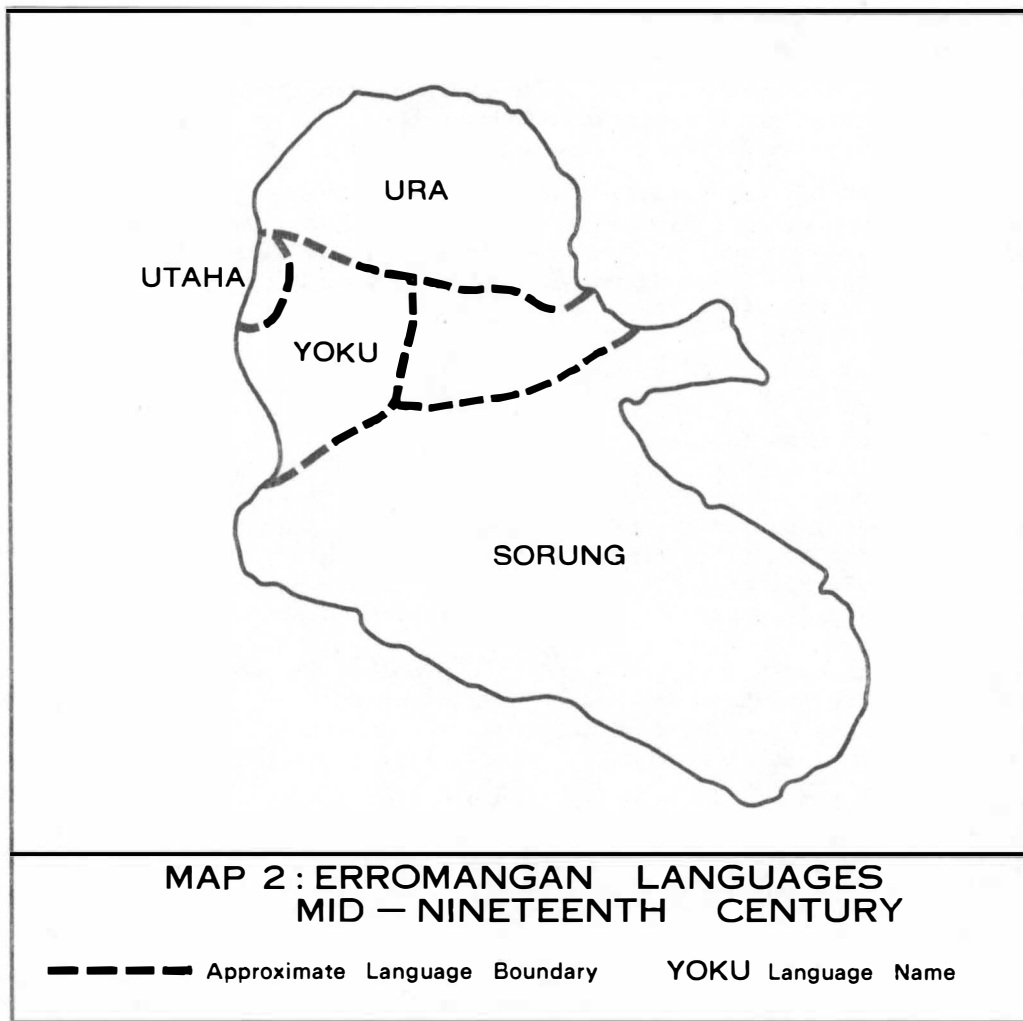
1.3. Location

Where were these languages spoken? Most sources which mention their locations at all agree that Yoku was spoken in the west, Sorung in the south, and Ura in the north, though few details are given. There has been some confusion, however, regarding the location of Utaha: Capell (1962:221) refers to "a southern dialect (Ifo, replacing the older Utaha)", but a map in another paper (Capell 1972:50) shows Utaha on the east coast, and his grammatical sketch of Sie (Capell MSa:7) refers to "Utaha or eastern dialect".

However, the most detailed — and thus probably the most reliable — description of the location of these languages comes from an anonymous nineteenth-century manuscript, 'Languages of Eromanga, New Hebrides'.⁶ Probably written by one of the Gordons, it gives the following locations of the languages:

- (a) Eniau (Yoku): spoken in Dillon's Bay and extending about eight miles north and ten miles south of Dillon's Bay; it intermingles with Utaha on the north and Sorung on the south and south-east.
- (b) Sorung: spoken between Unepang, twelve miles south of Dillon's Bay, and Traitor's Head, a distance of about fifty miles; it intermixes with Eniau on the one hand and Ura on the other.
- (c) Ura: spoken from Portinia [Potnuma] Bay to Uarringrie [Warengi?], about twenty-five miles more or to where it mixes with Eniau.
- (d) Utaha: spoken by a small tribe about five miles north of Dillon's Bay, but even then all but extinct.

Map 2 shows the probable locations of these four languages in the middle of the nineteenth century. No data on where the then extinct Novul-Amleng was spoken are available.



2. CHANGES IN THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION

The most recent survey of the languages of Vanuatu (Tryon 1976, 1978) shows that two languages are currently spoken on Erromango: Ura, with about ten speakers, and Sie, spoken by the remainder of the population. From an examination of the current situation it is clear that:

- (a) Novul-Amleng had already died out in Gordon's day.
- (b) Utaha, which Gordon labelled as "nearly extinct", has since become extinct; and
- (c) Ura is also heading towards extinction, with no more than ten speakers. My Ura informant, then aged about sixty, claimed in 1977 that he was the youngest surviving Ura-speaker, and that only six people still remembered the language.

What is not clear is what happened to the two largest languages in Gordon's day, Yoku and Sorung. Capell, for example, has remarked that

at the present day, there is considerable dialect confusion which is still spreading. The use of /h/ has spread. In the Mission texts, for example, the usual form for "woman" is /na'sivən/, but /na'hivən/ is even more often heard. This represents a southern dialect, which gained influence through the establishment of an "ideal Christian" village in the south called Nuru Navosavos, "Happy Land"... . It may be noted that this dialect, where the Yoku s becomes h seems to be gaining ground at present. (Capell 1972:51).

In Modern Sie, contrast between /s/ and /h/ has indeed been lost, and although Sie-speakers still appear to retain [s] in some words and [h] in others, [h] appears to be gaining ground. A comparison of earlier Yoku forms with forms in Modern Sie shows a strong tendency for earlier /s/ to become Sie /h/ in final position, and a weaker tendency for earlier /s/ to become Sie /h/ initially and medially (see chapter 2).

However, despite this spread of /h/, modern Sie does not appear to be a continuation of the old southern language Sorung, although it seems to have been strongly influenced by that language. We have available only twenty words in Sorung, but these are sufficient to show the basic identity of modern Sie with older Yoku rather than with Sorung. The useful comparisons are as follows:⁷

Sorung	Yoku	Modern Sie	
eti	te	ete	<i>to stay, be</i>
etni	netni	nitni	<i>his son</i>
hu	sai	hai	<i>one</i>
nahiven	nasiven	nahiven	<i>woman</i>
nin	nin	nin	<i>his name</i>
sat	sat, ur	ur	<i>bad</i>
sie	tie	se	<i>what?</i>
siklim	sukrim	sukrim	<i>five</i>
vilik	virog	virog	<i>small</i>

Apart from the s > h change, Sie lexical items appear to show clear continuation of the original Yoku rather than the original Sorung forms; note especially *hai one*, *ur bad*, *sukrim five*, and *virog small*.

On the other hand, the establishment of the mission station at Happy Land, and presumably other factors as well, may have been responsible for considerable Sorung influence on Yoku, yielding not only the $s > h$ change, but also other changes. It is clear, for example, that Sie has acquired an extra set of alienable possessives from Sorung. Almost the only grammatical data on Sorung given by Gordon (1889:80) is the following alienable possessive paradigm:

	Singular	Plural
1 inc.		sor it
2 exc.	sorun	soremam
2nd	sorum	soremi
3rd	isen	isenda

Gordon (1889:69) and Capell (MSa:32), on the other hand, are quite clear that Yoku also possessed only one set of alienable possessives:

	Singular	Plural
1 inc.		enogkos
1 exc.	enyau	enogkam
2nd	enogkik	enogkimi
3rd	eni	enirora

However, I recorded two sets of possessives in Sie, which are apparently used in free variation with each other. One set clearly derives from Yoku, the other from Sorung. The forms are:

	Set 1		Set 2	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1 inc.		enogkoh		horent
1 exc.	eniau	enogkam	horun	hormam
2nd	enogkik	enogkimi	horom	hormi
3rd	eni	eniror	ihen	ihed

Other, minor, differences between Yoku and Sie grammar may well also be due to Sorung influence: with virtually no information available on Sorung, this question is now impossible to answer.

However, the demographic question remains. It is understandable that Utaha, with only fifty speakers in the mid-nineteenth century, should have disappeared as the island's population declined. Similarly, it is also understandable that Yoku, which acquired prestige as the language of the mission, was able to survive the devastation of the population with a reasonable number of speakers. What is difficult to understand is why Ura, small even in Gordon's day, managed to cling onto existence, while Sorung, twice the size of any other Erromangan language in the 1860s, should have disappeared altogether. One possible answer seems to be that it was quite closely related to Yoku, that Sorung-speakers found it both necessary (for religious reasons) and easy to learn Yoku, and that, as the population declined, Sorung-speakers grew up in Yoku-speaking mission stations, using their own version of Yoku. Modern Sie thus appears to be a continuation of a Sorung-influenced Yoku — i.e. Sorung, to some extent at least, still survives in Modern Sie.

The fate of Gordon's five named languages can thus be diagrammed as follows:

1860s/1870s		1970s/1980s
YOKU (c.1,000?)	_____	SIE (c.900)
	_____ ?	
SORUNG (c.2,000?)	_____	extinct
URA (c.500?)	_____	URA (c.10; almost extinct)
UTAHA (c.50?)		extinct
NOVUL-AMLENG (extinct)		

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

This volume brings together a number of papers which present all the grammatical and lexical information available on the extinct Utaha and Sorung, as well as similar information on Sie and Ura. Since the publication of Gabelentz (1861-73), J.D. Gordon (1889), Kern (1906), and Ray (1926), almost nothing has appeared in print on the Erromangan languages: Capell (1957, 1972) and Lynch (1975, 1978a) are the only publications which look at phonology and grammar in any detail at all, and even these are only brief studies of certain aspects of grammar. Hence the need for a collection of available data.

The data on which the various studies in this volume are based vary considerably in both quality and quantity. Data on Ura, Utaha, and Sorung come mainly from Gordon (1889), with additional information from Capell (MSa, MSb) and Ray (1893, 1926). For Ura, these data are supplemented by my own fieldnotes and notes collected by Capell.⁸ The description of Sie grammar and vocabulary combine Capell's grammar sketch (MSa) and comparative dictionary (MSb) with my own extensive fieldnotes.

There are, naturally, considerable gaps in the data, even in the case of Sie, which is by far the best known of the Erromangan languages. Despite these gaps, I have felt it a worthwhile exercise to collect these studies together in one volume as a stimulation to further descriptive and comparative research.

NOTES

- ¹ See, for example, Spriggs 1981 for a discussion of some of the archaeological evidence, and Lynch 1978a for the linguistic evidence.
- ² Cook named the island, according to oral tradition, after pointing to the ground. The Erromangans, believing that he was questioning the quality of some yams they had brought to present to him, protested 'armai-ŋo' (good-plural) *they're good!*. Various spellings of the name of the island have been adopted in various sources, the commonest variations being between single and double r, and between final a and final o. I follow the standard usage of Tryon and Gély (1979).
- ³ See especially Shineberg (1967), and MacClancy (n.d.).

- 4 Reliable population data for the early years are extremely scanty: the various figures at different times were provided by different people whose closeness to the real situation varied considerably. Similarly, data on the effects of various epidemics are also scanty. McArthur and Yaxley (1968:8-10), however, briefly discuss the effects of (i) a dysentery epidemic in 1842, said to have killed off one-third of the population (Turner 1861:494); (ii) a hurricane followed by measles and dysentery in 1861 which the missionary G.N. Gordon (1861) felt had killed two-thirds of the population in some settlements; (iii) another hurricane in 1862, exacerbating the already serious food shortage; (iv) an epidemic resembling diphtheria in 1867; and (v) influenza outbreaks in 1873-4 and 1882, neither particularly serious. In addition, Matthew Spriggs (pers. comm.) believes that there is evidence for another epidemic in the 1830s, which certainly ravaged Aneityum and may well have affected Erromango as well.

There are also some doubts on the reliability of what early population figures there are:

There is reason to doubt that the population before the sandalwood era was as large as might be inferred from some of the early estimates. The basis for Gordon's estimate of 5,000 in 1859 ... was never explained. ... What was interpreted as depopulation may have been merely redistribution of population. (McArthur and Yaxley 1968:9).

But whether or not the figures are wholly accurate is really irrelevant here. What is clear from the figures is that the devastation of the population of Erromango is comparable to that which took place in Aneityum (McArthur 1974, Spriggs 1981), and that a population numbering some thousands in the middle of the last century had dropped to less than four hundred within a century.

- 5 I use the term 'speech-form' to refer to named or identified linguistic varieties while the question of whether they are to be classed as distinct languages or merely as dialects of one language is under discussion.
- 6 I am grateful to Darrell Tryon for the use of his notes on this reference.
- 7 The Yoku data are from Capell's manuscript dictionary (MSb) while the Sie data are from my own notes. Only nine of the twenty extant Sorung words may be usefully compared with Yoku/Sie.
- 8 Some of Capell's data appeared in Tryon (1976), while the then available data on Ura were summarised in Lynch (1982a).