



Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

State Society and Governance *in* Melanesia

TRADITIONAL INDIVIDUALS? GENDERED NEGOTIATIONS OF IDENTITY, CHRISTIANITY AND CITIZENSHIP IN VANUATU

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'TRADITIONAL' 'INDIVIDUALS'?

This is a preliminary paper following recent fieldwork in Vanuatu. The rhetorical question in the title challenges two pervasive stereotypes: first, the presumed universal applicability of the hierarchical opposition society:individual and its corollary, the conception of 'societies' as encompassing collectivities of bounded, autonomous 'individuals'; second, the hoary conventional opposition of 'Oceanic' (relational/communal) and 'Western' (bounded/individual) concepts of the person.¹ The second stereotype categorically segregates so-called 'primitive' or 'traditional' societies from 'modern' or 'Western[ised]' ones on the basis that the former lack a concept of the self as an autonomous individual, regarded as an effect and a characteristic of 'civilisation' or modernity. Such unthinking identification of modernity with 'Westernisation' and individualism is ethnocentric, anachronistic and denies contemporaneity to present people, such as Melanesian villagers, whom it consigns to the

archaic, backward status of non-modern/non-'Western'. A far more thoughtful and sophisticated variant is anthropologist Marilyn Strathern's abstract differentiation, along a 'we/they axis', of the (Western) unitary individual from the (Melanesian) 'partible person', conceived as a divisible composite of relations. Strathern destabilises the society:individual dichotomy itself, as an ethnocentric, hierarchised 'Western' construct inappropriate to 'Melanesian sociality' (Strathern 1988:10–18).

I quarrel with the distinction between relational and bounded conceptions of the person only insofar as it invokes a timeless categorical opposition between 'the West' and the non-modernised Oceanic rest. Located historically, geographically and politically, such a distinction can provide unexpected correspondences and contrasts. A useful analogy may be drawn between the 'partible person' and poststructuralist feminist conceptions of the person as decentred and relational: *both* are culturally and historically specific.² The universal sovereign subject of so-called Western

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individualism also needs to be contextualised. Historically, Christian varieties differ from the rationalist Cartesian 'I' or the rugged Hobbesian capitalist: yet Christian concepts of the individual as a moral agent in personal communion with God, appropriated and indigenised by Melanesians, are the earliest and still the most pervasive 'Western' versions of the person encountered in Melanesia.

Any analysis of actual indigenous conceptions of the person requires the profound familiarity with vernacular idioms and patterns of thought which can only be derived from lengthy ethnographic fieldwork. As a comparative anthropological historian I lack such access. Moreover, I dispute the assumption that very local, present ethnographic insights can be projected indiscriminately on to the region-wide past, as is logically entailed in the premise that there is an enduring, Oceania-wide, pre-modern theory of cultural and personal identity, in opposition to that of 'the West' (for example Linnekin and Poyer 1990:6–7). How one might know any such *past* regional theory of identity, other than deductively, is simply not addressed. My aims are more modest and my focus mundane. From a suggestive vignette of the early colonial past in Aneityum, southern Vanuatu, the paper shifts to scraps of narrative and testimony relating to my recent field trip in Vanuatu,³ with particular focus again on Aneityum. Vignette and fragments alike address a key issue in the politics of representing indigenous women: the need to dislodge the romantic secularism or feminist ethnocentrism which deride or deplore their strategic engagements in seemingly banal Christian settings—especially sewing circles—because such settings seem to advance hegemonic missionary, male and national agendas of conversion, domestication and modernisation.

COLONIAL VIGNETTE

The colonial vignette draws on early Presbyterian missionary representations of

indigenous Aneityumese women: classic before and after scenarios in a narrative of conversion, attributed to Providential design. Divine intent was seen to be effected through a hierarchy of human agency ordered by gender, race and religion. Indigenous women were virtually denied agency. 'Heathen' women—always positioned relative to men, as betrothed, married or widowed—were depicted as their passive victims, brutalised by violence and enslaved by a grossly inequitable sexual division of labour. Missionary authors accorded women little part in their own transformation, whereas their triumphal narrative of conversion had indigenous men actively 'embrace Christianity'. Objects of rescue and salvation as 'heathens', as Christians women were meant to be docile, their bodies and minds disciplined by useful domestic toil, improving stories and novel practical skills of literacy and numeracy. In Protestant bourgeois discourses of domesticity, women were (complicitly) consigned to a separate household sphere, idealised but dependent. In Aneityum, however, as in most subsistence, peasant and proletarian economies, Christian women still take a major share in routine production, in addition to domestic tasks. Melanesian men might well endorse the old missionary ideal of sexually segregated public and private spheres, so far as politics and public speaking are concerned, but the demands of subsistence gardening make it unfeasible economically.

From a feminist perspective, missionary authors seem determined to obliterate or objectify indigenous women. Yet read critically and creatively against the grain, missionary representations often also encode shadowy traces of women's constrained agency and circumstantial strategies. A small selection of Aneityum mission texts from the early 1850s registered a range of such traces. A mission wife complained that she had been forced to abandon her female school for several weeks because 'the women...are now all busy feeding pigs for a great feast that is to take place some three or



four months hence...The poor women have a hard time of it, collecting food for the pigs, and they are as particular in baking it for them, as if it were for themselves' (C. Geddie to her family, 8 Apr. 1850, *Missionary Register of the Presbyterian Church of Nova Scotia*, 1 [1850]:187). I read here a ghost of the Melanesian anthropological cliché that women take responsibility—beyond the call of coercion or duty—for producing pigs for men to exchange (see for example Jorgensen 1991; Josephides 1985; Modjeska 1982). The same mission wife graphically described the eagerness of women and girls to attend mission schools, to learn to read, write and sew, and hear about other people, places and another god

Grandmothers, middle-aged women with infants on their backs, young women and children meet every morning and again at mid-day. Some are learning their letters, others can read, and several are learning to write...I commenced a boarding school about six months ago. I have eight girls, six of them can read and all of them sew very neatly. The two eldest write pretty well, the others are learning. I meet with my boarding school girls four afternoons in the week, to teach them sewing. While they are sewing I endeavor to instruct and amuse them, by telling them of the manners, customs &c, of my own and other Christian lands; they are always delighted and listen with the greatest attention...Many of the females can sew quite well enough to make their own dresses with a little assistance from me (C. Geddie to Mrs James Waddell, 16 Sep. 1851, in Geddie and Harrington 1908:24–5).

In the early stages of the mission women were far more ready than men to become its 'adherents', and often did so in the face of local male hostility: 'Our adherents are to be found chiefly among the women and young persons', wrote the male half of the missionary couple; one 'poor woman...regularly attended...Sabbath day services' despite 'the ill treatment of her ["heathen"] husband,...who is enraged at her for

receiving Christian instruction' (Geddie, Journal, 1 Oct. 1850 [1975:75]; Geddie, Journal, 2 Jan. 1851, *Missionary Register*, 3 [1852]:134). There are also hints in the texts of 'rescued' women as disorderly sexed subjects, to the shared discomfort of missionaries and local men, who concurred as to the women's urgent need of discipline or control.⁴ The missionary husband thought he saw some unpleasant and unseemly side effects to relieving women of the curbs of customary male domination

There have been complaints of late from husbands about their wives. In some instances they have gone so far as to beat their husbands...Those men who embrace Christianity must give up their barbarous practices and treat their wives with humanity and kindness. Some of the women begin to take advantage of the altered state of things and to retaliate on their husbands (Geddie 1848–57: 23 Dec. 1851 [1975:113]).

Running through missionary representations of indigenous women is the refrain of sewing, as abhorrent to many modern feminists as it was dear to mission wives for its multiple practical and moral utility (Eves 1996:113–18). Like other feminists and anthropologists, I struggle to allow that domestication generally and sewing in particular might have been appropriated by indigenous women as desirable or even liberating. Yet mission texts Pacific-wide disclose insistent traces of female volition and 'delight' in sewing and related activities such as weaving, beyond the possibilities for coercion or mystification.⁵ Aneityumese women and girls made time for schooling and other novel activities offered by mission wives, especially sewing. They did so over and above their onerous subsistence and domestic responsibilities, which presumably did not slacken.

I do not pretend that a narrative of indigenous agency resting mainly on the blinkered, skeletal artifice of colonial texts can provide empirical grounds for identifying

'traditional' conceptions of personhood, or for deciding whether and how processes of individuation accompanied indigenous encounters with Christianity and modernity. The case made here merely signals the potential for a different perspective, decentring European authors, to divulge traces of interests, choices and strategies enacted by past indigenous women. Though their meanings and motives are irretrievably obscure, female concern for sociality looks like a common thread.

POSTCOLONIAL FRAGMENTS

ANEITYUM 1997

The theme of female sociality as problematic recurred in my recent discussions with women in Vanuatu. In both the capital, Port Vila, and on Aneityum women often depicted women as willfully solitary and in need of gender-specific collectivity: as simultaneously advocating, desiring and resisting shared work groups beyond the extended family. Such remarks recurred in my interviews with members of Presbyterian, Catholic and Seventh Day Adventist women's organisations on Aneityum. For example, the professed 'Goals' of the Uje chapter of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union (PWMU) are typical in stressing cooperation for mutual help and instruction: '[t]o keep women together to teach and help each other and to meet each other's needs'. Typical, too, are this group's cited 'Activities'—a thumbnail sketch of what women in the islands do: '[p]rayer, outside works, gardens, weaving, fundraising, cooking, etc' (Pacific Women's Resource Bureau 1993:163–5).

The Uje PWMU had claimed a membership of ten in 1993 but was reduced to four in 1997 by intra-community tensions. The hint of ill-feeling between distinct sets of Uje women signals an undercurrent of tension between the two quarters of the village. The quarters are spatially separate, somewhat unequal in standard of living, and apparently register the opposition of

kastom and *bisnis*, embodied in their respective male leaders, an expert on custom and a pastor/businessman. The village might thus be depicted—and, indeed, is sometimes so depicted by some residents—as split along a Melanesian:Western, community:individual grain. Embedded in these dichotomies, however, is a dubious conflation of modernity, individuation and 'the West', which conveniently effaces indigenous agency, responsibility and history. In fact, the differences between the two quarters of Uje are relatively slight, equivocal, and *internal to contemporary Melanesia*. All Uje women, like Aneityumese women and men generally, routinely garden—alone or in nuclear families; most engage in small-scale cooperative production of handicrafts for sale to tourists. All the villagers are subsistence farmers more or less frustrated in their efforts to integrate further, but on acceptable terms, into the cash economy: they differ in relative access to, or shortage of cash, but no one has much. All belong to the same church. Like most Presbyterian and Catholic Aneityumese to whom I spoke, they regret as divisive the dispersal of the island's populace with a rapid recent increase in population, the multiplication of denominations with the arrival of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in the late 1970s, and the appearance of national political parties in the lead-up to independence in 1980.

The maligned Seventh Day Adventists occupy a clearly marked quarter in the island's main centre of Anelcauhat and work hard to be an evidently close-knit, internally cooperating community. The paradox and price of such internal solidarity is its fracturing of wider, older collective unities—notably the extended family and the island populace as a whole, sometimes conceived as a vast extended family.⁶ The exclusivist pretensions and strategies of the Seventh Day Adventists alienate resentful kinspeople belonging to the other denominations. The Seventh Day Adventist Church opposes custom dancing, which even the Presbyterian pastor and his wife do these days.



Its members are prominent in what little officially backed development activity there is on the island: a communal forestry project, a malaria eradication project and a soil conservation project. This collection of traits—internal solidarity, external separatism, opposition to custom, energetic encouragement of modernity—amounts to a summary of the popular image and projected self-image of many ‘new religious groups’ in Vanuatu and elsewhere in the Pacific.⁷ The Seventh Day Adventist Church, which is not pentacostal, has been relatively long-established in Vanuatu and enjoys observer status with the Vanuatu Council of Churches, is ambiguously located between the mainstream denominations and the kaleidoscope of pentecostal groups. Charismatic activity as such is not confined to Pentecostals. Some Presbyterians, especially young persons, are attracted by charismatic preaching and faith healing, to the disquiet of many elders.⁸

It is my impression, endorsed by local women and men alike, that gender relations on Aneityum today are mostly benign. I nonetheless estimate that women’s routine contributions to the subsistence, domestic and limited cash economies are greater than most men’s: they share the gardening, do housework and most of the childcare, and make handicrafts. The male leaders of both sections of the Uje community remark that men are lazy and do as little work as possible, endorsing the ironic reproach (or boast?) of several women that ‘women work, men talk’. The main actual sphere of solitary work is also the most ‘traditional’—gardening, where women typically work alone or with their husbands and children.⁹ For women on Aneityum today, as, I surmise, throughout the Christian period, it is the churches and their women’s organisations which provide the main, ambivalently-valued opportunities for communion and community beyond the immediate family.

WIDER SETTINGS

The 1993 *Pacific Women’s Directory* (Pacific

Women’s Resource Bureau 1993) lists nine national women’s non-government organisations in Vanuatu—mostly church bodies—as well as the activist, feminist Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW) and fifteen provincial and island councils of women. It is novel, umbrella organisations like these—formally designed as hierarchical collectivities rather than contextual collective unities, to adopt Strathern’s ‘we/they’ terms (1988:12–13)—which particularly insist on the need for women to unite: the more inclusive the context the more likely such an avowed interest in unity. A high level of expressed concern for unity is presumably an index of the extent to which it is seen as elusive, fragile and threatened. The Vila Town Council of Women, in an implicit critique of women’s lack of unity and cooperative spirit, proclaims as its major goal: ‘To unite all women in Vila town area to see the importance of working together for the benefit of all’ (Pacific Women’s Resource Bureau 1993:169). The theme is a predictable concern of organisers, especially in dislocating urban settings, but is also more generally expressed, as by many of the 26 grass roots groups, all but two in central and southern Vanuatu, which took the trouble to register with the Directory.

The refrain of sewing spans all contexts: nationally, ‘sewing machine maintenance and sewing’ are listed as core practical activities of the VNCW; locally and domestically the lure of sewing may be more than just utilitarian and economic. Sewing and weaving, the major sources of handicrafts for sale, are also key occasions for female sociality and shared creativity, as indigenous equivalents such as skirt and mat-making have presumably always been. A club on Aniwa makes the poignant plea

we want to know some more about other things than weaving and working in gardens. We need your help! We want to sew but have no sewing machines’ (Pacific Women’s Resource Bureau 1993:151, 164).

Implicit in the appeal is a vision of sewing as

potentially liberating, beyond economic utility, rehearsing threads discerned in early mission accounts of circumscribed female agency and 'delight' in the seemingly domestic. Such valuations can seem incongruous, even perverse and demeaning to feminists. In Vanuatu and the Pacific generally sewing and the art of sewing machine maintenance are evidently not to be despised, and yet reference to them in academic settings routinely provokes sniggers.

CHURCH, CUSTOM AND COMMUNITY

This section considers the ambivalent attitudes of churches in Vanuatu to custom, which has been selectively rehabilitated in the interests of forging a nation and uneasily enshrined, along with Christianity, in national constitution and symbols (Jolly 1997:137–40). From its establishment in Aneityum in 1848 the Presbyterian mission in Vanuatu was generally hostile to indigenous values and practices—'customs'—whereas the Catholics and the Anglicans were more tolerant, within clearly-marked limits. Followers of all denominations no doubt regularly resisted, evaded or reworked unacceptable intrusions on indigenous practices by missionaries and local authorities. Yet until about the time of independence in 1980 most Christian ni-Vanuatu equated custom with 'heathenism' as the unequivocal work of the devil, something they had thankfully abandoned. In this they were sharply at odds with pagan enclaves in some islands who lived and reified the opposition of *kastom* and *skul* ('school', 'Christianity', 'introduced ways', including money) (Jolly 1982; 1994:247–58; Tonkinson 1981, 1982). On Aneityum, where rapid early conversion to Presbyterian Christianity and devastating depopulation obliterated much customary practice and drastically disrupted transmission of custom knowledge, the revival of *kastom* is cautious, contained, and consists mainly of learning dances, songs and stories and restoring certain body decorations.

Custom remains abhorrent to the Seventh Day Adventist and the pentecostal churches, which attract many adherents from the established denominations, especially the still fairly conservative Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu (PCV). Part of the attraction of the Pentecostals, especially to young people, is evidently their ethos of togetherness, which is difficult to orchestrate in the much larger mainstream churches. As with the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Aneityum, the other side of pentecostal togetherness in Vanuatu is its closed outside face and solvent effect on older collective unities. The coercive but contained communal ethos of the Pentecostals may appeal particularly to women precisely because it forces them to circumvent the dissipating, narrowly familial impulses they represent themselves as embodying, while simultaneously providing a bulwark against uncontrolled kinship obligations.

In an interview I bluntly asked Dorothy Regenvanu, an Australian long resident in Vila and one of only two female Presbyterian pastors in Vanuatu, whether she saw Christian individualism as in tension with Melanesian community orientation. Her response effectively subverted the question's crude dichotomy by alluding to ways in which Christianities, stereotypically Western but long indigenised in Melanesia, must themselves negotiate the nexus of individual and community in locally appropriate ways

I think the mainstream churches would emphasise individualism less than the more pentecostal type religions, but I don't think that Christianity here is very individualistic, because if one person converts the whole family converts... There isn't that sort of sense of your being alone. It's much more a community thing, and I think that probably comes out in the very large number of community activities which the church organises (Interview with Dorothy Regenvanu, 4 Aug. 1997).



MALE DOMAINS: WOMEN, NATION AND NATIONAL CHURCHES

Regarded synchronically, Aneityum might look like a microcosm of the nation. But cast in (very recent) historical perspective, the nation is the ultimate hierarchically-encompassing, artificial collectivity, and as such the oft maligned origin of the 'politics' which many people, especially in the islands, represent as corrosive to more organic socialities. In Aneityum, as in the islands generally, the state is present mainly as an aggravation and an absence, for men and women alike. It is widely seen as divisive, corrupt and producing few of the compensating benefits expected from electoral support: those which do transpire are rarely sustainable or are patently absurd. In the latter category belongs a ten kilometre long road recently bulldozed in Aneityum at a reputed cost of 11 million vatu (about AU\$130,000): not only is it said to be so badly constructed that it will hardly survive the next hurricane season; not only has it destroyed ancient, still-working taro irrigation systems in its path; but there are no vehicles on the island to use it.

Even in town, national citizenship is relevant for relatively few people, almost all men, for whom national and provincial politics have a dubious allure as a source of differences which make a difference in knowledge/status stakes. In general, nationalism is weak and island identity paramount. The determined insularity of most ni-Vanuatu men is neither 'traditional' nor 'national', but registers an at once expanded and contained modern arena for identity politics. Women, by contrast, are largely confined to local and domestic spheres. A few women have attained national repute since independence, generally in women's affairs but a handful in politics or the bureaucracy (Molisa 1987:19–22). Many of the latter, though, came to prominence during the independence struggle of the late 1970s; far from their numbers swelling significantly in the last decade, there has, if

anything, been a contraction. In national elections held in March 1998 there were fewer than ten women amongst more than 200 candidates for 52 seats. No woman was elected (*Vanuatu Weekly* 21 March 1998).

Within the churches the negotiation of gendered concerns is often problematic, though denominations vary in this regard: the Anglican Mothers' Union and the Christian Women's Fellowship of the Church of Christ are affiliated with the VNCW, whereas the Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventist and most pentecostal churches are opposed. Explicit attention to more 'feminist' concerns about the status of women, human rights and violence against women is the province of the two national women's umbrella movements, the VNCW and the more radical Women's Crisis Centre (KAVAW), which have led the fight for women's rights in Vanuatu. The VCNW and the Women's Centre are routinely accused of being anti-men, pro-divorce and feminist, by women as well as men. 'Feminism' is a dirty word in Vanuatu, as in much of the Pacific Islands, and is mainly avoided by women's groups (Jolly 1996).¹⁰ Yet the prominence given by the VNCW and the Women's Centre to the problems of sexual and domestic violence as human rights issues has necessarily impinged on the churches. While the men who dominate the Presbyterian hierarchy so far refuse to allow the PWMU to forge formal links with either body, the Church has nonetheless sought informal advice from individual Presbyterian women involved in the Women's Centre, with a view to setting up its own crisis unit. At its 1997 national congress the PWMU resolved to seek funds to establish a Counselling Centre which, writes Regenvanu, will 'employ counsellors whom they approve of' to help the numerous Presbyterian women who now attend the Women's Centre (Letter, 9 Jan. 1998).

The frustrating and demeaning sense of political impotence which ni-Vanuatu politicians (all but one of whom are male) deplore in their

relations with transglobal capital, the World Bank, the international aid bureaucracy and donor governments has its analogy in the quiet discontent of many women about aspects of their situation within Vanuatu and in the Presbyterian Church in particular. Women I spoke to, apart from some in the Women's Centre, mostly advocate a strategy of pursuing small gains with persistence and without overt confrontation. A Canadian aid worker on gender awareness programs in Vanuatu remarks that she has had to qualify her own feminism because it does not work in Melanesia. She has come to see subversion as the most effective strategy and to acknowledge that values such as harmony, working together and family unity are crucial. Gender, she says, really does include men in Vanuatu.

LAST WORDS

The very partial images constructed here of women and gender relations in Vanuatu derive from fleeting intimations of past and present contexts in Aneityum, and modern urban settings. The core image is of relatively solitary gardeners desiring sociality, but on their own terms. Women and men alike privilege (extended) familial sociality as a supreme value, but women are often ambivalent about the contrived collectivity of church and quasi-official women's groups, acknowledging them as necessary, beneficial, but intrusive. Such ambivalence, I suspect, has long been part of ni-Vanuatu women's experiences of the claims by missions, churches and local (male) leaders to annex, encompass, direct and reshape indigenous, especially female sociality. Conceding that claim and compliance with at least a necessary minimum of its implied injunctions and constraints are the price of accessing its equivocal benefits—which might include salvation, protection, ritual power, status, knowledge, skills, amusement and fellowship.

The image of the solitary gardener is hardly consistent with the sharing, cooperating, community-oriented, composite Melanesian persona of ethnographic and much modern political stereotype. But the associated images of women shifting strategically between valued familial sociality and more ambivalent engagements in artificial modern collectivities are also far from the naturalised social scientific conceptions of 'society' or social units as superordinate aggregates of atomised, but sovereign individuals. Strathern's model of another form of sociality, which she labels 'Melanesian', places partible persons and collective unities in analogous or congruent—the latter term is Wagner's (1991)—rather than hierarchical relationships. Strathern argues that 'the difference between Western and Melanesian (we/they) sociality means that one cannot simply extend Western feminist insights to the Melanesian case'. I take this to mean that feminist conceptions of a decentred, relational subject remain locked within the hierarchical binary logic of the opposition of society:individual, which implies that 'sociality is a question of collectivity, that...collective life is intrinsically plural in character' (1988:7, 12, 13). Yet might not a counter image of groups as collective unities, equally decomposable analogues of partible composite persons (Wagner 1991), have certain resonance for 'us', too, in these vexing post-everything times?



NOTES

¹ The equation 'primitive' / non-'Western':communal:'civilised' / 'Western':individual is one of those tenacious, persuasive Enlightenment images which recur in different eras and across political spectrums. It has long been standard fare in missionary anthropology across the denominations, ranging from the evolutionist polemics of the Methodist Fison, writing under a nom-de-plume (Lee 1877), to the benign relativism of the High Anglican bishops Stone-Wigg and Newton (1933:8), to the phenomenology of the French Protestant Leenhardt (1947; Douglas 1982). It was a basis of colonial paternalism in Fiji and to a lesser extent in Papua (France 1969; Murray 1925:60), but in New Caledonia it underwrote the colonial expropriation of Kanak (Douglas 1982:406–7). It appears in varied guises in modern anthropology, ranging from the simplistic essentialism of Linnekin and Poyer (1990; Linnekin 1990), to Marilyn Strathern's complex abstractions (1988). With reversed relative moral weighting, it is nowadays invoked by indigenous leaders in oppositional narratives of national identity, and at the grass roots in villagers' ambivalence about urban and elite materialism (Lini 1982:27; Tjibaou 1996:199–207; Thomas 1989:17–18).

² Moore's depiction of the 'feminist post-post-structuralist view of the subject' as 'radically different from the traditional subject of anthropological enquiry, the unitary, whole, rational individual which is prototypically male' (1994:58), maps quite neatly on to Strathern's differentiation of the 'Melanesian' 'partible person' from the 'Western' unitary individual.

³ The term 'colonial' here does not imply formal annexation or the necessary centrality of Europeans in local conceptions and actions; rather it denotes that European texts—mostly 'colonial' in intent—are key resources for writing histories of the early encounters of Islanders and Europeans. Aneityum in the 1840s was the first

island in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) to be settled by outsiders: traders, whalers, and Polynesian, then Canadian and Scottish missionary families. In the wake of these contacts Aneityumese suffered arguably the worst depopulation of anywhere in western Oceania: from an estimated 4,600–5,800 in about 1830 to a recorded low of 186 in 1941 and a present population of around 1,000 (McArthur 1974:ch.3; Spriggs 1981:ch. 4). They were the only Melanesians outside Fiji until late in the nineteenth century to convert *en masse* to evangelical Christianity. I have written histories of Aneityum (1989, 1998, forthcoming).

⁴ In a forthcoming essay I argue for the qualified exercise of female agency in pagan marriage on Aneityum, given that missionaries subverted their own image of wives as slaves by adding: 'wives are constantly deserting their husbands, and taking up their abode with other men' (Geddie 1852:20–1; Douglas forthcoming).

⁵ In an excellent article on Methodist politics of refashioning indigenous bodies in Papua, Richard Eves quotes a lengthy passage on 'The Sewing Class' from the *Australasian Methodist Missionary Review* (1996:114–15). His intent, which I endorse, is to signal 'the [missionary] stress on sewing as an "object lesson" in orderly behaviour...[and] the importance of subjecting the body to disciplinary regimes and of covering that body'. But my reading, alert for surreptitious traces of other, indigenous agendas, would also foreground such remarks as: '[t]he girls in the villages, as well as those on the station are very fond of sewing'; 'even quite wee dots have already made themselves a garment and carried it home in triumph'.

⁶ There is historic point to the Aneityumese conflation of family and island, given that by sixty years ago demographic disaster had reduced them to fewer than 200 closely related people, from whom today's growing population is virtually all descended. Everywhere in Vanuatu, including in town, as in Oceania generally, kinship provides a strategic metaphor to forge and legitimate friendships and other links.

⁷ Cf. Gordon 1990 on the Mormon Church in Tonga; Errington and Gewertz 1995:ch. 4 on the evangelical New Church in Karavar, Papua New Guinea. 'New religious group' is Ernst's collective term for 'rapidly growing religious groups...which are broadly designated as "evangelical", "fundamentalist" and "pentecostal-charismatic"'. He acknowledges that five 'widespread and well established New Religious Groups'—including the SDA Church—'are not really "new" to the Pacific Islands, but are also not mainline Protestant denominations', he further notes the spread of charismatic beliefs into mainstream Catholic and Protestant denominations (1994:10, 13, 20).

⁸ Cf. Gewertz and Errington's detailed description of the attractions to young people in Wewak, Papua New Guinea, of the charismatic Catholic youth movement Antioch (1996).

⁹ Matthew Spriggs remarks that my image of the lone female gardener is totally at odds with values and practices in islands in north Vanuatu such as Maewo, where women work in large groups and belong to grade-taking societies. He thinks a tendency for individuals to garden alone or in nuclear families may be peculiar to 'southern Melanesia'—southern Vanuatu and New Caledonia (pers. com., 7 Oct. 1997). These are precisely the places where I have done fieldwork.

¹⁰ The Women's Centre Collective strategically yokes the concept of universal womanhood to the ubiquitous Melanesian value of women as mothers and peacemakers, explaining the Centre's logo in the following terms in an effort to outflank the widespread calumny they attract [t]he logo of the Centre was designed by the members of the Collective. It shows the Women's symbol being embraced by the leaves of the *namele* leaf which is a symbol of peace in Vanuatu. The use of the *namele* leaf encircling women signifies the central role that women play as the mother, the care provider and the foundation of the family. The need to provide peace, love and protection is embodied in this symbol (Vanuatu Women's Centre 1994:iii).

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