

Christian Citizens: Women and Negotiations of Modernity in Vanuatu

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In January 1997 I began a comparative research project on gendered engagements with Christian and state ideologies and institutions in Melanesia, in the course of which I spent August 1997 in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, and on the island of Aneityum, in Vanuatu's extreme south.¹ Determined to ground the project's broad scope in local perspectives, I undertook a systematic program of interviews with ni-Vanuatu, extended in written correspondence and subsequent meetings. One focus of the interviews was women's varied experiences of women's groups and organizations, gender relations, and citizenship in a modern, avowedly Christian Melanesian state. These themes are conspicuously absent from scholarly literature on Vanuatu, except in several pioneering articles by Margaret Jolly and obliquely in Lissant Bolton's work on women's *kastom* (Bolton 1993, 1998; Jolly 1991a, 1996, 1997).² That being so, an overview is appropriate: this paper juxtaposes local and wider aspects of ni-Vanuatu women's lives as Christians and citizens and casts them in historical perspective.

The paper's ethnographic depth is restricted by the brief time spent in situ and my reliance on lingua franca—Bislama, English, and French. However, I bring to the paper the compensatory breadth of more than a decade's detailed ethnohistorical research on Aneityum (Douglas 1989; 1998, 225–261; 1999; 2001; nd), the invaluable help and direction of ni-Vanuatu with intellectual interests similar to my own,³ and comparative insights derived from an ongoing program of related discussions with Kanak, Papua New Guineans, and Solomon Islanders.⁴ The paper charts the ambiguous, mobile interplay of individual and community in the self-representations and actions of ni-Vanuatu in general and women in particular. It does so via a series of verbal snapshots of mundane settings,

changing focus successively from the past to present rural, urban, and national contexts. After briefly scanning early missionary representations of women in Aneityum, I shift to narrative and testimony derived mainly from interviews, focusing initially on women in Aneityum and then on ni-Vanuatu women in wider settings. I do not artificially isolate women, because they themselves mostly profess a Christian familial ideal whereby men and women are different, but complementary rather than opposed. As is the case in Melanesia generally, gender includes men in theory as well as practice.

Running through my argument is a key issue in the politics of representation, both academic and popular: the need to problematize the romantic secularism that slights indigenous women's engagements in apparently banal Christian settings—prayer meetings, Bible schools, sewing circles, fellowship groups—because they seem to advance hegemonic missionary, male, and national agendas of conversion, domestication, and modernization, rather than empower women. Women's individual and group actions, strategies, and choices, and the constraints on them—condensed as “agency”⁵—deserve the same scrutiny as those of men. Agency thus defined, its conceptual and political ambiguities notwithstanding, is the closest a historian can get to the gendered subjectivities of long past indigenous people, given the ethnocentrism of colonial authors and the opacity or absence of indigenous women in their textual legacy. Female agency is the thematic thread linking the historical snippet that follows with more recent investigations.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH MODERNITY: READING FEMALE AGENCY AND ITS ABSENCES

Nineteenth-century Presbyterian missionary representations efface or objectify indigenous Aneityumese women, “heathen” and Christian alike, and attribute them scant agency, even in the Christian sense of “instrumentality”—the chosen means to effect God's will. As “heathens,” women are depicted as the inert objects of male violence and exploitation. The reported early interest in Christianity of many Aneityumese women was always configured by missionaries as a providential impulse or a reflex search for refuge and relief from brutality and drudgery. As Christians, women were meant to be docile, disciplined, and domesticated, and are usually thus described. Yet, read critically and creatively against the grain, the same texts and language that serve as conventional vehicles for a mis-

sionary tropology also yield other stories in which both “heathen” and Christian women figure ambiguously as agents. In other recent papers I disassemble missionary fulminations on the “sad . . . condition of the female sex” in pre-Christian Aneityum (J Geddie 1975, 80) and the complacent mission narrative of ensuing salvation, conversion, and domestication. These essays systematically exhume shadowy traces of indigenous female actions, circumstantial strategies, and presumed desires encrypted in a wide range of mostly antipathetic or indifferent texts (Douglas 1999, 2001, nd). This section of this paper condenses the argument there expounded, citing a single instance of the mission trope of domestication to exemplify my case for female agency and to problematize the temptation for anticolonial and feminist scholars, myself included, to read missionary propaganda with hostile but literal eyes, construing the conversion of indigenous women as a simple lineal shift to the grip of the moral and practical hegemonies of missionaries and local Christian men.⁶

The following passage, written by a female Presbyterian missionary three years after the establishment of the Aneityum mission, could be effortlessly transposed to most evangelical settings in the southwest Pacific until at least the 1930s, so typical are its agenda—an ordered domestic routine—and the activities described—literacy, sewing, and “instruction.”

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, 16 Sep 1851, in Geddie and Harrington 1908, 24–25)

The text is a catalogue of Protestant bourgeois domesticity, one of several such passages written by this missionary for the edification of friends at home and reproduced as propaganda for the faithful: women are consigned, happily, to a separate household sphere, idealized, necessarily literate to permit personal scriptural access, but also dependent and devalued (Jolly 1991b; Langmore 1989). Yet even this snippet, detached from its contextual and textual moorings, can be decentered to divulge enig-

matic traces of indigenous female agency: women's variously circumscribed potential for strategic choice and action on the basis of personal or collective interests and desires, though the precise logic and content can now only be surmised. The clearest such trace is of the seeming willingness of numerous women and girls to attend the mission schools, to learn to read, write, and sew and hear about other people, other places, and another (more powerful, accessible, and responsive?) god. If one credits the missionary's account of attendance patterns and activities at her schools, as I do, then there are no plausible grounds to deny agency to participants. In the mission's early phase, the means for moral or physical coercion available to its agents were limited or nonexistent, while women were sometimes said to have attended school and services in the face of violent opposition from their husbands (eg, J Geddie 1975, 80).

Running through the passage, and the missionary domestication narrative generally, is the refrain of sewing, dear to female missionaries because not only did it render seemly the indecent by producing clothes that local people, too, read as key symbols of Christianity and modernity, but it corralled women and girls within collective domestic settings to teach useful skills to putatively "idle" hands and necessary discipline to unruly female bodies (C Geddie, 28 Mar 1860, in *HFR* 1861, 73; Eves 1996, 113–118). The heavy moral baggage in these texts renders problematic my reading that aspects of domestication, and sewing in particular, were appropriated by indigenous women as desirable and enjoyable. On the other side of the moral ledger, the ethnocentric "western denigration of domesticity" has been denounced by indigenous critics of western feminism and is rightly discredited in feminist anthropology.⁷ Moreover, missionary texts Pacific-wide disclose fleeting traces of female volition and "delight" with respect to sewing and congruent activities, such as learning different weaving techniques and patterns taught by the wives of island teachers.⁸ The springs of that "delight" are quite opaque and were doubtless always mixed, but pleasure in sociability with other females beyond the immediate family—an undertone in the passage cited—is a persistent subtext. Sewing is evidently a zone of serendipitous conjuncture between otherwise dissimilar missionary projects and indigenous female interests and desires. Missionaries' texts inevitably privilege their own affairs and suppress indigenous, but there is no excuse for taking those priorities literally, whether by endorsement or negation.

Secular discomfort with nontraditional religiosity means that scholars may be alert to female resistance, but less so to traces of creative appro-

priations of Christianity by women in Melanesia, who historically and collectively have been accorded even less agency than men in becoming and being Christians.⁹ I too am uneasy about missionaries' agendas and activities, but try not to take them at face value, preferring to decenter their representations and interrogate their discursive hegemony via radical textual critique, reconfiguring "conversion" to Christianity as "appropriation" and "vernacularization," by women and men alike (Douglas 1998, part 3; nd; Rafael 1988, 15). Some anthropologists have recently engaged in an analogous rethink of Christianity encountered in the field, while a few attribute significant agency to Christian women as spirit mediums, "zealots," and ambiguous beneficiaries in revivals and pentecostal and charismatic movements.¹⁰ These days Christianity's status as an indigenized Pacific religion is no longer seriously in question.

Women and girls in Aneityum made time to come together for schooling and other novel activities offered by mission wives, especially sewing. They did so beyond their onerous subsistence and domestic responsibilities. As in most subsistence, peasant, and proletarian economies, Christian women in Aneityum continued to take a major share in routine production, despite the missionary ideal of sexually segregated public and private spheres. The advent of sewing, for instance, did not for a long time mean abandoning the laborious manufacture of pandanus-leaf skirts, which Christians continued to wear. A male missionary-ethnographer who served in Aneityum in the 1880s remarked, "although every woman and girl wears a large print garment, she would have the feeling of being unclothed without the native-made fringes, of which three or four are worn together. The material these skirts are usually made from is *Pandanus* leaves chewed and soaked in water to make them soft" (Lawrie 1892b, 305).

The blinkered, skeletal artifice of colonial texts cannot provide empirical grounds for identifying "traditional" conceptions of personhood or for deciding whether and how individuation accompanied encounters with Christianity and modernity. The extended missionary narrative of the domestication of indigenous women in Aneityum nonetheless encodes more or less enigmatic traces of female agency. Here a single decontextualized sample hints that women of all ages were active participants for their own reasons in the female missionary project of gathering indigenous women together for purposes of education, training, and "improvement." Instituted in the earliest stages of Protestant missionary endeavor everywhere in Oceania, such regular gatherings were prototypes for the local

church women's groups that missions of all denominations began to establish from the early twentieth century. Now indigenized, such groups are normal—if variously active and effective—features of the socioeconomic landscape in rural communities throughout the Pacific Islands.

WOMEN'S GROUPS AND MODERNITY AT THE GRASSROOTS: ANEITYUM 1997

In the exemplary passage, I read a vestige of the value placed on sociality by women in Aneityum in the past. The theme of female sociality as problematic recurred in my recent discussions with women in Vanuatu, who persistently depicted women as willfully solitary and in need of gender-specific collectivity: at once resisting and advocating cooperation beyond the extended family. The motif was invoked by urban dwellers in the capital, Port Vila, and by rural women from the nearby, well-populated Shepherd group, as well as in distant, depopulated Aneityum, where mid-nineteenth-century conversion and pacification had seen settlement concentrated from dispersed hamlets into a single Christian village. In Aneityum such remarks were reiterated in interviews and conversations with members of Presbyterian, Catholic, and Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) women's groups.

In 1993 the Pacific Women's Resource Bureau of the then South Pacific Commission (now Pacific Community) published the *Pacific Women's Directory*.¹¹ This very useful handbook, intended as a "networking tool" for Islanders and a guide for aid agencies and donors, stemmed from an exhaustive survey in which "women's associations, clubs, offices, groups and organisations" in twenty-one Pacific countries and territories were asked to complete questionnaires outlining their history, membership, and funding arrangements, plus brief statements of "Goals" and "Activities" (PWRB 1993, iii, 197–198). Respondent groups are classified by country as government focal point, nongovernment focal point, and nongovernment organization. The entry for Vanuatu—the longest by some margin—subdivides nongovernment organizations as "nation-wide" and "island-level," with the southern province of Tafea, which includes Aneityum, particularly well represented (PWRB 1993, 149–170). A follow-up survey produced a second edition in 1997, published in electronic as well as print format. The separate "island-level" classification for Vanuatu was abandoned, presumably because fewer groups responded. They included seven in Tafea Province, down from twelve (PWRB 1997, 191–201). Reliance on

voluntary response in any survey guarantees uneven representation, as the editors acknowledged, but I take the significant ni-Vanuatu presence in the first edition of the directory as an index of the effectiveness and high local profile of the Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW) in the early 1990s. Equally, the decline in ni-Vanuatu participation in the second edition probably marks a reduction in the reach of the council by the middle of the decade as its leaders dissipated their energies in infighting.

Three women's groups in Aneityum opted to be listed in the first edition. They do not include the local branch of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Dorcas Federation, which registered only as a national organization. Two of the groups reappeared in the second edition and were still active when I visited the island in 1997. A Catholic group claiming a membership of twenty in 1993 gave as its contact person one of only five Catholic women living in Anelcauhat, the main center in the south of the island (PWRB 1993, 163; compare 1997, 195). Since most Catholics moved from Anelcauhat in the late 1970s, the group was actually based some ten kilometers to the east in the mainly Catholic village of Umej. This woman and another Catholic resident in Anelcauhat complained of feeling isolated, though both lived amid numerous, but non-Catholic, extended kin. The second woman also complained that there were too many church groups: "women's group, youth group, and so on, and each one has its day."

Also registered in the directory is the Uje chapter of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union (PWMU), the oldest and largest women's organization in Vanuatu. The Uje group claimed a membership of ten in the 1993 edition and twelve in the 1997 edition—amounting to most of the adult female residents of the village. The "Goals" professed in 1993 stressed cooperation for mutual help and instruction, "To keep women together to teach and help each other and to meet each other's needs." The "Activities" listed are typical of such groups: "Prayer, outside works, gardens, weaving, fundraising, cooking, etc" (PWRB 1993, 163–165; 1997, 196–197). Uje is an outlier of Anelcauhat about three kilometers to the northwest. When I stayed there in 1997 the local PWMU chapter had only four active members, their houses scattered on one side of the stream running through the village. These women commanded relatively greater financial, nutritional, and material resources than did those on "the other side" of the river. The husbands of two were long employed in church and public service; one, a Presbyterian pastor, was locally active in business and a leader of the island community. He and his family lived in a concrete house with a generator and an iron roof feeding two large water tanks—

rare luxuries in Aneityum. Everyone else in Uje lived in bush material houses, used kerosene lanterns when they could afford and get fuel, and walked to fetch water from streams likely to be polluted by cattle.

The women across the river were mother, daughters, and wives in a large extended family whose patriarch was widely respected for his knowledge of *kastom* (custom). They had a seemingly more communal lifestyle than the families opposite, with even less access to *vatu* (money), but work patterns were similar—Uje women, like Aneityumese women generally, garden alone, or with children, or as nuclear families. Everyone in Uje gardens, because imported foods are scarce and expensive: Aneityum, like all Vanuatu's outer islands, is plagued by the high cost and unreliability of shipping and by lack of *vatu*. The PWMU members insisted that working together is best, but regretted that women tend to work alone, especially in the gardens. They complained that the women on "the other side" refused to join in the collective activities of the local Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union—mainly cooperative production of handicrafts for sale to tourists during the irregular calls of P&O cruise ships to "Mystery Island" (the islet of Inyeuc, off Anelcauhat). These visits, a major source of cash, were said to be critical to the island's economy. Most Aneityumese women made handicrafts to this end, with pooled expertise a spur to innovation and higher quality. Women and their groups were thus in the vanguard of modernity on Aneityum.

The hint of ill-feeling between distinct sets of Uje women signaled an undercurrent of tension between the two quarters of the village, spatially separate and superficially registering the opposition of *kastom* and *bisnis* (business) embodied in their respective male leaders, the expert on *kastom* and the pastor-businessman, whom I heard criticize each other mildly in these terms. The village might thus be stereotyped as split along an indigenous–western grain, marking out opposed complexes of values and behavior—community : individual; sharing : possession or consumption; tradition : modernity. Radical dichotomy of "Melanesia" and "the west" along such lines has been a hydra-headed trope in post-Enlightenment discourses from colonialism to anthropology.¹² It 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. Thus Father Walter Lini, the late first prime minister of Vanuatu, invoked an oppositional narrative of national identity celebrating "Melanesian" values of sharing, "communalism," and (Christian) religiosity, and denigrating "western" "material-

ism, individualism, and a narrow, insensitive brand of organised religion" (Lini 1982, 27; see also Boseto 1994, 57–59; Narokobi 1980; Tjibaou 1996, 199–207).

To a secular binary logic it might look anomalous that the loudest case for female cooperation in Uje should be made by the seemingly modern, artificial Christian collectivity of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union, and be resisted by seemingly more traditional, communally oriented women; or it might look ironic that the seemingly atomized modern sector of the village should need to have recourse to artificial collectivity and be opposed by the organic solidarity of the seemingly traditional sector. These apparent contradictions dissolve when the binary logic is itself dislodged: the essentialist conflation of modernity, individualism, consumption, and "the west," in opposition to tradition, communalism, antimaterialism, and "nonwest," is both ethically dubious and logically specious.¹³ It denies coevality or the legitimacy of material desires to present-day rural dwellers. It caricatures untidy, ambiguous actualities and effaces long histories of indigenous engagements in commerce, Christianity, and migration. It elides complexity, variety, and change in each of the opposed meta-categories and the endless practical interplay and slippages between them. Thus the most pervasive "western" versions of the person in Melanesia are *Christian* concepts of the individual as a moral agent in personal communion with God, concepts that are selectively appropriated and socialized in locally meaningful terms. Yet Christianity also offers a powerful promise of present and future community,¹⁴ which has also been selectively naturalized in indigenous practice, sometimes as an antidote to debilitating violence and disunity in preexisting sociopolitical relations (eg, White 1988). In villages throughout Melanesia, Christian women's groups are ubiquitous mundane instances of the localization of Christian community ideals.

No one in Aneityum rhetorically opposed "Melanesia" (or "us") and "the west" in conversation with me. This is not to say that Aneityumese do not hold such popular stereotypes, but that other considerations loom strategically larger. Nearly two decades after independence, these rural ni-Vanuatu evidently prefer to locate agency within the state by condemning perceived local or national failings—especially those of politicians—than to project them onto "the west," though they sometimes used "white man's fashion" as a derogatory epithet for behavior regarded as locally inappropriate (eg, Tepahae 1997, 19 Aug). In practice, the differences I discerned between the two quarters of Uje were relatively slight and *internal to a contemporary Melanesian state* (Carrier 1992a). Uje villagers on

both sides of the river were subsistence farmers more or less frustrated in efforts to integrate further, but on acceptable terms, into the cash economy. They differed in relative access to, or shortage of cash, but no one had much, including the pastor-businessman. All belonged to the same church. Both leaders were literate, well-traveled, enjoyed islandwide respect and influence, favored collective strategies, regretted the inertia of chiefs (identified with *kastom*), and condemned the impact of national politics, political parties, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which settled in Aneityum in the late 1970s.

With rapid population increase in Aneityum in the last decade, individuals and married couples often temporarily leave the two main centers of Anelcauhat (including Uje) and Umej to garden on land to which they claim rights. The resultant dispersal of the populace, the multiplication of denominations, and the advent of political parties were widely cited as divisive and fragmenting by Presbyterians and Catholics, women and men alike. Unlike the “separate” Seventh-day Adventists, Catholic and Presbyterian women were said to cooperate, as in helping decorate each other’s churches. In nostalgic retrospect, these mainstream Christians did not recall the (Presbyterian) church as having been divisive when there was only one in Aneityum to which everyone belonged, or even when Catholics and Presbyterians lived together at Anelcauhat. But in 1997 there was significant perceived tension between primary commitments to family and island—the latter figured as a vast extended family¹⁵—and the rival collective imperatives of churches and political parties.

The maligned Seventh-day Adventists occupied a discrete quarter on the outskirts of Anelcauhat and worked hard to appear a close-knit community—a Polynesian Dorcas Federation worker complained privately that Aneityumese women used always to do things alone, but were learning to cooperate, although they still did not work together enough. The paradox and price of internal SDA solidarity is its fissiparous impact on older, wider unities: extended families and the island populace as a whole. The exclusivist pretensions and strategies attributed to the Seventh-day Adventists alienate resentful kin belonging to other denominations: Adventists were said to condemn Presbyterians and Catholics for not worshipping the true God on the proper day. The Seventh-day Adventist Church opposed *kastom* dancing, in which even the Presbyterian pastor and his wife engaged. Adventists were prominent in what little official development activity there was on the island.¹⁶ This congeries of traits—internal solidarity, external separatism, opposition to *kastom*, encouragement of certain aspects of

modernity, and qualified individualism—is a conspectus of the popular image and projected self-image of many “new religious groups” in Vanuatu and elsewhere in the Pacific.¹⁷ The Seventh-day Adventist Church, although well established in Vanuatu and enjoying observer status with the Vanuatu Christian Council, is ambiguously located between the main-line denominations and a kaleidoscope of more recent evangelical and pentecostal groups.¹⁸

GENDER RELATIONS IN ANEITYUM

The foregoing discussion of the ambiguities of Christian modernity in Aneityum seen through the prism of women's groups is a logical preface to consideration of gender relations in this local setting. My outsider's impression, endorsed by local women and men alike, is that gender relations in Aneityum in 1997 were mostly benign: this perception is time- and place-specific and neither necessarily permanent to Aneityum nor general to Vanuatu. A Catholic woman in Anelcauhat attributed recent improvement in the respect accorded women to the now limited availability of alcohol on the island, and especially to the campaign for women's rights spearheaded by the Vanuatu National Council of Women since independence in 1980. In predictable contrast, the Presbyterian pastor thought that the position of women in Vanuatu generally is better because the church is making an issue of women's rights.¹⁹ He and his wife, with whom I spent most evenings while in Aneityum, said they were aware of no recent instances of wife-beating, though it would certainly be public knowledge given the small size and intimacy of the island's populace. I have no reason to disbelieve them, since they cheerfully discussed other local scandals. Matthew Spriggs, who has conducted archaeological field research in Aneityum since the late 1970s, and his wife, Ruth Saovana-Spriggs, recall little domestic violence there, apart from one or two dramatic assaults by wives on husbands suspected of adultery (*pers com*). In nearby islands Aneityumese women are reputed to be bold and willful (*strong hed* in Bislama).

Arguing from structure rather than agency, Philip Tepahae, an authority on Aneityumese *kastom*, maintained that “according to *kastom*” women “had similar status” to men and “particular importance” as mothers. The image is sharply at odds with the dismal nineteenth-century European representations of indigenous Aneityumese women and gender relations that I mentioned earlier and juxtapose with Tepahae's present reflections in

another paper (Douglas nd). Tepahae insisted that wife-beating is far worse in other islands in Vanuatu, where bride price is high, a wife leaves her own place to belong exclusively to her husband, and her own family “has no rights” in her. In Aneityum, he argued, bride price was “only small,” took place in secret rather than in public, and today is “no longer known”; an abusive husband must thus pay compensation to his wife’s family. This tallies with the indigenous preference in Aneityum for district endogamy, a cognatic emphasis in affiliation and inheritance, and the prevalence of uxori-local residence (Lawrie 1892a, 709–710). Wives in Aneityum are only strangers in their marital homes if they come from other islands; most live close to and derive support from their natal families, and sociality from female relatives. Tepahae’s formulation leaves women in the control of men and families, but shifts the locus and severity of their objectification. He believed, like many ni-Vanuatu, that violence against women is far worse in urban than rural areas: he blamed alcohol abuse, and dissension between spouses over money and the endless demands of kin (Tepahae and Lynch 1994, 12–13; Tepahae 1997, 15, 16 Aug).²⁰ Money and kinship—key symbols of modernity and tradition respectively—are here represented as antithetical yet ambiguously enmeshed in present indigenous experience.

Relative optimism about gender relations notwithstanding, I estimate that Aneityumese women’s routine contributions to the subsistence, domestic, and limited cash economies are greater than those of most men: women share gardening with men, who do most of the intermittent and seasonal heavy work, while women also do the housework and childcare—usually in ones and twos—and make handicrafts, alone and in small groups. Men contribute occasional group labor to community projects, such as laying a pipeline to supply water to Anelcauhat. An Uje PWMU member remarked wryly that when men return from the gardens they say they are tired and sit around together to talk and drink kava (*Piper methysticum*). Talking and kava-drinking—major forms of ni-Vanuatu sociality—are quintessential male activities, though nowadays women in Aneityum also drink kava and there are no formal barriers to their speaking in public. But they choose to do so rarely, other than on reserved occasions such as the Presbyterian Church’s yearly Women’s Day, when women take responsibility for services. The male leaders of both sections of the Uje community said that men are lazy and do as little work as possible; they endorsed the ironic, reproachful boast of several women that “women work, men talk.”²¹

On Aneityum the main sphere of solitary work is also the most “traditional”—taro gardening, where women typically toil alone or with their husbands and children. This work pattern could be a by-product of depopulation, but Tepahae suggested an older, cultural dimension: that “*long kastom*” men—and presumably women—preferred to garden alone, for fear of exposing crops to danger from other men who might have broken taboos. He said that the church promoted communal garden work to counter such “superstitions,” while nowadays the need for increased production to provide cash and contributions to ceremonies sees organizations like the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union encouraging group work to boost efficiency (Tepahae 1997, 19 Aug). For women on Aneityum today, as, I surmise, throughout the Christian period, it is church women’s groups and gatherings that provide ambivalently valued opportunities for collective assembly and production beyond the immediate family. These slippery intersections of *kastom*, Christianity, community, and modernity again elude simplistic binary categorization.

In a salutary reminder that anthropology’s classic inductive shift from intimate field study to regional generalization may cloak the extent to which ethnographies are the very particular writ large, Spriggs pointed out that my image of the lone female gardener can hardly stand for “Melanesia” or even “Vanuatu”: it is, for instance, at odds with values and practices in islands in northern Vanuatu, such as Maewo, where women work in large groups and belong to grade-taking societies. He suggested that a tendency for individuals to garden alone or in nuclear families may be peculiar to “southern Melanesia” (pers com, 7 Oct 1997)—southern Vanuatu and New Caledonia, which happens to be the geographic span of my own historical and field research. In his PhD thesis, Spriggs attributed the emphasis on taro cultivation in Aneityum and the “minor importance” of yams, which favor dry conditions, to the possibility and prevalence of irrigation, which allows taro to be the staple (1981, 15; see also Barrau 1956b, 183, 191, 192, 194). In New Caledonia taro together with yams formed “the basis of indigenous agriculture,” with irrigated taro very common. According to the geographer Jacques Barrau, writing in the 1950s, Kanak “women effect the major part of the work” of taro cultivation, which “in the past . . . was their monopoly” (1956a, 72–82). My emergent sense of a connection between women, solitary gardening, and taro production is further clarified by analogy with Margaret Jolly’s ethnography of south Pentecost, in northern Vanuatu, in which she contrasted “household based” taro cultivation—“each household tending its plots”

—with the “necessarily communal” cultivation of yams—“the community tends each plot in turn” (1994, 67). In both south Pentecost and New Caledonia anthropologists have discerned a higher symbolic valuation of the dry, male yam, relative to moist, female taro (Barrau 1956a, 75–76; Jolly 1994, 62–68; Leenhardt 1937, 63). While this was conceivably the case in Aneityum, I have come across no such identification, either linguistically, in textual traces of early encounters, or in interviews with Aneityumese.

WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS, SEWING, AND EMPOWERMENT

Having placed my key themes in a particular local context, I begin a shift in focus that relocates them in wider national settings. The 1993 *Pacific Women’s Directory* listed nine national women’s nongovernment organizations in Vanuatu—mostly church bodies—as well as the equivocally feminist Vanuatu National Council of Women and fifteen provincial and island councils of women. It is novel, umbrella organizations like these that particularly insist on the need for women to combine. *Yuniti, Pis, Prosperiti* (unity, peace, prosperity) is the VNCW motto, while its “Goals” promote “unity” as both means and objective: “To unite women to work together . . . to promote unity . . . to share . . . to build a strong network.” The more inclusive the context the more likely is an avowed strategic interest in unity, while the level of stated concern indexes the extent to which common action is seen as elusive, fragile, and threatened. The Vila Town Council of Women, in an implicit criticism of urban women’s lack of cooperative spirit, proclaimed as its major goal: “To unite all women in Vila town area to see the importance of working together for the benefit of all” (PWRB 1993, 151, 169). The theme of unity is a predictable concern of organizers, especially in dislocating urban settings, where strength for the weak might plausibly be seen to rest in numbers and collective action. Unity was expressly mentioned or implied by only four of the twenty-two grassroots women’s groups—all but two in central and southern Vanuatu—which took the trouble to register with the 1993 directory. One of the four was the Uje Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union. The decline in its active membership that I noted in 1997 is reflected in a greater stress on togetherness in the “Goals” announced in the second edition: “To bring together members to help strengthen their spiritual life. To strengthen the spirit of working together” (PWRB 1997, 197).

The professed goals and activities of the grassroots groups constitute

modest, fluid constellations of the spiritual (prayer, Christian fellowship); the financial (fundraising, credit schemes); the productive (gardening, cooking, sewing, weaving); the educative (training, sharing ideas and ways of doing things); the practical (health, water tanks, and sewing machine maintenance); and the social (visiting old, poor, and sick people) (PWRB 1993, 149–170). A strong orientation to home economics and welfare is a recurrent theme in both editions of the directory and typifies most women's organizations and groups throughout the Pacific Islands. From both the limited literature on the subject and my ongoing interviewing program with ni-Vanuatu and citizens of other Melanesian countries, it is clear that such a focus is usually expected or demanded by female participants. Women's preoccupation with the apparently mundane can frustrate feminists, especially those involved in aid projects seeking to empower indigenous women, rather than reinforce their apparent domestic subsumption (eg, Scheyvens 1998; Schoeffel 1983; Soondrawu 1991). Yet what outsiders read unproblematically as a sexist traditional or colonial legacy (or both) takes on unexpected hues in the process of localization: as Regina Scheyvens has shown for Solomon Islands (1998), ostensibly conservative, innocuous bodies like the Young Women's Christian Association and church women's organizations often pursue social agenda and implement programs that in rural contexts can be quite radical. In Vanuatu and elsewhere in Melanesia, women's involvement in collective action in the protected space of a village church women's group—with possible extensions to district, island, provincial, national, or regional caucuses—provides their main opportunity to build solidarity, confidence, and leadership or managerial skills, which can help loosen hegemonic male controls over their bodies and their thinking (eg, Douglas 2000b).

Sewing as a metonym for women's collective cooperative enterprise spans all contexts and shades of politics in Vanuatu. Nationally, "sewing machine maintenance and sewing" were listed as core practical activities of the Vanuatu National Council of Women, which included a workshop on sewing machine maintenance in its National Festival of Women in May 1990 (Molisa 1990, 36; PWRB 1993, 151). "Purchase of two sewing machines" was a pending project of the Catholic group in Aneityum; a club in the Torres Group announced a "sewing machine project"; another in Makira wanted to learn "how to sew and repair sewing machines" and listed its activities as "sewing and weaving"; PWMU groups in several islands cited among their activities "sewing machine repair and renting tools to other groups," "weaving, sewing," and the desire "to buy a cole-

man light and a hurricane lamp and a sewing machine" (PWRB 1993, 157, 162, 166; 1997, 195–197). In local and domestic settings the lure of sewing is partly utilitarian and economic, but may be more than that. Not only do sewing and weaving produce items of mundane practical utility, economic value as handicrafts, and possibly social and ritual significance,²² but they are key loci for female sociality and shared creativity. Lissant Bolton, a specialist on women's fine-mat production and female grade-taking rituals in northern Vanuatu, stated that weaving and sewing, or indigenous equivalents such as skirt-making, have always provided women with valued occasions for sociality (pers com, 22 Oct 1997; 1993, chap 6). A club on Aniwa pleaded poignantly, "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" (PWRB 1993, 164). Implicit in the appeal is a view of sewing as potentially empowering, beyond economic utility, recalling traces in early mission accounts of proactive female "delight" in the seemingly domestic. In Vanuatu, and the Pacific generally, sewing and the art of sewing machine maintenance are evidently not to be despised.²³

WOMEN IN MALE DOMAINS: NATION, CHURCHES, *KASTOM*

My snapshots thus far have situated ambiguous manifestations of female agency and sociality within past and present local settings in Vanuatu, with a particular focus on church women's groups and a glance toward the wider contexts of national women's organizations. Pragmatically, the growing social and economic significance of Christian women's groups in Vanuatu's villages is potentially empowering for rural women; rhetorically, it subverts the essentialist opposition of tradition and modernity. At this point I bring the nation-state into sharper focus as a mostly male and largely ineffectual domain: place and island are the primary sites of *kastom*; women are at once confined and intensely committed to the local and the domestic; even for men, slippage between rural and urban dimensions of the local is far more constitutive of experience and identity than is national citizenship.

Regarded synchronically, Aneityum looks like a microcosm of the nation: Aneityumese of both sexes do not doubt that their island is part of a nation or question their own status as ni-Vanuatu citizens. But cast in (very recent) historical perspective, the state is the ultimate artificial collectivity and the oft-maligned origin of the "politics" that are seen as cor-

rosive to more organic socialities. In Aneityum, as in rural areas 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 benefits expected from payment of taxes and electoral support: those that do transpire are rarely sustainable or are patently absurd.²⁴ In the latter category belongs a ten-kilometer-long road bulldozed in Aneityum at huge cost shortly before my visit in 1997: not only was it said to be so badly constructed that it would hardly survive the next hurricane season, not only did it destroy 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, mostly men involved in politics and administration. Dorothy Regenvanu, one of only two female Presbyterian pastors in Vanuatu, saw nationalism as weak and island identity as paramount. She illustrated her case with anecdotes about how things work in the Paton Memorial Church in Port Vila: "When they elect elders they would say, this elder's from Malakula, therefore he'll look after the Malakula people"; "they say for a church roster for cleaning, then the Malakulans will do it today, and next week it'll be the Paamese" (Regenvanu 1997). The self-professed insularity of ni-Vanuatu, men in particular, especially in town, is neither "traditional" nor "national," but registers an at once expanded and contained modern arena for the practice of *kastom* and identity politics: the island. Women, by contrast, are largely restricted to local and domestic spheres and enjoy few advantages from citizenship: for instance, their constitutional and legal rights to equality and protection against violence are consistently ignored or infringed by representatives of the police and the judiciary (Mason 2000; VNCW press release, 8 Feb 2000). A few have attained national repute since independence, generally in women's affairs, but only 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 1970s, often in the face of male hostility or disquiet. Their numbers have not swelled noticeably in the last decade, and in some respects have contracted. There has only ever been one female member of parliament in Vanuatu. In national elections in March 1998 fewer than ten women stood among more than two hundred candidates for fifty-two seats. None was elected (Tari 1998, 61–64; *Vanuatu Weekly*, 21 Mar 1998).

From before independence, men have often opportunistically used an insular conception of *kastom* in support of arguments against women's participation in the public sphere. A council of chiefs in north Efate tried

to bar the candidature of women in the first national elections on the grounds that it was against local *kastom*. In riposte, a prominent woman, Mildred Sope, mobilized Christian values and a civic rights discourse to argue a very different nexus of gender, *kastom*, and national politics, evincing an optimism about the latter that has widely turned to cynicism or resignation:

How absurd to think that what the Efate chiefs decide to be right or wrong in their custom, should be meant to influence [sic] the welfare of the whole [national] community. . . . Politics concerns the ways to bring about the good of a country and its citizens. Both men and women being God's creatures are equal in his sight—they are also citizens of a country with equal basic rights We have been fighting against colonial injustices up to now and we are now ready to rule our own country. . . . [To] exclude women from our national decision making . . . is pure injustice. (Mildred Sope, *Vanua'aku Viewpoints*, 20 Sep 1979)²⁵

Nearly twenty years later, this same woman's husband, Barak Sope, a government minister soon to be prime minister, rehearsed the tactic of extrapolating an interested version of parochial *kastom* into the modern state arena in an effort to delegitimize both the public activities of a woman and the authority of a state agency over his own dubious activities. He demanded the repeal of the Ombudsman Act on the grounds that "its content contradicted the traditional practices in Vanuatu": the then ombudsman, a citizen but a French woman, "was very critical of many male leaders in her reports therefore she had contradicted the principles of the local society, [since] according to the custom of his home island . . . men could not be criticised by women" (Radio Vanuatu News, 21 Nov 1997).

Such episodes signal the contingent, ambiguous interrelationships of religion, *kastom*, and gender in a modern Melanesian state. The earliest conversions to Christianity were in Aneityum in the 1850s. By the mid-twentieth century most ni-Vanuatu identified as Christians and equated *kastom* with "heathenism" as the work of the devil, 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, 247–258; Tonkinson 1981, 1982). Two decades later such antinomies are increasingly blurred (Curtis 1999; Michael Morgan, pers com, 14 Apr 2000). During the struggle for independence in the 1970s *kastom* was selectively rehabilitated in the interests of forging a nation and uneasily

enshrined, along with Christianity, in the national constitution and symbols, to the discomfort of many Christians (Jolly 1997, 137–140; Tonkinson 1982). Political discourses routinely conflate the two, as in this Presbyterian party leader's homily: "When we do not honour the custom we organised to forgive one another and settle the issue then it means that the blood Jesus Christ shed on the cross to forgive our sins is meaningless" (Peter Taurokoto, *Trading Post*, 21 Mar 1998). Yet in long Christianized islands like Aneityum, where rapid early conversion and devastating depopulation obliterated much indigenous practice and disrupted the transmission of *kastom* knowledge, the revival of *kastom* has been hesitant and cautious. It consists mainly in learning dances, songs, and stories taught by a handful of older people and restoring certain body decorations in the face of Presbyterian ambivalence and SDA hostility.

Despite nationalist celebration of Christian *kastom*, the attitudes toward *kastom* of the churches and their parishioners vary widely: from qualified approval by Anglicans and Catholics, and the gradual rehabilitation of selected aspects of *kastom* by the previously hostile Churches of Christ, to the ambivalence of the Presbyterians, the ongoing opposition of the Seventh-day Adventist and Apostolic Churches, and the fundamentalist intolerance of most new evangelical and pentecostal groups (Reganvanu 1997; Tarisesei 2000). Public responsibility for the guardianship, revival, and promotion of *kastom*, defined as place-specific knowledge and practices attributed to the precolonial past, rests with the consciously secular Vanuatu Cultural Centre, which from its inception in 1976 until the inauguration of the Women's Culture Project in the early 1990s treated *kastom* as a male preserve. Since then, the acknowledgment as true *kastom* of women's productions and activities—such as mats and their making in Ambae—has enhanced women's confidence, self-esteem, and community repute (Bolton 1998, 1999; Tarisesei 2000). *Kastom* politics, though, remains resolutely male: all chiefs, like almost all national politicians, are men.

As with *kastom*, negotiation of gender issues within the churches is often problematic, and attitudes vary with denominations along a similar spectrum: the Anglican Mothers' Union and the Christian Women's Fellowship of the Churches of Christ are affiliated with the Vanuatu National Council of Women, whereas the Presbyterian, Adventist, and most pentecostal churches are opposed. The woman in charge of the council in 1997 regarded the Churches of Christ, to which she belonged, as "a very good church" on gender issues—its then conference president was a woman,

the first ni-Vanuatu woman to gain such status (Solomon 1997). In sharp contrast, the secretary-general of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union explained the frustrations of working with an intransigent male church hierarchy:

Our Church does not agree for us to work very closely with the NCW. We are trying our best, the women, to cooperate together, to work together, but only the men, they are not helpful for us to [do so]. If I'm going to join it's for my individual [self], not to represent the organization. But the thing is that all the members in our organization, the pastors, they don't want the women to go out . . . we are still trying to tell the men that we want to join the NCW, but we can't do because we are working under them. . . . We share [as] individual [Christians], we don't share as an organization. . . . I think about four times we put forward to the general assembly [to join the Vanuatu National Council of Women] but we are not allowed so we're trying again this year. We pray for it . . . we women want to join the others. (Mangowai 1997)

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE LOCAL FACES OF FEMINISM

Women are thus largely excluded from national arenas in Vanuatu, by male prejudice, lack of education and opportunity, and to some extent by choice: notoriously, women rarely vote for female candidates. Nonetheless, two prominent umbrella women's organizations—the Vanuatu National Council of Women and the Vanuatu Women's Centre—strive with some success to direct national attention and resources to global issues such as the status of women, women in governance, human rights, and violence against women. The Vanuatu National Council of Women emerged shortly before independence out of the Women's Wing of the National, later Vanua'aku Party, with the general aims of uniting, training, and representing women. It achieved a high point in 1990 in organizing the National Festival of Women as a joint celebration of its own tenth anniversary and that of the nation, but in the mid-to-late 1990s was often riven by internal dissension. The Women's Centre, more radical and with a single-issue focus, was formed in 1992 as “a counselling and education centre that works to end violence against women in Vanuatu” (Tahi and Kilsby 1998). Scholars and secular aid workers are fairly comfortable with these central, largely urban-based organizations, their often tertiary-educated leadership, and their familiar recourse to a human rights discourse and proactive tactics—consciousness-raising, training programs, workshops, counseling, and provision of refuge and legal assistance for victims of sexual and domestic violence. The Vanuatu National Council of Women and the Women's Centre

are far more prominent in academic and secular aid-agency literature than the national church women's organizations, which are usually pious and mundane in their agendas (eg, Jolly 1991a, 1996, 1997; Maryanne 1997; Mason 2000). Yet for most rural women, as in Aneityum, it is the local chapters of church women's wings that provide avenues for collective action, small-scale development activities, and perhaps modest empowerment (Douglas 2000a; Netine 2000).

In Vanuatu, as in many of the Pacific islands, *feminism* and *activist* remain dirty words, laden with connotations of heartless globalization and irreligion (Johnson 1984, 35–36; Jolly 1991a). They are avoided by women's groups, including the umbrella organizations—the Women's Centre dropped references to “empowerment, gender issues and feminism” from its entry in the second edition of the *Pacific Women's Directory* (PWRB 1993, 152–153; 1997, 199). Indigenous ambivalence about feminism has been a refrain in literature on the women's movement in Vanuatu from before independence. In an early article Grace Mera Molisa—nationalist, poet, women's rights advocate, and senior bureaucrat—dismissed “Women's Liberation or Women's Lib” as “a European disease to be cured by Europeans,” in contrast to the “total liberation” sought by the independence movement (Molisa 1978, 5). Hilda Lini—nationalist, editor, regional women's affairs bureaucrat, and politician—was quoted as saying: “The term feminism is virtually unknown in the South Pacific, . . . Pacific women have strong and firm beliefs on the subject—but not in the terminology of the Western world” (Robie 1984). An educational adviser, Kathy Rarua, “dislikes a common criticism of the women's liberation movement that it is a purely Western phenomenon” (Mangnall 1987, 40). A nonindigenous male reporter described the then VNCW executive director, Kathy Solomon, as “far from being a wild-eyed feminist” and summed up the “women's movement” in Vanuatu as “a distinctly low key affair based on self-help and gentle raising of awareness” (Rothwell 1990, 50). An “Update” on the Women's Centre by its major external funding source remarked on the “complex political environment” in which it operates: “The women can't be seen to be politically aligned, or too influenced by Western Feminism, and they must obtain the support of those in power to survive ie: chiefs and politicians” (IWDA 1996).

In a 1990 interview Solomon spoke pragmatically of the slow progress made by the Vanuatu National Council of Women: “A lot of women don't really know what we are doing, and some of them—not only uneducated women—thought our work was rubbish. . . . [I]t will take us ages.” She stressed that “We are not here to fight men We are here to assist—

we just want to tell them that we need to be recognised, we have talents we can contribute to the development of this nation, and perhaps you could give us some room to achieve this" (Rothwell 1990, 50). Women belonging to the Vanuatu National Council of Women and especially the Women's Centre are often accused, by women as well as men, of being "damaged" and therefore anti-men, pro-divorce, and feminist. From inclination as well as self-defense, both organizations cloak their relative radicalism on gender issues in discourses of community and family values or domesticity. The official literature of the Women's Centre Collectively strategically yokes the concept of universal womanhood to a *kastom* symbol expressing the key indigenous value of women as mothers and peacemakers: "The logo of the Centre . . . shows the Women's symbol being embraced by the leaves of the *namele* [*namwele*, *Cycas* palm] 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" (VWC 1994, iii).

The vigorous campaigns of these organizations against sexual violence as a human rights issue have necessarily impinged on the churches. While the men who dominate the Presbyterian hierarchy refused to allow the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union to forge formal links with the Vanuatu National Council of Women, the church sought informal advice from individual Presbyterian women at the Women's Centre in order to set up its own crisis unit. At its 1997 national congress the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union resolved to seek funds to establish a counseling center that, wrote 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).

Women in Vanuatu mostly advocate a strategy of pursuing small gains with persistence and without overt confrontation. Echoing Solomon's comments quoted earlier, Jean Tarisesei, coordinator of the Women's Culture Project, maintained that "in doing things [to raise the status of women you] must always take time and be patient with men and try to communicate more and then you will get what they say and then you can go in slowly, to work with them and in that way you can convince [them] that women are not just nothing; they can be an equal to men" (Tarisesei 1997).²⁶ A leader of the Christian Women's Fellowship of the Churches of Christ in Port Vila said that her organization cooperated readily with the Women's Centre, but stressed, "it's good to take both sides, to teach them both sides . . . So, if any important programs, like especially to do with women, maybe violence or whatever, . . . then . . . it's open, for both

the husband and wife to come and listen” (Ala 1997). An expatriate aid worker on gender awareness programs remarked that she had to qualify her own feminism because it does not work in Vanuatu. She had come to see “subversion,” rather than confrontation, as the most effective strategy and to acknowledge that values of harmony, working together, and family unity are crucial. She learned that gender really does include men in Vanuatu and wrote about it somewhat defensively in notes prepared for a 1996 training workshop: “Gender is just a word which shows the differences between women and men in a society. . . . Gender looks at the work and responsibilities of men and women in a society” (VANGO 1996, my translation from Bislama).

CONCLUSION

These partial images of women, women’s groups, and gender relations in Vanuatu derive from glimpses of past and present contexts in rural Aneityum and modern urban settings. A core image is of relatively solitary gardeners desiring sociality, but on their own terms. For example, marriage in Aneityum was represented by Tepahae as a strategy to unite families to “make good cooperation and good community”—“marriageability dominates the system of kinship terminology” in Anejom, the vernacular language (Tepahae and Lynch 1994, 13; Tepahae 1997, 14, 16 Aug). People generally privilege family solidarity as a supreme value, while women I spoke with were often ambivalent about the contrived collectivity of church and other women’s groups, acknowledging them as beneficial but intrusive. Ambivalence, I suspect, has long been part of ni-Vanuatu women’s attitudes to the claims by missions and churches to encompass, direct, and reshape indigenous, especially female, sociality. Conceding those claims and compliance with at least a necessary minimum of their injunctions and constraints are the price of gaining access to their equivocal benefits—salvation, protection, ritual power, status, knowledge, skills, amusement, *and* fellowship. For rural ni-Vanuatu women, as for village women in Melanesia generally, the local face of modernity, such as it is, is usually found in the church women’s groups that women themselves create and organize and that men often praise for probity and efficiency. Such groups and their members are increasingly acknowledged for their moral authority and economic contributions, but in Vanuatu, as elsewhere in the region, the skills and qualities that women exercise locally are conspicuously missing from wider settings.

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Notes

1 In the 1840s Aneityum was the first island in the New Hebrides to be settled by outsiders, including Evangelical missionary families. Aneityumese converted en masse to Presbyterian Christianity in the 1850s, but suffered drastic depopulation: 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 (Douglas 1989, 1999; Spriggs 1981, 70–94). The New Hebrides became a Franco-British condominium in 1906 and the independent Republic of Vanuatu in 1980. I call the archipelago Vanuatu and its residents ni-Vanuatu, even when referring to the precolonial and colonial eras.

2 A ten-year moratorium on all field-based research in the social sciences from 1985 to 1994 (Bolton 1999, 1) no doubt contributed to the virtual invisibility of modern, especially Christian women in scholarship on Vanuatu. It is a matter of degree only, since they are hardly prominent in academic research done elsewhere in Melanesia: exceptions include work by Sexton (1982, 1986) and Warry (1987, 147–184) on the Wok Meri and Kafaina movements in the Papua New Guinea Highlands—though Christianity looms large in neither study; Pains's thesis on Lifu women in New Caledonia (1996); Scheyvens' thesis on Solomon Islands women (1995; see also 1998).

3 My research in Port Vila and Aneityum respectively was made possible by Jean Tarisesei, coordinator of the Women's Culture Project of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and Philip Tepahae, long-term Vanuatu Cultural Centre fieldworker, chairman of the custom council of Aneityum, and a rigorous critical historian of Aneityumese *kastom* (custom). Jean Tarisesei suggested key persons to interview in government departments, church women's organizations, and national women's associations, and helped arrange meetings with them. Philip Tepahae welcomed me to Aneityum, showed me historical sites, and recorded many hours of *kastom* stories and historical discussion in Bislama. His wife Wanipi, also an authority on *kastom*, introduced me to the organizers of local women's groups.

4 I recently edited a collection of papers by Melanesian women (Douglas 2000b), and am in the process of editing a more academic set of essays on women's groups in Melanesia, including one written by a Papua New Guinean and one by a Solomon Islander.

5 By "agency" I mean not a naturalized notion of the bounded, autonomous individual, but a presumed general human capacity to choose and act strategically, within the limits of local, gendered conceptions of subjectivity and unstable constellations of culture, religion, structure, personality, and circumstance (Douglas 1999, 111–112).

6 On relationships between anthropologists and missionaries, and anthropological frustration with missionary texts, see Barker 1992; BurrIDGE 1978; 1991, esp 205–232; Douglas 2001; Stipe 1980. For self-reflexive critiques by feminists of their ethical problems with missionary texts and the political minefield of representing indigenous female agency, see Douglas in press; Haggis 1998; Mani 1991. For passivist readings of Christian women in Melanesia by feminist and other scholars, see Eves 1996; Gailey 1980; Jolly 1991b, 1993, compare 1998; Miles 1998, 169–170; P Thomas 1982, 114–116; Young 1989.

7 Kuehling 1999, 205–207; Mohanty 1991, 72; Molisa 1978, 5–6; Moore 1988, 21–41; Strathern 1984.

8 For example, there are numerous such traces in a diary written at the end of the nineteenth century by a Methodist missionary sister in southeast Papua New Guinea: "they would spend more time if possible in sewing. . . . Sewing is their pride, for in this they excel. . . . our girls are being taught to make mats in the Fijian style much superior to their own [Mat-making] involves a good deal of time and attention from the girls. First of all they go off in a body for a day to collect the stuff Evidently it is a pleasure for all are eager to go" (Lloyd 1898–1902, 2: 21 Apr; 3: 16 May, 10 July 1899).

9 For example, Eves 1996, esp 102–118, 126–127; Jolly 1989, 233–235; 1991b; 1993, 112–115; Miles 1998, 169–170; Young 1989; see also Rountree 2000.

10 For recent historical ethnographies of indigenous Christianity in Melanesia, see Barker 1993; Burt 1994; Robbins 1998; White 1988, 1991. On women's involvements in modern pentecostal Christianity, see Jorgensen 1981; Stewart and Strathern 1998; Tuzin 1997, 146.

11 The *Pacific Women's Directory* grew out of an earlier *Resource Kit for Pacific Women* published by the Pacific Women's Resource Bureau in 1988.

12 The binary set "traditional or nonwestern is to communal or relational as modern or western is to individual" was a staple of racist colonial administrations (eg, on India, see Dirks 1997, 195; on Fiji, see France 1969); in missionary anthropology across the denominations (eg, Lee 1877 [Methodist]; Leenhardt 1947 [French Evangelical]); Stone-Wigg and Newton 1933, 8 [High Anglican]); in modern anthropology, in various guises but with reversed moral weighting (eg,

Dumont 1972, 1986; Gewertz 1984, 619; Gewertz and Errington 1996; Linnekin and Poyer 1990; Strathern 1988; N Thomas 1995, 106).

13 Several anthropologists have stringently criticized the categorical opposition of relational "Melanesian" and bounded "western" concepts of the person on the grounds, among others, that to identify modernity with "westernization" and individualism literally configures present-day villagers as archaic or backward (Carrier 1992b, 15–16; 1992c; Jolly 1992, 146; Macintyre 1995).

14 On the fertile tension of individuality and community in Christian experience see Burridge 1991, esp 54–70, 71–132, 159–167.

15 Everywhere in Vanuatu, including in town, as in Oceania generally, kinship provides a strategic metaphor to describe and legitimate friendship, co-residence, and other social links.

16 Holger Jebens described a parallel situation in a "small rural village" in Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea, where "frequent quarrels" between Catholic and Adventist residents often involved close kin. Here, too, Adventists maintained that Catholics "cannot be considered good Christians" because they flout biblical prescriptions for Saturday worship; Catholics accused Adventists of encroaching on Catholic territory and "causing social disruption." Jebens saw Adventism's attraction to its mostly young adherents as in part the promise of "development," to be achieved by "dissociating themselves from traditional behaviour and . . . incorporating aspects of Western culture" (1997, 34, 39, 41, 42).

17 Compare Gordon 1990 on the Mormon Church in Tonga; Errington and Gewertz 1995, 107–134, on the evangelical New Church in Karavar, Papua New Guinea; Brutti 1997, 114–118, on the SDA Church in the Oksapmin region of Papua New Guinea. "New Religious Group" is Manfred Ernst's term for "rapidly growing religious groups . . . broadly designated as 'evangelical', 'fundamentalist' and 'pentecostal-charismatic'" (1994, 10). An Adventist minister admitted his church's "entrenched . . . exclusivism" in Pacific mission settings, but argued that Islanders are attracted to its "'wholistic' philosophy," despite the "highly individualistic" fashion in which "it has often been construed . . . within Adventism" (Oliver 1998, 110–114, 117).

18 The Seventh-day Adventist Church is evangelical and millennial but not pentecostal. There were no pentecostal groups active in Aneityum in 1997, but some Presbyterians, especially young persons, were attracted by charismatic preaching and faith healing, to the disquiet or bemusement of many elders. Charismatic beliefs and practices are spreading rapidly in mainline Catholic and Protestant churches in the Pacific (Ernst 1994, 13, 123, 213; Garrett 1997; Gewertz and Errington 1996; Robbins 2001).

19 Yet ironically, as I discuss later, the male-dominated Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu refused to permit the national Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union to coordinate with the Vanuatu National Council of Women and the Van-

uatu Women's Centre, which have led the campaign for women's rights in Vanuatu.

20 By contrast, some of the most horrifying anecdotes of domestic violence cited by the Women's Centre were located in the islands, though the bulk of its clientele are urban residents (Jolly 1996, 181; "Maryanne" 1997; VWC 1994). An official social planning report argued that violence against women is increasing, particularly in towns, but may go unreported in rural areas, where anecdotal evidence suggests it is common and often "severe." The reasons given by victims were taken to reflect "the expectation that women should be subservient to men," believed to stem "from the bride price" (Tari 1998, 57–60). The link presumed between domestic violence and bride price indirectly supports Tepahae's case for the low incidence of wife-beating in Aneityum.

21 The trope "women work, men talk" is invoked by Rachel M Bule in her poem "Blak Woman," in a collection of poems about women by young ni-Vanuatu, published by the Vanuatu National Council of Women in 1990: "Black woman is bearing a heavy load/ . . . Her husband . . . / is carrying nothing but/ A piece of wood in his hand/ . . . Black woman is still going on/ To do her everyday chores/ Her husband/ Is sitting down/ . . . Telling stories/ And waiting for a good dinner/ While this woman/ Though she is very tired/ Must give them all enough" (VNCW 1990, 28, my translation from Bislama).

22 Indigenous women's products such as fine mats, fiber skirts, and bark cloth had, and often still have, important symbolic significance and ritual potency in many Pacific Islands societies, while quilts, originally an innovation by missionary women but thoroughly indigenized, have similar value in Polynesian countries such as Tonga and Cook Islands (eg, Bolton 1993; 1998; Hammond 1986; Herda 1999; Rongokea 1992, 1–5; Schoeffel 1979, 5; 1999; N Thomas 1995, 131–150; Weiner 1977). For comparative ethnographic studies of the social value of textiles see Weiner and Schneider 1989.

23 Gewertz and Errington gave a Papua New Guinea instance of the paradoxical entanglement of a general modernist ambivalence about the domestic with the quasi-sacred valuation placed on sewing by indigenous women and some local versions of modernity, as in the testimony of a young Wewak woman recounting her rebirth in a charismatic Catholic youth movement: "My mother and my father struggled to pay my school fees; they wanted me to go to high school. . . . But I ended up with a Standard Six Certificate—with nothing. . . . And I thought I was rubbish. I couldn't find a job but . . . God has a plan for me: I can sew clothes, can help my parents take care of the house. And I know God loves me. . . . I was so angry. A true friend, a member of Antioch . . . told me that this attitude wasn't good. I took her advice, and now I am a new women. Now I am peaceful: I smile and chat freely. . . . I have dedicated myself to sewing. I practiced hard. I learned how to use the big machines in the Wirui Catholic Mission laundry house. I am happy with what I have accomplished. . . . God wants me to be

a special person. He put special things inside me" (1996, 485, translated from Tok Pisin).

24 For a Papua New Guinea instance of "negative nationalism"—the capacity at once to "hold a national identity and harbor extremely negative views of the nation of which one is a part"—see Robbins 1998, 104, 108–113.

25 I thank Michael Morgan for bringing to my attention this item and the remark by Peter Taurokoto quoted next.

26 Putting precept into practice, Tarisesei tutored her anthropologist colleague Lissant Bolton, adviser to the Women's Culture Project since 1991, on "the critical importance of showing respect" to men's *kastom* when speaking about women's *kastom* at public meetings in Ambae (Bolton 1998, 18).

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Abstract

This paper seeks to unpack the ambiguous intersections of gender, Christianity, and *kastom*, together with place, island, and nation in a modern Melanesian state. It does so through a series of verbal “snapshots,” mostly of mundane settings, which chart the ambivalent, mobile interplay of individual and community in the self-representations and actions of ni-Vanuatu, particularly women. The snapshots juxtapose local and wider aspects of ni-Vanuatu women’s past and present lives as Christians and citizens, locating them successively in the remote island of Aneityum and in urban and national contexts. Arguing that women’s agency deserves the same scrutiny as that of men, I problematize the romantic secularism that slights indigenous women’s engagements in apparently banal Christian settings and activities, especially fellowship groups and sewing, because they seem to advance hegemonic agendas of conversion, domestication, and modernization. Instead I see the growing social and economic significance of Christian women’s groups in Vanuatu’s villages as potentially empowering for rural women. By contrast, women are generally absent from authority positions in the churches and in the nation-state—the latter a mainly male domain experienced as ineffectual by most ni-Vanuatu. Notwithstanding widespread indigenous suspicion of “western feminism,” women’s issues and gender relations are kept uneasily on the national agenda by the women’s wings of the mainline churches and particularly by the umbrella women’s organizations, the Vanuatu National Council of Women and the Vanuatu Women’s Centre.

KEYWORDS: Christianity, *kastom*, modernity, nation-state, rural villages, Vanuatu, women