

**VESSELS OF *KASTOM*:
CANOES AND CANOE BUILDERS OF LAMEN ISLAND**

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By

Joel van Allen

Thesis Committee:

Geoffrey M. White, Chairperson

Lamont Lindstrom

Ty Tengan

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This work is dedicated to the people of Lamén Island—past, present, and future,

with very special thanks to Apia Mowa for putting up with me; and to his wonderful wife, Loma, for putting up with both of us.

I wish to express my respect and gratitude to the men who contributed to this project directly by sharing their work, their humor, their wisdom, and their words:

Atis Avio
Filemon Charlie
Douglas Danda
Avio Jack
Orah Joseph

Ben Kalo
Charlie Lemaiya
Tom Maite
Willie Mowa
Tasso Omai

Halpy Tala
Morsen Valia
Jack Waiwo
Marius Yoan

Sipa ruka eä suniyena.

I also wish to thank Ralph Regenvanu for greasing the wheel, and Sarah Kunkel for adjusting her clock to *aelan taem*.

Author's Note

Nearly all of the words used in identifying the parts and natural materials used in the construction of Lamén Island canoes rely on the use of Lewo Lamenu, the indigenous language of Lamén Island. As such, pronunciation of words in Lewo is relatively straightforward; however, the language occasionally uses a nasalized *v*, which is indicated by the use of *ṽ* in this work. It has no direct equivalent in English, poised somewhere between what we hear as [v] and [w]. *Merawelaṽ*, for example, is pronounced mer'-ə-we-laṽ. Further, [g]/ [k] as well as [t]/[d] and [b]/[p] are often used interchangeably in spelling, although [g] is, in some cases, pronounced /ng/, [b] is pronounced /mb/, and [d] is pronounced /nd/ when speaking. For purposes of clarity and consistency in this work, therefore, I defer to the familiar English pronunciation and spelling for these sounds when using Lewo.

Grammatically, neither Bislama (Vanuatu's national language, based on English and French) nor Lewo nouns have discrete plural or possessive forms, such as the use of -s or -'s in English. Verbs in Bislama, as well, are entirely lexical and rely on auxiliary verbs to convey tense. The instances in this work in which I use isolated Bislama or Lewo words in English sentences, I adhere to these grammatical forms except when I feel they may cause confusion or alter meaning in some way.

The term "*kastom*," as it appears in quotations, refers to the word-concept itself as decontextualized for intellectual consideration, while *kastom* in italics refers to the fully integrated and operational "way in which people live their daily lives." Words in languages other than English are italicized; however, the capitalization and italicization of the word *Other* on page 50 serves to emphasize the concept of "other-ness" as one of intellectual, rather than immediate or pragmatic, comparison.

PREFACE

Custom

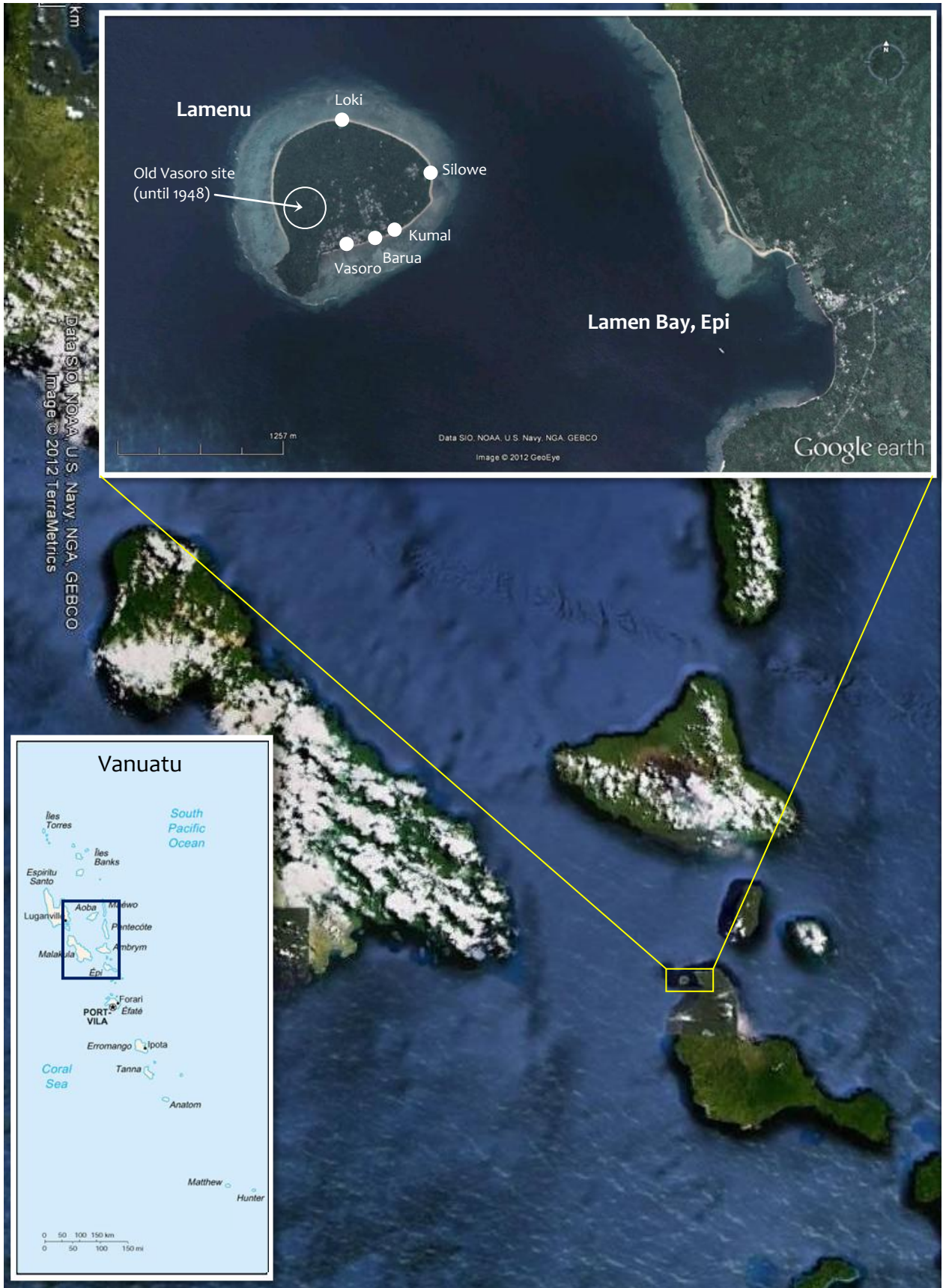
By Grace Molisa

Custom
is an English word
English
a confluence
of streams of words
is a reservoir
of every shade
nuance and hue
sharply
contrasting
Melanesia's
limited vocabulary
supplementing
non-verbal
communication.

Inadvertently
misappropriating
'Custom'
misapplied
bastardised
murdered
a Frankenstein
corpse
conveniently
recalled
to intimidate
women
the timid

the ignorant
the weak.
'Custom'
oft-neglected
by non-conforming
advocates
the loudest
proponents
empty vessels . . .
Theoretical
'Custom'
more honoured
in omission
than commission.

A word
sandwiched
between
multifariously varied
traditional vernacular
and accidentally
occidental
Franco-Britannic
life and lingo
perplexed
by pandemonic
condominium
complex.
Custom is
as custom does!



CHAPTER 1: Thoughts on Language and the Nature of Change

Introduction

The yellow flowers of the *burau* tree were falling on the beach, marking the time to return home from Lamén Bay. We crossed the bay at dusk in a crowded speedboat loaded precariously down to the level of the gunwale. The journey across the bay was slow, without the usual chit-chat to pass the time and take peoples' minds and stomachs off the rolling of the water; the gurgling roar of the engine made conversation tiresome to people already weary from a long day working in the gardens. This was the time when the men's thoughts were turning to kava and the women's to the evening meal. Passengers drifted off to sleep among stalks of bananas and bundles of yams while children on the foredeck dangled their legs off the bow to stare out to sea, occasionally pointing out to each other a sighting of dolphins or barracuda or the shimmer of flying fish winging *en masse* over the low swells.

Twenty minutes later, the boat was maneuvering carefully through the shallow nests of brain coral and volcanic rock dotting Lamén Island's western reef. The pilot spun the bow around once we neared the shoreline; his son leapt from the boat and pulled the boat astern the last few feet to the beach. There was a palpable sense of relief from everyone on board. People murmured to themselves, some giggled nervously through their words. Slowly, passengers disembarked, passing loads of food to others waiting on the beach. People then settled their accounts discretely with the pilot before heaving their respective bundles toward home.

The shoreline looked strangely different than I remembered, receding upward to a line of sea oaks that had once stood much farther inland. Their roots, grasping blindly seaward from a sharply eroded shelf, were now exposed and tangled in mid-air. There were few seaworthy canoes along the shore, and I had seen only two canoes sailing homeward during our crossing. Undoubtedly, I thought, I'd see more familiar faces over kava that evening.

Later, however, to my astonishment, I was told there were no longer any kava bars on the island. There had been a number of significant changes since I'd left the island in 2001, but the joint possibilities that Lamén Islanders would prefer commercial speedboats to their own canoes, and, furthermore, had completely eliminated the social institution of nightly public kava drinking, seemed to me unimaginable, completely antithetical to what I understood—in fact, what I had always been taught—it meant to be a Lamén Islander. *"I no gat kenu, I no gat laef,"* Chief Douglas had once told me one evening over kava—"There is no life without canoes."

A stroll around the tiny island revealed colorful, new passenger speedboats bobbing in the sandy shallows of the reef near Vasoro, as well as in the deeper waters off Silowe, to the south. Handwritten signs could be found posted intermittently around the island, stating passenger rates to various destinations around Epi, as well as to the island of Paama to the north and the island volcano, Lopevi, to the east.

As for signs of any kava bars, only a few meat grinders, repurposed to grind kava, could still be found scattered among the island's three adjacent villages. Where these skeletonized grinders stood, however, anchored to makeshift wooden posts under which plastic buckets could be fitted to catch the acrid pulp prior to mixing, there were no longer the familiar assemblages of tree stumps, timber slats on concrete blocks, overturned and rotting canoe hulls on which people could simply sit and chat while "listening" to the kava. The familiar thatch shelters for serving and drinking kava looked as though they'd been scavenged for their wood and nails, leaving little more than rotting posts behind. When I inquired about this, my brother, Apia, who would be working as my research counterpart, told me in a tone I recognized as embarrassment that "things aren't like before." He explained that, since the surge in the export market price of kava, there wasn't enough kava left on Epi for steady local consumption. Few people grew enough in their gardens to provide an adequate supply for even a small kava bar, while others had actually replaced portions of their subsistence gardens with kava plants, the express intent

being to sell them to export companies from Efate and Espiritu Santo. So high was the international demand for kava that growers on Epi were harvesting their plants well before the five years traditionally considered optimal by local drinking standards. Consequently, when kava was available at kava bars in Lamén Bay, its quality was regularly a point of contention—if not outright ridicule—with local customers. For Lamén Islanders in particular, replacing food from the garden with kava plants was not a viable option; such an indulgence could not be afforded the people of a tiny island for whom food acquisition was tied solely to the “big island,” requiring substantial physical effort, logistical coordination, and a disciplined work ethic. This usually meant returning home from Epi at the end of the day with an abundance of food but only what little kava might be grown personally and was intended for private consumption.

Many canoes, as well, had an air of abandonment, half-hidden in the brush with the pale “five-o’clock shadow” as sea salt is purged from the dried, bleaching wood. Apia explained that many Lamén Islanders were, in fact, in New Zealand as part of that country’s new Recognized Seasonal Employment program. Participants worked for six to 12 months at a time, picking kiwis and apples. This accounted for the absence of so many familiar faces, I thought, and the reason, I was told, several community projects had been placed on hold—there simply weren’t enough able-bodied people left on the island to do the work. But the common justification seemed to be that those returning from New Zealand were bringing home a lot of money. This was evidenced by the surprising appearance of home-based benzene generators on the island, as well as a number of concrete block houses in various stages of completion; televisions, stereo systems, mobile phones, bicycles, and even an impressive wind turbine; alcohol, too, to popular vexation, was also making its presence known. This influx of money also explained how Lamén Islanders could lately afford to hire passenger speedboats on a regular basis, let alone buy and maintain them. In a time of economic abundance, paying a 100vt (roughly one dollar)

fare to go to the garden, it seemed, was a worthwhile expense and a lot less work than paddling a canoe. Owning a speedboat was apparently proving a lucrative venture.

I had returned to Lamén Island, with permission from local community leaders and the Vanuatu Cultural Center in Port Vila, to conduct research on Lamén Island's maritime *kastom*, focusing particularly on the evolution of *waa*, or indigenous canoes. While much of my research plan was to involve both individual interviews with Lamén Island's few remaining canoe builders and the physical construction of a local canoe, my familiarity with the island and its community had taught me that much of what I would learn would be revealed over casual conversation and a few compelling shells of kava at the local kava bars. Practically everything I knew about Vanuatu in general and Lamén Island in particular—including the national language, Bislama, and a little of the local language, Lewo—I learned from old men sitting on cracked canoe hulls beside the warm, alluring glow of a *hariken laet*, a small kerosene lantern that radiated outward into the balmy, quiet night its insular promise of commensality. The complete absence of kava bars once I arrived, therefore, left me with an unexpected sense of bitterness—for the loss of many opportunities for important social engagement personally and as a researcher, but also for the loss of a critical traditional performance of a *kastom* mode of exchange still visible in the daily life of a rapidly changing community.

In this respect, my research could just as aptly have focused on kava culture on Lamén Island (see also Young, 1995) as it could indigenous canoes. In truth, I felt the loss of this one essential aspect of local culture impaired my ability to satisfactorily examine other aspects that were equally as endangered. A tremendous social and educational resource had simply disappeared with what I perceived initially to be local complacency.

It brought to mind the death of Apia's older brother, Eric, in 2001. He was one of the most knowledgeable and respected men regarding traditional *kastom* on Lamén Island at that time. Apia and I had paddled Eric, looking haggard and pale, across Lamén Bay in a canoe so that he could go to the

Vaimali hospital, where he died three days later of what locals term “lazy blood.” Word of Eric’s death overshadowed conversation at the kava bars, particularly among the chiefs. The dawning realization of the *kastom* knowledge that had been lost with Eric preempted a community-wide meeting to address the epidemic neglect of traditional knowledge sharing that had pervaded the community, and to promote the revitalization of *kastom* practices of intergenerational knowledge sharing.

At that time, I was a Peace Corps Volunteer who had lived on the island for nearly two years, working as a teacher in Lamén Island’s small primary school. I introduced an idea to replace the paid government teachers with select volunteers from the community for one week, during which time each class would be taught a strictly *kastom* curriculum, including everything from language classes in Lewo to traditional storytelling, craft-making, performances, and canoe-building. The idea was eagerly received by the school and the community, and it was surprisingly easy to organize, with many of the arrangements being hashed out between the men over kava in the evenings and the women during regular meetings of the PWMU, or Presbyterian Women’s Mission Union.

Throughout the week, classes practiced songs and learned dances long since performed on Lamén Island; the old women taught traditional games to the youngest children, while the young women taught the older girls how to weave various mats and baskets, as well as items for tourists; on the beach near the school, old and young men alike returned daily from the forest with materials for building a *waa*. As they worked together, they invited the boys to watch and participate, showing them the intricacies and nuances of *asi karo* (shaping the hole, or “basket”) and *asi yepe waa* (shaping the hull); hand-weaving the coconut fiber ropes, and properly lashing together the *korana* (outrigger); cutting *leveluwa* (paddles) and carving a suitable bailer. Some of the men, curious themselves, experimented with using traditional tools as well, such as a *piyaïsa* (clamshell adze), albeit with humorous results that left panting participants with a deeper respect for the hard work and ingenuity that characterizes *kastom*, but also a bolstered appreciation for the modern tools available to Lamén



A common mollusk shell, called *kinakiyaṽ*, once used for adze heads.

Islanders today. What once might have taken a year to build, even as a community project, could now be done in less than a week, and in some cases, a single day.

On the final day of the event, which had been given the name *Sabona*, or “reawakening,” each class performed *kastom* songs and dances for the community and a handful of tourists.

Traditional handicrafts were displayed and sold by the individuals who had made them during the week, and the finished canoe, beautifully carved, was auctioned off and raised over 7,000vt for the school. Purchases and donations from foreign visitors who had heard about the event from the local proprietor of the Sunset Bungalows on Epi came to almost 25,000vt, an impressive amount for the community to make in one day.

Both the cultural and community spirit embodied in *Sabona*, and the realization that such events could benefit the community economically, left many with a desire to make the festival a yearly event; however, by the time I returned to Lamén in 2008, *Sabona* had yet to reawaken. Some locals blamed the lack of concern and cooperation at district and national levels on governmental prioritizing that favored a Western educational system, while others blamed general community lethargy at returning to the “hard work” *kastom* demanded. Many felt that *kastom* had already been forgotten in favor of Western materialism and ideals. Others simply viewed *kastom* as the ways of people “before,” with seeming ambivalence about its contemporary relevance. In any case, it became clear to me that multifarious perceptions of the apparently ambiguous nature of *kastom* were problematic to the realization of *Sabona*, both literally and symbolically.

I left Lamenu Island in 2002 and did not return again until 2008. I had begun my graduate study in 2007 and was interested in undertaking my thesis fieldwork in cooperation with the community on Lamenu Island, who had, years before, expressed interest in doing a project related to local *kastom* that could be given to the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC). I was, therefore, intent on spending the next four months laying the groundwork for my upcoming research efforts with Ralph Regenvanu, the Director of the VCC, and members of the Lamenu Island community. Most important during that time was reestablishing my relationship with the people of Lamenu and demonstrating my commitment to assuming a participatory role in the community—a role I hoped to revisit when I returned for four months in 2009 to conduct my thesis fieldwork and again in 2010 when I returned for four months to fulfill my Research Agreement obligations to the VCC.

As Apia and I sat down to discuss the initial arrangements for beginning our research on *waa*, we also discussed opening our own kava bar. I would provide the start-up capital to buy a new lantern, a kava grinder, the necessary serving bowls, and enough kava for the laborers and the public on opening night, as was traditionally proper; in exchange, he would provide the land, raw materials and manpower for the building and its construction. We were both excited about the idea, and our work began immediately. Within days, Apia had a steady and abundant supply of fresh five-year-old kava arriving twice a week by canoe from a relative in the village of Malvasi, five miles across the bay.

The kava bar quickly became the locus of male social activity in the evenings. I served kava every night and, as expected, the presence of a *mera* (foreigner) behind the bar left people both pleased and perplexed. The popular perception of *mera* is that they are unaccustomed to physical labor and “spoil” easily, so they should be treated like delicate porcelain. When customers would ask with furrowed brows why Apia was working me so hard, it became the perfect opportunity to explain my presence—as Apia’s “brother,” as the kava bar’s co-proprietor, and as an anthropologist interested in *kastom* in general, and *waa* in particular. It wasn’t long before the same local interest shown in the

sudden resurrection of a kava bar on Lamén Island turned to a popular interest in my research, and I felt our somewhat tangential project justified: invariably, each evening came to involve informal discussions of both *kastom* and *waa* with a variety of people, curious youths and seasoned *olfala* alike. Canoes, as it turned out—much like kava bars—were feared to be a waning tradition in the face of changing times, but a tradition nevertheless considered integral to social and cultural identity. Unlike kava bars, however, the survival of canoes was also perceived to be directly linked to the mental and physical well-being of Lamén Island’s inhabitants; more so, to the survival of the community as a whole.

Kastom seemed characterized by most as something both palpable and enigmatic; something one should cling to, yet something difficult to grasp. Most Lamén Islanders would not consider a kava bar to be the same as a *nakamal* (a word used synonymously with kava bars in many places), for example, although both involve institutionalized social maintenance mediated by *miao*, or kava. The differentiation rests not in the degree of variation between their respective forms or functions, however, but in the level of collective psychological import attributed to their respective performances as a reification of cultural continuity. Assumptions regarding form at the individual level are superseded by function at the community level. Tradition (the former) as a synchronic “cultural structure” (Bateson, 1958: 24), therefore, is not synonymous with *kastom* (the latter, being a diachronic process), nor is it obligated to be associated with it. This distinction is what makes both kava and canoes, necessarily, vehicles of social and cultural maintenance if they are to be identified with *kastom* and what allows *kastom* to simultaneously inhabit culturally defined realms of both immutability and change.

Because of this, I felt my research had to shift from observing a synchronic *tableau vivant* of canoes and their builders to exploring the fluid, subjective nature-process of *kastom* on Lamén Island vis-à-vis the objective effects of historically contingent evolutionary processes in local *waa* design. The notion of duality became a recurrent theme in many aspects of my research over the next two months. By exploring how this duality was expressed in the relationship between Lamén Island’s few remaining

canoe builders and the objects of their craft—between individual perceptions of change and the public performance of socially recognized forms of *kastom*—I arrived at a better understanding of the adaptive nature of cultural continuity. For Lamén Islanders, change is less a threat to cultural identity than it is an opportunity for experimentation within an indigenous science of cultural survival. Lamén Islanders, by exchanging canoes for speedboats, are experimenting, for better or worse, in providing themselves with what they perceive to be a better life; nevertheless, new ideas undergo constant internal scrutiny and evaluation against the rigid criteria of *kastom* values—discipline, community, hard work, and respect—that will inevitably determine their trajectory. But what happens when *kastom* is popularly perceived as “lost?”

I couldn't help feeling nostalgic, bitter, and disappointed about the waning of kava bars and canoes on Lamén Island; I placed blame on local ambivalence, if not outright apathy, toward *kastom* itself. Loss of *kastom* had always been a vocalized concern on the island, and a source of what I, as a *mera*, misinterpreted as a prevailing fatalism about cultural revitalization. This was my biggest mistake and, consequently, a recurring point of personal bewilderment that, nevertheless, raised appropriate research questions about the cognitive dissonance I perceived between strict local adherence to *kastom* and *kastom* itself as an indigenous moral framework for innovation. While I felt justified in mourning the degradation of cultural heritage, for example, my feelings that locals were ambivalent to the situation only meant that I had yet to understand the paradoxical nature of “*kastom*” discourse. In so doing, I had personally condemned Lamén Islanders to either an essentialized existence of “pure”, insular primitiveness or a muddled colonial acculturation devoid of indigenous agency. Empirically, however, neither characterization was tenable. What I saw happening but had chronically failed to recognize in seemingly discrete changes was the collusion of *both* in the subsequent emergence of something “new” and resilient—something *necessarily* expressed perhaps—if *kastom* on Lamén Island was to survive.

A year later, in May, 2010, I returned to Vanuatu for a three-month visit to Lamén Island, followed by a month in Port Vila, where I was to spend a final month cross-referencing loose ends with available materials at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC) and begin working on a supplementary project to my research, an illustrated lay booklet on the canoes of Lamén Island, as per my Research Agreement with the Centre. A recent change of government in Vanuatu, however, meant not only a change of staff at the VCC, but changes in visa regulations as well; consequently, my visa, which normally would have been valid for three months, had only been so for only one month—a fact the clerk pointed out when I went to the immigration office to have my visa extended for one more month. The fine for an expired visa was considerable and well beyond the modest “incidentals” line item amount in my research budget. The clerk pointed out, however, that because I was in the country as a cultural researcher with the permission of the VCC, I could obtain a signed authorization from the current director, which would allow my visa to be renewed free of charge, and any fines would be dropped.

It had been a year since I had been to the VCC in any administrative capacity, and I recognized only a few of the new staff members. I recounted my situation to the secretary, who then disappeared to find my Research Agreement and verify my story. When she returned, however, she told me my Agreement wasn't on file, and a letter from the Director, therefore, would be impossible.

It was a disconcerting sense of disconnection. My identity, both with Immigration and the Cultural Centre, had no classifiable legitimacy—I was suddenly “neither here nor there” in spite of the fact that these were the very institutions that made my presence in Vanuatu possible in the first place. But with my own research nearing completion and an obligatory supplementary project for VCC already underway, continued non-affiliation with the VCC was not an option. I phoned Ralph Regenvanu, the previous director with whom I had personally made the original research agreement, and asked for his help. Without hesitation, he said he would contact the VCC. A week later, my Research Agreement was found exactly where it should have been, alphabetically filed, in a folder full of authorized research

proposals. The issue was resolved; however, my brief bout with displacement had shifted my confidence in my relationship with the VCC in a way I still have difficulty reconciling. Nevertheless, the event would eventually serve to illustrate my argument in this work regarding the improbable nature of a “continual dialectic” (cf. p. 25) between central institutions and peripheral communities and the potential for believing such continuity exists in creating political liminality when inevitable gaps in the continuum go unrecognized.

This work represents a four-month collaboration (and in many ways a decade-long friendship) with members of the Lamén Island community to develop a detailed ethnographic account of modern *waa* construction that, at least by appearances, defies the bounded categories of “*kastom*,” while addressing local conceptions of the nature of *kastom* itself as discursive practice, ritual event, and everyday way of life. The intention of this work as a product for the VCC is to “catalogue” a quintessential aspect of Lamén Island culture as it exists today; the purpose of this work as a collaboration with Lamén Islanders, however, is to revisit *kastom* in a context of specific historical entanglements that recognizes and demonstrates *kastom*’s continuing role in navigating change. In turn, it is hoped that this mutual exploration of local articulations and constructions of “*kastom*” will provide Lamén Islanders with a stronger voice in their ongoing relationship with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and will encourage the VCC to explore new ways of listening.

Lewo, *Logos*, and the discursive construction of *kastom*

A canoe begins to take shape long before a tree is cut or an axe is raised. It begins as a perceived need, ballasted by many practical considerations before embarking on its journey to the tongue. Its efficacy there in inspiring social reaction remains “commissive” rather than “factive” (Rappaport, 1999: 115), contingent upon navigating the external reality of those prior considerations: the strength of pre-established networks of reciprocity; access to raw materials, necessary manpower,

and specialized traditional knowledge; and an awareness of existing ecological conditions. More importantly, the motivational sway of the words requires they be moored to socially legitimated experience (Berkes, 2000: 1256-57). The tremendous work of building a canoe—if that canoe is to be anything more than a child’s toy—is rarely undertaken on behalf of those who do not already know how to use one, and never alone attempted by those who have not already learned to build one for someone else. Words on Lamén Island are akin to canoes: if they are to make the winding voyage from mind to mouth to materiality, they must be substantiated by and reinforce one’s ongoing investment in the social charter.

Not until recently was Lewo, the indigenous language of Lamén Island, a written language. For millennia it existed as no more than modulated breath, disseminated in formally recognized patterns to mediate between “insubstantial form and formless substance” (Rappaport, 2006: 163), between individual thought and socially legitimated performance. Removed from abstraction, in other words, utterance catalyzed social action through *storian*. *Storian* (broadly defined here as “sharing words”) was thus the breathed accompaniment to the practical instruction that transferred the traditional knowledge of material culture from one generation to the next. It fostered both social and cultural maintenance, but also gave moral order through community consensus to the expression of individual experience. It was the creative act, or *logos* (ibid.), that reified the spirit of local identity and rectified ambiguities—or, rather, specificities (ibid.:401)—that might otherwise pollute *kastom* performance (Douglas, 2007). In this regard, materiality within the domain of *kastom* was always circumscribed by the moral order intrinsic to *logos* and reified by Lewo. A decline in *kastom* meant a decline in the moral order, and this was likewise reflected in the production discourse surrounding specific material objects and performances.

For the people of Lamén Island today, no other material object gives as much symbolic form and creative expression to their cultural identity as the *waa*, or traditional canoe. Although primarily of

wood construction, its materialization (Bell, 2009) at all begins and ends with another kind of construction entirely: the shared word, setting the stage for both social action and reaction. This relationship between the shared word and a realized *waa* generates recursive feedback loops (Bateson 1958, 2000; Rappaport, 1975; 2006) through which *kastom* criteria appraise novel elaborations and individual experimentation with traditional forms, rejecting or appropriating them, in response to larger perturbations in the cultural *status quo*. A finished canoe, for example, is only recognized as such after being formally consecrated with Christian prayer, a sharing of words with God—a moral legitimization that also applies to the consumption of kava, or to the inauguration of any new edifice. Dedications with prayer, however, may also be accompanied by ritualized pig killing or other performances that publicly sanctify use or the transition of ownership. The collaboration of Christian religious ritual with *kastom* performance necessarily reconciles the two, legitimizing and reinforcing the social and cultural value of their respective but also mutual continuities. Importantly, the historical distinction between the two is not diminished in this process—a paradoxical misunderstanding more attributable to the erosion of rigidly discontinuous categories created by anthropologists rather than the people they study (Jolly, 1992: 243; McKinnon, 2005: 65)—but reiterated, since their respective forms of ritual expression still differ greatly, having historically remained coexistent rather than hybridized (unlike, for example, those of the John Frum Movement); nevertheless, their respective value systems are viewed in local discourse not only as highly compatible, but ideologically identical. Confusion stems from ignoring the “graded nature of realities to which words actually refer” (McKinnon, 2005: 65), thereby creating a double-bind scenario (Bateson, 2000: 201) in which canoe builders, for instance, are not allowed with any modicum of practicality to build an “authentic” *waa*, even though practicality both intrinsically characterizes *kastom* and ultimately facilitates its production.

Social identity on Lamén Island is embodied and most obviously reproduced by the seamlessly integrated presence of the Presbyterian Church, which made its initial appearance on Lamén Island in

1948 (cf. p. 72). Missionaries lived on Lamén Island for 20 years, establishing both a church that also served as the island's first school, and a mission house that offered Western medical care. At the time, the three villages on the island—Vasoro, Barua, and Kumal—were on less than amicable terms as each competed with the others for access to land and natural resources. Warring and vendettas were common. The people of Barua and Kumal, both impressed and intimidated by the wealth and words of the missionaries, eventually incorporated Christianity into their larger cosmology; Vasoro was slower to yield, but a general fear of the alliance their enemies had forged with foreigners and unfamiliar occult forces provided the impetus for their eventual conversion as well (Orah Joseph, conversation, 2009), after which *ngalo* Vasoro was physically relocated next to the other two villages. The church building became central and unifying, unchallenged by other denominations until the late 1990s, when the sharply more evangelical Assemblies of God (AoG) established a small “bush” church on the north side of the island, in Loki. Ideologically at odds with many *kastom* practices, including kava drinking, the church remains comparatively marginalized; nevertheless, the size of its congregation has seen some growth, particularly with youth looking for more energized and engaging church services. Consequently, within the last decade, a new and larger AoG church has been built in *ngalo* Kumal to rival the crumbling Presbyterian church nearby. In response, the Presbyterian community is now in the process of building a new church at the original location of the *ngalo* Vasoro *nakamal* prior to 1948. Geographically, this movement resembles the social division that existed on the island prior to missionization; nevertheless, in a secular context any social divisiveness between competing ideologies gives way to the more practical concerns of navigating daily life in a modern “two island” existence.

Kastom in this way remains the common denominator, not just in the life of individuals, but in authoritarian modalities as well. The reinstatement of a traditional system of chiefs on Lamén Island, inspired by the larger efforts of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre as the country's post-colonial independence dawned in 1980, resulted in the island's current incarnation of the *Kaonsel blong ol Jif* (Council of

Chiefs), whose purpose it remains to mediate in issues of *kastom* law at the local level. Importantly, this system exists not in lieu of the presence of a state authority (there is none locally) but as the traditional precedent for possible future state involvement. If a matter cannot be settled locally within the context of *kastom* law, only then does it become a common law matter for the Magistrate's Court or the Supreme Court. As it is, however, *kastom* arbitrations or "courts," formalized by the country's constitution in 1980, wield significant cultural, social and psychological weight as to resolve most issues on Lamén Island. I have attended many such public arbitrations, which concern a great variety of issues and, in form and ritual, emulate a Western judicial model; nevertheless, they exemplify the few times when *kastom* makes itself solidly recognizable and universally undisputed, evoking a remarkable sense that the real "authority" of the court lies in the palpable *communitas* it inspires. In this sense, a legal tradition invented only a few decades ago has intertwined itself so closely with the continuity of *kastom* as "the way in which people live their daily lives" that it has become indistinguishable from *kastom* itself (White, 1993: 483-486; Hobsbawm, 2003).

The purpose of this research is to examine the relationships between canoe builders and the materials/materializations of their craft, using the fundamental characteristics of these relationships to construct a broader explanatory model of the necessarily adaptive nature of *kastom* and its relationship to the Lamén Island community during a time of popularly perceived cultural decline. This research relies almost entirely on the two vehicles indispensable to the people of Lamén Island—namely, *waa* and the shared word. Primary partners in the research are represented by the remaining handful of Lamén Island's traditional canoe builders who collaborated on the construction of a traditional *waa*, using the tools, techniques, materials, and means they felt appropriate, but few of which were recognized as falling within the taxonomy of "*kastom*." Through recorded interviews, this process was concurrently cross-examined from individual perspectives on contemporary style, function and form against a backdrop of considerations of the nature of *kastom*. From the larger discourse emerged answers to the

central questions posed (or, more precisely, *imposed*) by this research: Where is *kastom* located in the process of creating? How can *kastom* be simultaneously immutable and adaptive, ineffable yet tangible? What does the inherent paradox imply for the future of *kastom* on Lamén Island?

There is no equivalent in Lewo for the concept of *mana* as a pervasive spiritual force, the Western intellectual fetishization of which Robert Keesing has explored extensively (1982; 1984; 1989). Nor is there a word in Lewo for *kastom*, since, as Keesing observes regarding the concept of culture itself, *kastom* likewise "... represents a reification" for the satisfaction of intellectual discourse within a context of colonial displacement, "... [leading one] to take an objectified, externalized view of one's way of life that would hardly be possible if one were simply living it" (ibid., 1989: 33). Significantly, however, the term *mana* was understood by some participants during interviews conducted in Bislama to mean "manner," or, in the same way *kastom* was explained, "the way in which people live their daily lives" (Jack Waiwo, Interview, 2009). Paradoxically, one of a multiplicity of usages for the term *kastom* on Lamén Island is as a validation of the spiritual or occult potency of a person (i.e., *mana*), such as a *kleva* (sorcerer) or a chief, or of any associated object, particularly in the context of ritual performances that, for the uninitiated, would be considered *tabu* (meaning both "forbidden" and "holy"). As such, the concept of *kastom* can, by proxy to a socially legitimated source of occult power, be expanded to include an object that might under normal circumstances defy local classification as "*kastom*." In other words, objects, like people, can undergo a process of sanctification. According to Rappaport (2006: 313-314), sanctification is composed of two elements: the sacred (i.e., *tabu*) and the sanctified (associated with the sacred, but not itself inherently so). The legitimacy of the sanctified object (i.e., the object as *kastom*) is not without question, therefore, as would be the "Ultimate Sacred Postulate" (ibid.) or locus of the object's legitimization, in this case the non-discursive institution of *kastom* itself, which by necessity must be maintained by the social charter as an irrefutable truth.

It is necessary to establish a pragmatic relationship between the term “occult” and the concept of *kastom*, without specifically defining—and thereby delimiting—either; instead, both can be generally viewed in terms of their overall efficacy in prompting socially legitimated performances, whether to perceived spiritual or more practical material ends. While Rappaport, for example, analyzes the occult in terms of its relationship to religious ritual, he also acknowledges that ritual itself has broad connotations beyond religious observance (ibid.). Specifically in the context of *kastom*, therefore, it is more appropriate in this case to identify its occult aspect with language and its ability to mediate between individual thought and social action by embedding both in a specific cultural-historical context that organically generates appropriate classifications for previously unrecognized features (i.e., new traditions) within a *kastom* taxonomic system. For example, while a clamshell adze is considered *kastom* by Lamén Islanders today because it was used “before” to shape canoe hulls, its own technological progenitor was a smoldering hardwood stick used to hollow out the canoe tree through a labor-intensive process of burning. When the clamshell adze first appeared as the latest innovation in this specialized tool set, its use may have been viewed as antithetical to *kastom* (as axes, and certainly chainsaws, are today) because it still lacked a respected place in a shared cultural history; nevertheless, it was immediately revolutionary in ways too beneficial to simply dismiss altogether, since hulls could now be dug out in days rather than months. Its persistence over time—but more significantly, its association with “before”—eventually garnered it legitimacy as a *kastom* object. Clamshell adzes have long since been replaced with modern steel models introduced by foreigners; however, along with their technological predecessor, clamshell adzes are still regarded in local discourse as *kastom* tools whose legendarily arduous usage continues to earn the canoe builders of “before” a tremendous position of awe and respect on Lamén Island today.

Indeed, any induction into the taxonomy of *kastom* is a negotiated social act fraught with perceptions of cultural risk and pollution (Douglas, 1982), particularly because ideological conceptions

and practical applications of “*kastom*” in Vanuatu vary with and even contradict one another across space and time—across both contemporary and traditional geopolitical boundaries, but also across the more psychological threshold known as *bifo*. “*Kastom*,” therefore, exists as contested space, similarly organized into what Paul Sillitoe, examining indigenous taxonomies in Papua New Guinea, describes as “fuzzy sets” (Sillitoe, 2002: 1162), prescribed by the interaction of highly localized cultural and ecological contexts.

Kastom on Lamén Island has undergone a locally perceived transformation from semi-conscious way of life to the lamented *palaga na sumo*, the “ways of before.” The differentiation is marked by use of the Bislama term *bifo*—literally, “before”—a word with as much psychological significance as historical reference, placing Lamén Island’s modern considerations of *kastom* within a cultural-historical taxonomy of juxtaposed binaries revolving around a centralized theme of Darkness and Light (White, 1991: 9, 48, 138; Errington, 1994; Hereniko, 1994): good and evil, wisdom and ignorance, primitiveness and modernity, white and black, easy and difficult, then and now. Conceptions of *bifo* polarize the necessary unity of *kastom*’s dichotomous nature. “The modern moment . . . creates a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present. Reincarnated as the break between tradition and modernity and typologized as the difference between ostensibly traditional and modern societies, this view has been shown repeatedly to distort the meanings of change and the politics of pastness” (Appadurai, 1996: 3). *Kastom*, consequently, is viewed today as something which one should *holemtaet* (hold to firmly) but which is also difficult to *kasem* (to understand; to grasp either conceptually or physically). Again, the dichotomous construction of “*kastom*” relates not only to its conceptualization (and the paradoxical results of objectifying it) but also to its materialization. As Christopher Tilley aptly remarks: “...we [as academics]... primarily have to write and speak of things, transform them into utterances and thus risk domesticating their difference from the language used to re-present them ... [but] Discourses and material practices are fundamentally different” (Tilley, 2002: 23); nevertheless, as

“‘meaningful, symbolic behavior’ in any [communicative] mode” (Johnstone, 2008: 2) both are collusive actors in the legal fiction the word “*kastom*” embodies. In this respect, *kastom* is always “domesticated,” yoked to the immediacy of highly localized realities, agendas, and priorities—including those of the necessarily “two-faced and two-tongued” anthropologist (Young, 1992: 195)—while conceptually identified with *bifo* and divorced from a corroborative role in local encounters with modernity. It is this duplicitous “working fiction” (ibid.:194) that facilitates discourse surrounding “*kastom*” but often overshadows the persistence of *kastom* itself—non-discursive *kastom* as the Ultimate Sacred Postulate—throughout its many conceptual and material reimaginings. Apropos to this conflation of sign and signified are the words of Lao Tzu:

Tao, the path of subtle truth,
Cannot be conveyed with words.
That which can be conveyed with words
Is merely a relative conception.
Although names have been applied to it,
The subtle truth is indescribable.
One may designate Nothingness as the origin of the universe,
And Beingness as the mother of the myriad things.
From the perspective of Nothingness,
One may perceive the gentle operation of the universe.
From the perspective of Beingness,
One may distinguish individual things.
Although differently named,
Nothingness and Beingness are one indivisible whole.
The truth is so subtle.
As the ultimate subtlety, it is the Gate of All Wonders (Gottlieb, 2004: 71)

Indeed, the unity is the mystery. The conclusions of this research operate within a framework of *kastom* as “Janus-natured” (Young, 1992: 195), existing as a manufactured interplay of conceptualization and materialization, both of which are, by logical definition, mutually exclusive; nevertheless, they are shackled together in the reconstruction of highly localized social and cultural identities within a context of externally imposed and internally reinforced cultural objectification:

“These images and forms of presentation and representation in which persons ‘present themselves to themselves” (Strathern, 1990: 26) may not be, and often cannot be, articulated in spoken language. The meanings created through artefacts [*sic*] and

words cannot be exchanged for each other, and thus the material object forms a powerful metaphorical medium through which people may reflect on their world in a way simply not possible with words alone. Through the artefact [*sic*], layered and often contradictory sets of meanings can be conveyed simultaneously” (Tilley, 1999: 103).

As such, ontological primacy of the problem in this research is assigned to the intrinsically political origin and perpetuation of a discursive “*kastom*,” designed to “implicitly construct” the cultural legitimacy of local material production (Geismar and Tilley, 2003: 177). This research, however, concurs with Rappaport’s argument that “... if human social systems are to remain adaptive, they must remain flexible [to] the degree of sanctity accorded to the various directives composing their regulatory discourse... highly sanctified directives should be low in political, social or material specificity” (Rappaport, 2006: 440). This research, therefore, contends that the conflation of “*kastom*” as regulatory discourse with *kastom* as the “way in which people live their daily lives” has essentialized modern *waa* on Lamén Island, relegating their *kastom* “authenticity” to the materials and production modes associated with idealized conceptions of *bifo*. “In short, *kastom* is represented as a timeless, ritual, primarily island, rather than urban, phenomenon” (Geismar, 2003: 177).

Within this framework, this research concludes that *kastom waa* on Lamén Island have continued to co-evolve with local perceptions of immediate practical need in an environment of foreign encounters and concomitant intellectual and political discursivity (Lindstrom, 1995). The argument is made that modern *waa*, although in many ways different from their technological progenitors associated with *bifo*, are nevertheless living performances of a persistent *kastom* because they continue to embody a relationship to “primordial attachments” (Geertz, 1973: 259). Modern *waa*, thusly, are *kastom* when they are reified by, and reinforce through their materialization and use, *kastom* values: cultural identity, community, respect, discipline, and hard work. Their relationship to *kastom* ideology, more so than morphology, places *waa* squarely within a shared cultural history that far predates the discursive objectification of *kastom*. As such, *kastom* is necessarily abstract, but not necessarily

material; rather, its materiality is an expression of the *kastom* values of canoe builders, whose motivations, when prescribed by those values, legitimize modern *waa* as *kastom*.

This research also concludes that the evolution and persistence of *waa* on Lamén Island are not mutually exclusive but, rather, mutually catalyzed by their popular association to loci of socially legitimized occult power or cultural authority (Rappaport, 1975: 237; Allen, 1981: 105-106, 109). The argument is made that both *kastom* and modern *waa* forms constitute immediately adaptive phenotypical expressions sublimated by the fundamentally abstract genotypical traits of local *kastom*. In this way, a comparative distinction can be made between the mal/adaptive products of continual trial-and-error experimentation in new cultural forms, and the intrinsically abstract, non-discursive nature of *kastom*, without divorcing the two entirely: “They are ‘blind variation and selective retention’ processes [respectively] . . . What separates learning and culture from genetic evolution is not their evolutionary character but their speed. Learning and cultural evolution adapt organisms to their environment quickly, while genetic evolution is so slow that its products are essentially fixed over the time scales that matter most in contemporary human affairs” (Wilson, 2005: 26). Thusly, the immutability of *kastom*’s abstract nature (e.g., as Ultimate Sacred Postulate) is maintained by the flexibility allowed its materialized expression through a medium of social legitimization contingent on a shared cultural history. Changing cultural forms can be inducted into the “fuzzy sets” of *kastom* taxonomy because of their socially recognized association with irrefutable (but flexibly expressed) *kastom* truths:

“Tradition’ . . . must be distinguished clearly from ‘custom’ which dominates so-called ‘traditional’ societies. The object and characteristic of ‘traditions,’ including invented ones, is invariance. The past, real or invented, to which they refer imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices, such as repetition. ‘Custom’ in traditional societies has the double function of motor and fly-wheel. It does not preclude innovation and change up to a point, though evidently the requirement that it must appear compatible or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it. What it does is give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history” (Hobsbawm, 2003).

Finally, this research found that local discourse surrounding new technologies recently introduced on Lamén Island, widely used, classified them as extraneous to *kastom* for a number of reasons, all of which were associated with local considerations of respect as paramount to identification with *kastom*. This distinction was often metaphorized in terms of “roads,” (meaning a chosen way or means of accomplishing something, but also a mode of travel) specifically characterized by moral and ethical trajectories of directness and circumvention (Young, 1999: 115; Allen, 1981: 109-113). Both roads traversed a single pathology of “loss” vis-à-vis the ignorance or “forgetting” of *kastom* social *tabus*, the dwindling of traditional modes of cultural production, and the erosion of intergenerational traditional knowledge sharing. This research, therefore, argues that a revitalization of *kastom* values is not only contingent upon recognizing them in new and changing forms of cultural production, but upon the integration of new modes of exchange that embody and reinforce those values as the “way people live their daily lives” today as much as they did *bifo*. A cultural and historical continuity has to be articulated, bridging the epistemological gap between experienced modernity and an essentialized past, and reinstating non-discursive *kastom* into a position of immediate psychological and practical relevance. This research concludes that the discursive objectification of the abstract nature of *kastom*, in purely pragmatic terms, constitutes an “adaptive falsehood” (Rappaport, 2006: 443), shackling *kastom* to *palaga na sumo* (“the ways of before”), and problematizing its modern relevance as a means of staying in the “existential game” (ibid.: 420, 442); ironically, to remain adaptive, the discourse invoking it must necessarily remain practical. As such, the most contiguous expression of its non-discursive significance is *Lewo*, as it relates to *logos* and, by extension, as its use reflects the obligation inherent to the stability of the moral order (ibid.: 132). In the words of Jack Waiwo: “When [we] move to and fro, [we] take with [us] our customs and our culture. If we can teach [our children] to speak the traditional language, *kastom* will never disappear” (Waiwo, interview, 2009). The relationship here between *waa* and the shared word on Lamén Island becomes evident: both, when aligned to a visceral

engagement with *kastom*, facilitate the reproduction of stable vehicles for cultural mobility and exploration while establishing safe “roads” for a highly localized cultural identity moving through often tempestuous cross-cultural currents and geopolitical “territories” (Bonnemaison, 2005: 117-119).

Persistence and thoughts on the metaphysics of change

One needs a notion of kastom to compare present circumstances to those of the past; or to compare one's own culture with that of other people. The first comparison is thinkable only if there is a concomitant concept of the possibility of change in structure. The second comparison is possible only when a people comes into contact with cultures of a different order (Lindstrom, 1982: 316).

On Lamén Island, narratives surrounding historical change directly link both positive and negative impacts on *kastom* to encounters with colonial processes of missionization, workforce exploitation, the presence of Allied forces in the region during World War II, and the pervasive but often underestimated influence of tourism. The infrastructure for tourism in particular in Lamén Bay has always been limited to the Paradise Sunset Bungalows, a family-managed business that caters to the handful of tourists that fly in and the occasional yacht or fishing charter that moors itself in the bay overnight. It wasn't until 1998 that the *Fair Princess*, a 1,000-passenger cruise ship, began making a biannual day-long stopover in Lamén Bay on its way to Port Vila, an event documented in the film *Selo! Selo!* (see Wood, *et al*, 1998). Within two years, much larger cruise ships would visit as well, carrying as many as 2,500 passengers. While an exciting and generally positive cultural exchange for locals, who take pride in exhibiting their *kastom* for foreigners, the sudden influx of considerable (and poorly managed) tourism revenue created social rifts in the community that can still be felt today. Interestingly, local considerations of the role of cultural researchers themselves—both foreign and indigenous—were rare in discourse and were couched in general terms of cataloguing “*kastom*” for preservation efforts at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, for whom the foreign articulations and concomitant display of “*kastom*” are of central concern.

“Kastom” is officially defined by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre as “indigenous knowledge and practice and the ways it is expressed and manifested” (Vanuatu Cultural Research Policy, Article 1), a necessarily generic definition at the national level consistent with generalized local definitions of *“kastom”* on Lamén Island. The “divers[ity of] local concerns around the relations between persons and things” (Geismar and Tilley, 2003: 171) means that centrally institutionalized mediations between a broad foreign exposure to *“kastom”* objects and the specific origins of their cultural significance and material expression relies heavily on generalized display. More importantly, “The transformation of ephemeral events and practices into ‘museum objects’ has ... profoundly expanded the scope of what can be construed as specifically material culture, and has to some extent reformulated wider relations between persons and things, as they are consolidated between locality and nation” (ibid.:180).

Prior to Vanuatu’s independence in 1980, the Vanuatu Cultural Centre was “geared primarily towards exhibition, primarily displaying expatriate collections” which were intended to “ ‘illustrate the history, literature and natural resources of the New Hebrides’(Bolton 2003: 33)” (ibid.: 172). After independence, however, the transfer of VCC management from an expatriate to a Ni-Vanuatu curatorship refocused the Museum on a more participatory grassroots approach with diversified cultural and educational program interests. Arguably, the most innovative of these programs, and unique to museums in the Pacific as a whole, was the development and nationwide implementation of an indigenous Fieldworker Program, which boosted the number of indigenous volunteers from two in 1977 to approximately 80 today, 25 of whom are women. Annual four-week Fieldworker Workshops (men and women are trained separately) have been held at the VCC since 1981 “to train ni-Vanuatu in the recording and preservation of oral traditions and histories [i.e., see Lindstrom and Gwero, 1998], the creation of indigenous language dictionaries, the recording of sites of cultural and historic importance, the regulation of traditional copyright and access rules and the promotion and revival of traditional skills and values” (Vanuatu Cultural Centre, May 2012). Fieldworkers then return to their respective

communities or language areas as the honorary cultural conduits in the dialectic between the VCC and rural localities. In addition, “information is provided to raise participants’ awareness of issues relating to development, environmental conservation, gender and cultural tourism, as fieldworkers are often involved in rural development initiatives in their own communities” (ibid.). In this respect, the VCC extends its “contact zone” (Clifford, 1997) beyond decontextualized representation into a general expression of greater involvement in the *living* cultures of remote communities to which the objects it displays are “immutably connected” (Geismar and Tilley, 2003: 184), “provid[ing] a broader vision of culture that has practical significance . . . beyond the tourist gaze” (Foana’ota, 2011: 292).

The decontextualization of cultural expressions, particularly those classified for practicality as “material culture,” must still, however, confront the paradox present in *kastom*’s inherently non-discursive nature. In the case of Lamén Islanders and their canoes, what Geismar and Tilley refer to as “wider relations between persons and things” created by materialization, or their “transformed” status to museum exhibits, refers to the mutual dispossession of cultural meaning that occurs between object and origin when placed in a synchronic tableau. While a canoe on display, for example, may still be labelled “*kastom*,” the definition of “*kastom*” is subsumed under a generalized institutional rubric with its own values, criteria and localized agenda. More importantly, however, the powerful influence of institutions themselves, generally assumed to represent the public interest as “monitoring devices so that one’s principles will be defended by friends and neighbors” (Douglas, 1982: 81), is often overlooked; the cultural “center” is in many ways viewed synonymously with cultural authority, and a nationalistic, institutionalized notion of “*kastom*,” the product of an asymmetrical exchange between presentation and representation, is continually disseminated among and reabsorbed into “peripheral” localities:

“. . . the museum archive becomes a reference point for an entirely separate system of storage—that of the locality—negotiating with the centralised and archetypal view of artefacts that is represented in the exhibit hall. In a continual dialectic between village and museum, recordings in the archive use technologies of replication to reproduce

social relations; local people are encouraged to use them to remind themselves of past or lost practices so that they can revive them in local practice” (Geismar and Tilley, 2003: 180).

A “continual dialectic” implies process—an open-ended and symmetrical synthesis of differing perspectives on the re/presentation of *kastom*—yet, as with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, the publicized standard for those perspectives remains an idealized archetype archived for the purpose of replication. The term also underestimates the reality of public expectations about the role of institutionalization in cultural preservation, popular assumptions that help create a double-bind scenario surrounding authenticity: canoes on Lamén Island today retain legitimacy as *kastom* only through meeting the criteria of decontextualized materiality, i.e., their facsimile to the “official” blueprints by which continued reproduction is promoted by the “authoritative” center back into the “informed” periphery.

“A center and a periphery are assumed: the center a point of gathering, the periphery an area of discovery. The museum, usually located in a metropolitan city, is the historical destination for the cultural productions it lovingly and authoritatively salvages, cares for, and interprets” (Clifford, 1997: 193). But the cultural “center” can be likened to the center of a hurricane. In the eye there is stillness and a heightened appreciation of calm and constancy, while on the edges a tumultuous wind hurls objects in every conceivable direction. Things collide, or ricochet about in a flurry of near disasters. Things are destroyed and created. Things uproot while others stand firm. On the edge, the storm is as constant as the stillness at its center, but its constancy is characterized by a turbulent experiential landscape.

I weathered through three hurricanes while living on Lamén Island. Hundreds of people bunkered down while trees toppled, houses blew away, and corrugated sheet metal sliced through the air blindly like throwing axes at a three-ring circus. In the morning, people would step outside their respective shelters to find the lush, familiar landscape transformed into a forest of splintered matchsticks that were once buildings, trees, and canoes. Immediately, however, people would begin

combing the ground for food. It was everywhere. People walked around, joking and elated, their moods lifted by the passing of the storm and the effortlessness with which fruit, coconuts, vegetables, and even root crops could be found and gathered afterward. Men, women, and children alike assembled huge piles of food for eventual distribution. It was a feast to begin the inevitable work of rebuilding, and a powerful illustration of how *kastom* not only withstands but exploits change to catalyze social and cultural reproduction.

Like *kastom*, the problematization of change is a product of intellectual discourse that reflects a disjunction between the complexities of real-world dynamism and the technical ability to adequately recontextualize objects in a museum setting as anything more than momentary evidence of a lived—but also living—process of social and cultural reproduction. Clifford movingly recounts such a “dialectic” when Tlingit elders were invited by museum curators to provide consultation and details on traditional objects in the Portland Art Museum’s Northwest Coast Indian collection:

“In the museum basement, objects from the collection were brought out, one by one, and presented to the elders for comment: a raven mask, an abalone-inlaid headdress, a carved rattle . . . What transpired was a series of complicated, moving performances, by turns serious and lighthearted.

“The curatorial staff seems to have expected the discussions to focus on the objects of the collection. I, at any rate, anticipated that the elders would comment on them in a detailed way, telling us, for example: this is how the mask was used; it was made by so-and-so; this is its power in terms of the clan, our traditions, and so forth. In fact, the objects were not the subject of much direct commentary by the elders, who had their own agenda for the meeting. They referred to the regalia with appreciation and respect, but they seemed only to use them as aides-mémoires, occasions for the telling of stories and the singing of songs . . . The objects in the Rasmussen Collection, focus for the consultation, were left—or so it seemed to me—at the margin. For long periods no one paid attention to them. Stories and songs took center stage.

“As the process continue[d] over three days, objects from the Rasmussen Collection lie on the museum tables or in storage boxes . . .

“It was clear that from the elders’ viewpoint, the collected objects were not primarily “art.” They were referred to as “records,” “history,” and “law,” inseparable from myths and stories expressing ongoing moral lessons with current political force” (ibid., 188-191).

The double-bind Lamel Islanders face lies in reconciling the paradox created by the competing modes and definitions of “*kastom*” maintained by the “continual dialectic” across geopolitical space. On



Tasso Omai, a devout canoeman, takes a break from working on his own canoe to watch our progress.

Lamenu, everyday practicality is at the very heart of *kastom*, and this affords *kastom* a necessary adaptability to changing contexts through its own flexibility of expression. Canoes, therefore, are *necessarily* polymorphic; their morphology represents phenotypical expressions of highly idiosyncratic and immediate priorities. The genotypical framework that delimits these expressions, however, is a historically consistent value set, which, for the purposes of this research, is identified as the “non-discursive” or experiential *kastom* that underlies daily life.

Following the example of the Tlingit elders, the intent of this research is to foster an appreciation and respect for canoes themselves, but to do so by returning them to the shifting currents from which they emerge and for which they were built. “Words,” commented a Tlingit elder, “are for catching” (ibid.), but in the words of a Lamén Islander, “[*kastom*] is a hard thing to grasp” (Tasso Omai, interview, 2009).

How in this sense does one “grasp” *kastom*? Heraclitus was quoted as saying, “Everything changes and nothing remains still . . . You cannot step twice into the same stream” (Freeman, 1952: 31). In the case of Lamén Island’s canoes, how then can this continual change be understood in terms of their relationship to *kastom*?

“The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same” (Bowin, 2008: 63).

An approach to “grasping” the paradox that faces Lamén Islanders can best be undertaken with Heraclitus’ concept of *logos* in mind: “This *logos* holds always but humans always prove unable to understand it, both before hearing it and when they have first heard it . . . For this reason it is necessary

to follow what is common. But although the *logos* is common, most people live as if they had their own private understanding” (Freeman, 1952: 31). The intellectual appropriation of *logos* as a problematic for political discourse sublimates its ultimately social experiential value with the “preservation technique par excellence” (Battaglia, 1990: 197) of words. “...Through words, people succeed in objectifying—rendering detachable from individual memory and therefore analyzable—the cultural inheritance. Words are exactly repeatable, reversible, not ‘attached to the situation’.” The problem of preserving cultural identity in a changing universe, therefore, is not resolved by perfect preservation or exact duplication, but in recognizing the vehicles by which cultural identity is given the mobility to express and traverse highly contextualized and historically bounded experiences.

I remembered once, in Japan, having been to see the Gold Pavilion Temple in Kyoto and being mildly surprised at quite how well it had weathered the passage of time since it was first built in the fourteenth century. I was told it hadn't weathered well at all, and had in fact been burnt to the ground twice in this century. "So it isn't the original building?" I had asked my Japanese guide.

"But yes, of course it is," he insisted, rather surprised at my question.

"But it's burnt down?"

"Yes."

"Twice."

"Many times."

"And rebuilt."

"Of course. It is an important and historic building."

"With completely new materials."

"But of course. It was burnt down."

"So how can it be the same building?"

"It is always the same building."

I had to admit to myself that this was in fact a perfectly rational point of view, it merely started from an unexpected premise. The idea of the building, the intention of it, its design, are all immutable and are the essence of the building. The intention of the original builders is what survives. The wood of which the design is constructed decays and is replaced when necessary. To be overly concerned with the original materials, which are merely sentimental souvenirs of the past, is to fail to see the living building itself (Adams, 1992: 149).

Like a koan, reconciliation of the paradox comes from recognizing the problem itself as the consequence of its own problematization. “The real problem here,” asserts Johnston regarding persistence, “is not the problem [the paradox poses] but the problem of exhibiting and justifying some

philosophical problematic which explains why we should not rest content with the most obvious and dismissive answers to these questions” (Johnston, 1987: 107). Indeed, acknowledging the problem of problematization awakens the kind of metalogue (Bateson, 2000: 1) important to addressing non-discursive *kastom* as the fundamental mechanism in the evolution of *waa*. Rather than simply mapping change over time through synchronic comparisons of difference, difference itself can be articulated vis-à-vis its relationship to *kastom* as an immutable “law” intrinsic to semi-conscious social processes. By repositioning *kastom* as the Ultimate Sacred Postulate—as the datum or value set by which individual (and, by proxy, social) expression is measured, rather than extrapolating the state of *kastom* from the unmoored, value-free “sentimental souvenirs” it precedes, problems of authenticity and preservation become unshackled from the problematic of materiality. “Metanarratives of destruction and invention need to be held in a kind of unresolved ethnographic tension . . . a simultaneous awareness of different possibilities” (Clifford, 1997: 186) created by the flexible expressiveness (i.e., *logos*) inherent in *kastom*’s own necessary invariance (Hobsbawm, 2003).

Organizational overview

This work is divided into three chapters, each addressing the various perspectives that inevitably converge in the construction of *kastom* and canoes on Lamén Island. *Chapter 1* tackles the nature of construction itself from a philosophical and metaphysical vantage point that can metaphorically address the inherent paradox created by *kastom* as a discursive practice; furthermore, it follows the construction of *kastom* through its ontological development from mind to mouth to materiality—a process referred to in subsequent chapters as *materialization*.

Chapter 2 moves beyond notions of construction to examine the various ways in which aspects of local identity are reconstructed in relation to *kastom*. The analysis expands outward from the somatic metaphors central to Lamén Island canoe construction, to the gendered roles and motifs that, both literally and figuratively, ensure a canoe’s structural integrity. Subsequent sections move the

analysis from metaphor and motif outward again, into the cultural and social processes of sanctification that allow the tradition of canoe building to survive, with the final two sections of the chapter expanding further still to examine how sanctification works within the context of *kastom* as both indigenous science and modern magic, using two very different canoes as examples of shared historical entanglements and practices of international resource harvesting.

Chapter 3, above all, catalogues the technical and material construction of a Lamén Island canoe, detailing the entire process from initial tree selection to the canoe's maiden voyage. Throughout the construction, aspects of Chapters 1 and 2 are encountered and considered; however, the perspective shifts to that of my own as a foreign researcher, enlisting a more reflexive accounting of my relationship to both the project and the people participating in it, and forcing considerations of my own role in articulating *kastom*.

Finally, *Chapter 4* concludes the work by revisiting the "continuing dialectic" between Lamén Island and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, including the role of its indigenous fieldworkers, my role as a foreign researcher, and the Centre's greater role in representing both national solidarity and *kastom* to the international community. I suggest a solution for bridging the liminal gap between centralized and idealized representations of *kastom* and the peripheral performance of *kastom* as practical, everyday life.

The progression of this work moves considerations of *kastom* along an outward spiral from individual metaphysic to national materialization. National representations of "*kastom*" inevitably feed back into the individual metaphysic via the "continual dialectic," which, in the case of Lamén Island specifically, displaces local articulations of *kastom* from everyday life and moves them to a place of paradox indicative of the community's political liminality. In this sense, this work emulates the growth of a pig's tusk (cf. pp. 39, 67) in its concentric development, addressing the role of the gaps in between *kastom* and "*kastom*" that emerge to define the problem's shape and circumscribe its growth.

CHAPTER 2: Mutual Reconstructions: Navigating Shifting Cultural Currents

Pacific Islanders expect—and even welcome—the influence of the outside world. Any new cultural item is taken in and tested before being merged into a larger synthesis whereby old custom and new culture are mixed and soon become indistinguishable. In part, this attitude may explain why, for instance, a large majority of Oceania’s populations—except in Tanna and some other islands—adopted Christianity relatively rapidly in the course of the missionary venture of the nineteenth century, or at least made an attempt . . . such deliberate acceptance of the influence of the outside world does not imply that traditional island life is rejected. Insular patriotisms are among the strongest: the sole wish of those who leave their island—even the most remote—is often to return. Fundamentally, islanders have a dual expectation; they wish to enjoy the serenity of their environment or even their seclusion while, at least periodically, being able to elude the syndrome of confinement, be it spatial or cultural. They can only achieve this by sustaining their links with the outside world (Bonnemaison, 1994: 105-106).

Vanuatu is an archipelago of 84 islands situated roughly 1000 kilometers directly west of Fiji and extending southeast of the Solomon Island chain along the convergence of the South Solomon/North New Hebrides Trench line. The first European explorer to the archipelago was Pedro Fernández de Quirós in 1606. Louis Antoine de Bouganville arrived in 1768 and named the archipelago *Les Grandes Cyclades*, but it was not until 1774 that James Cook, charting the area, named it the New Hebrides, the name it held throughout its colonial occupation until the country’s independence in 1980, when country officially became the Republic of Vanuatu.

The 19th Century was marked by a boom in the sandalwood trade as well as albeit initially disastrous attempts to convert Ni-Vanuatu to Christianity. From 1847, the remainder of the century was marred by colonial labor exploitation of Ni-Vanuatu men, nearly 50% of whom were taken to other countries in the Pacific and to Europe, both through open recruitment and more dubiously coercive methods referred to as “blackbirding,” which continued until 1906 and frequently employed kidnapping and indentured servitude (further reduction of the population can be attributed to the spread of new diseases introduced by workforce migration, inevitably decimating a population of approximately one million people in 1800 to a population of 45,000 by 1935). European settlement began in 1865, and

labor exploitation turned to colonial plantations within the archipelago. Consequently, many Ni-Vanuatu overseas found themselves returning home by 1906, the year in which the French-Anglo Condominium government was formalized.

A Condominium government, far from unified, meant that the New Hebrides had been divided evenly between two concurrent administrations—French and British—each of which employed separate official languages, educational systems, religious institutions (which oversaw education), and police forces. Because of the rising frequency of indigenous land disputes throughout the country, however, the Condominium government established a Joint Court, which functioned within an overarching ideological framework of manifest destiny and favored the legal entitlements of foreign settlers over *kastom* land owners who lacked any physical documentation of their ownership. This system would remain in place until 1980.

The presence of American forces in the New Hebrides during WWII in 1941—particularly African American soldiers—marked a transition in the way Ni-Vanuatu historically experienced their relationship to foreigners (see White, 1989). It was after the war that Ni-Vanuatu began mobilizing and lobbying for self-determination, a difficult road that eventually led to national independence in 1980.

The resurgence of Indigenous cultural revitalization efforts in the Pacific is directly linked to a new era of decolonization and subsequent nation-building that relied as much upon developing international recognition as it did on reestablishing traditional cultural and value systems as the heart of nascent governments, making them embodiments of unified indigeneity rather than simply duplications of colonial-era power structures. Beyond rebuilding a new sense of cultural identity within the context of nationalism, however, there was also a desire to rebuild the diasporic regional identity that had existed before colonial occupation, and to do so through means of political engagement that were already imbued throughout the region with many centuries of shared symbolic significance (i.e., the establishment of cultural centers and regional cultural festivals)—the most ambitious among them,

the revitalization of traditional voyaging canoes. Of greater significance, however, was the impact of this kind of engagement within those indigenous populations still under colonial rule:

“Today ethnic groups, nations, and would-be nations from around the world are engaged in selectively recalling their respective cultural heritages, bringing them forward, however altered, into the present. This is as much an age of cultural revival as it is of globalization, particularly in those regions, such as the Pacific Islands, where indigenous peoples are still under foreign rule or have only recently escaped from it to find that the outside world and its influences are still pressing on them. Reviving declining languages and other cultural elements has become a way to demonstrate cultural identity and worth in relation to both the old colonial structure and increasingly impinging pressures of globalization. From this perspective, it is no accident that the voyaging revival first took hold in Hawai‘i, Aotearoa, the Cook Islands, and Tahiti and its neighbors, for their people suffered greatly from initial contact with the outside world and continue to bear the brunt of foreign impact” (Finney, 1999: 9).

Today, indigenous canoe voyaging projects can be found throughout the Pacific, not simply the results of isolated efforts to revitalize sharply traditional knowledge bases regarding construction and navigation techniques of specific cultural pasts, but through cross-cultural collaborations and technological adaptations (i.e., the use of fiberglass hulls) that allowed ancient knowledge perhaps long forgotten in places to be rediscovered. The most well-known example of this kind of regional collaboration is the *Hōkūle‘a* project (Finney, 1974; 1999; 2003), in which Mau Pīalug, a Micronesian master navigator, played a critical role in reviving Hawaiian navigation techniques that has allowed the vessel to sail throughout the Pacific on a number of voyages designed not only to apply that knowledge, but to share it with others. “This blending of Satawalese and Hawaiian voyaging traditions illustrates two different historic trajectories of knowledge maintenance and loss. Satawalese voyaging represents one end of a voyaging spectrum, with its historic continuity and recent resurgence; Hawaiian voyaging represents the other end of the spectrum, with a complete historic cessation and recent rebirth” (Genz, 2011: 7).

In Melanesia today, both of these trajectories present themselves concurrently, in part because the socio-economic realities of the post-colonial era are characterized to a considerable degree by international interest in specific projects and their continued funding (Foana’ota, 2011: 275), but also

because access to many forms of traditional knowledge has historically been restricted at local levels, either by *kastom tabu* or social/political rivalry; furthermore, encroachment of modern technologies coupled with colonial prohibitions (and their post-colonial remnants) on certain traditional practices (Genz, 2011: 9-11), such as long-distance interisland canoe travel in Vanuatu (cf. Jack Waiwo, p. 47), expedite an indigenous reliance upon-- and often an eventual preference for--those introduced technologies. Nevertheless, the traditional spirit of these practices persist, even if their forms shift (DeLisle, 1997), because they continue to facilitate (particularly in rural areas requiring higher degrees of localized reliance) a practical and sustainable lifestyle that comes to represent indigenous freedom (cf. Jack Waiwo, pp. 94-95) vis-à-vis those encroachments. In Vanuatu, in particular, this lies at the very heart of *kastom*.

After arriving in Vanuatu, I remained in Port Vila for a week prior to flying out to Lamén Island in order to make preparations for my extended stay outside the capital city and to coordinate my research efforts with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. It had been five years since I last visited Port Vila and, for the most part, on its surface the town seemed to have undergone few changes. The most prominently displayed evidence of the government's continued desire for economic development and a greater role in the pan-Pacific community were the ubiquitous red and white billboards advertising Digicel wireless phones and internet plans. Not just billboards, but whole buildings, repainted in the two-tone motif synonymous with Vanuatu's new connection to the rest of the world. Images of fashionably urban youth texting each other flirtatiously, an older woman in an island dress smiling at the sound of her distant son's crystal-clear voice, and a group of outer island youth walking along a white sand beach in vibrantly adorned "*kastom*" dancewear, laughing, care-free, into their phones-- all eliciting a sense of closer connection between friends and family, but more significantly, between past, present, and future. Owning a mobile phone in these advertisements in no way implied one couldn't also wear a traditional penis sheath. Rather, owning a mobile phone could thrust even the most rural or traditionally

influenced islander to the unmapped frontier of national modernity without compromising local mores. The two realities were presented as a seamless, frictionless, straightforward progression along the path of national economic development.

Traditional systems of communication on Lamén Island, however, are rarely straightforward. Local conceptions of directness and circumvention determine the appropriateness of social “performances”, verbal or otherwise, vis-à-vis traditional values, particularly respect. In this way, potentially disruptive or even volatile interpersonal encounters, rather than being openly confrontational, are buffered through more passive layers of social mediation. Such mediation may take the form of gossip while weaving mats, small talk at the kava bar, serious discussion among local chiefs, the silent preparation of a plate of food, or in the cooperative efforts of canoe building. A resolution between individuals is usually one that has already been legitimately recognized elsewhere. To illustrate this point, Apia placed a cup on the table. “This,” he said, pointing at the cup, “is a problem. But to resolve it, we first have to go over there,” pointing to a pot hanging on the wall, “then there,” pointing to a jar of match boxes across the room, “then there,” pointing to a broken lantern, “then over there,” motioning to a loaf of bread. “We never deal with the cup directly. That’s how things get done around here.”

Again, directness and circumvention, or “roads,” refer not only to the appropriate means by which one should conduct social affairs, but also to spatial relationships and ways of traveling. In this way, a mobile phone is like a speedboat. Both bridge a gap between distances, whether social or geographic, and allow for a more direct passage through otherwise restrictive environments. In local discourse, it is precisely this directness that conflicts with *kastom* values. With a mobile phone and the right phone number, for example, anyone can easily contact a Paramount Chief directly, circumventing appropriate traditional intermediaries altogether. Likewise, a speedboat’s captain can travel across Lamén Bay with little regard for environmental conditions or the comprehensive traditional knowledge

that has taken Lamén Islanders millennia to develop as a matter of sustainable coexistence, both socially and environmentally.

“Road” in this sense, like “canoe,” is not a stationary metaphor, but one of process, “which has been cogently stressed in the writings of other Melanesian anthropologists (e.g. Battaglia 1990; Keller 1988; Jolly 1991a; 1991b; MacKenzie 1991; Munn 1977; Thomas 1995), [as] a way of thinking about the relationship between producers and their products centring [*sic*] upon *activity* [italics theirs] . . . Through creating, exchanging, and ordering a world of artefacts [*sic*] people create an ordering of the world of social relations. Such a process of objectification is about the construction of meaning and values [and] about social relationships and self-understandings of those meanings and values through material forms” (Tilley, 1999: 102-103).

***Waa* at the somatic center**

Ubiquitous to Vanuatu is the notion of a healthy body as *fatfat*, or well-fed. As in other cultures across the Pacific, appearing well fed is not simply a sign of personal health; it embeds conceptions of health within a context of the larger social legitimization of the individual as a productive member of the community. It is, as Becker describes, “the social monitoring of bodies for confirmation of their participation in the regeneration of the community” (Becker, 1995: 85). On Lamén Island, food production and consumption within a “two island” system of subsistence means that, while sharing and eating generous amounts of food reifies social bonds, this “regeneration” is only made possible by other activities of cultural reproduction that allow food to be obtained elsewhere and brought back.

Knowledge of canoe building is important, although many people have their canoes built by those who know best how to build them; however, navigating a canoe is at the core of both an individual’s ability to fully participate in community life and can be critical to an individual’s survival. Those who are incapacitated by age or injury are looked after in their homes while community members, either from within the *nasara* (clan) or organized by the community through the church, continue to tend their

gardens. Those who help often do so at the expense of their own gardens (or twice the gardening work), but are customarily offered some portion of their day's harvest by the land owner. For those who are able-bodied, however, it is assumed rather than expected that they will be tending to their own gardens regularly and will always have enough food, if not a surplus, for the purpose of food sharing, which is always a part of every meal.

In this way, the circulation and return (Taylor, 2008: 106) of canoes between the two islands is deeply tied to other patterns of circulation and return that “fuel” traditional ecological systems of knowledge (maritime as well as agricultural), physical fitness (e.g., food-energy conversion), and social participation (“sharing words,” food reciprocity, and the social implications of being regarded as *fatfat*).

While Apia's *waa* was being built, Loma made numerous trips to the garden, gathering enough food to feed those who would be working on the canoe throughout the week, as well as her family—as



Loma, Apia's wife, with granddaughter, Hariet. As “body builders,” women play a critical social and symbolic role in canoe building and its associated performances of cultural continuity.

many as eight to ten people. She would awake before dawn to prepare breakfast for the family. Immediately afterward, she would wash her pots and begin preparing the vegetables she would later be cooking for lunch. An appropriate meal would have to include copious amounts of rice, which would eventually be accompanied by a small amount of meat or fish and covered in a

protein-rich broth or coconut milk, possibly in combination with instant ramen noodles, a conservative portion of vegetables, and a piece of yam or other root crop. Equally as appropriate, however, would be *laplap*, a traditional dish of grated root crops topped with meat, local cabbage, and coconut milk. Both dishes are high in carbohydrates and fats, a pairing that, for local appetites, is considered the most satisfying because it provides a full stomach without making the body “slack.” *Laplap*, although

Ol Rod blong Solwota

(See also, Bonnemaïson, 1996: 184-185)



Port Quimy

Malekula

Image NASA
Image © 2012 DigitalGlobe

Rovo Bay

Ambrym

Lamen Bay

Wind Compass

Lag Kandua

Legawo

Lagiye

Lagiura

Lagsoi

Wepa (tides)

- Lesiwa (travel at high tide) ———→
- Lesimema (travel at low tide) - - - - -→
- Lele (neutral current) ← - - - - - →

Google earth

remarkably labor intensive to prepare, takes three to four hours to cook in a *pwili* (earth oven), giving Loma time to rest. Using a newly adopted method for cooking *laplap*, she could have placed the *laplap* in a cast iron saucepan before placing it under the volcanic stones of the *pwili*; however, this would have cut cooking time in half and, ironically, made more overall work for her.

Loma's social role—in this case, as a nurturer, sustainer, or “builder” of the body—echoes the *karo*, or hull of a canoe, as the symbolic womb. In the domestic cooking space, for example, Loma actively asserted her control over all aspects of food preparation and decided what food would constitute the meal. If she needed help, she would assign specific tasks to either her daughter or Apia; otherwise, she preferred to work alone. When the meal was ready, she apportioned food and served each plate herself, keenly aware of any dietary restrictions that might exist: Apia had specific food restrictions because of a medical condition, for example, but she also remembered the particular dietary needs of the individual canoe builders as well and tailored their plates accordingly. Furthermore, her cultural conceptions of how a healthy body should look (and how she would look if this were ignored) were certainly at play: I was far too thin for her liking (I had lost enough weight so that I was holding up my pants *blakman stael*, with a dry lash of pandanus) and so received extraordinarily large portions I could not hope to finish; anything less would have garnered her the criticism of her neighbors. Any signs of illness among the men were also treated accordingly through food apportioning. Food for Loma in this way embodied not just health, but an interpersonal gesture of care and respect, and an assertion of her “regenerative” role in activities of social legitimization and cultural reproduction.

Private parts, public practice: engendered motifs and gendered roles

Also “ubiquitous of . . . images [of circulation and return] is the pig tusk . . . [which is] indexical of ni-Vanuatu understandings of production, growth, and exchange” (Taylor, 2008: 106); it serves as a symbolic reflection of the individual with relation to society: “The behavior of men and women is ‘caused’ not so much by forces within themselves (instincts, drives, needs, etc.) or by external forces

impinging upon them (social forces, etc.), but what lies in between, a reflective and socially derived interpretation of the internal and external stimuli that are present” (Ito, 1985: 301, citing Meltzer *et al*, 1975:2). In this same respect, the *karo* as “what lies in between” represents the place of convergence—of dialogue and dynamic tension—between internal structure and external forces. For the interior of the canoe to remain dry and intact, external forces must be simultaneously resisted and exploited: the *yepe waa* must be shaped in such a way as to rise above the water yet move efficiently through it, while the hull wall itself must be cut thin enough to make the canoe light and maneuverable, yet thick enough to ensure structural integrity.

The *karo* as a “basket” (specifically, for carrying food from the garden) or “womb” is symbolic of the canoe’s role in “reproductive” processes and its ability to sustain life. As such, a “two island” way of life demands the continuous movement of the physical body through a traditional pattern of circulation and return that emulates female physiological processes. In this respect, the gendered dialogic of Lamén Island *waa* “... gives rise not only to metaphor, or even to polysemy, but also to a contrapuntal dialogue between men and women about agency in the reproduction of society” (Barlow, 1997: 4); for although the gender roles of men and women on Lamén Island are almost entirely segregated, they are also generally complementary in almost every social activity. While the segregated activities foster and reinforce a gendered sense of individual identity, it is the mutual ethos of complementarity that makes activities of social reproduction so culturally adaptive to outside forces, allowing a range of perspectives and experiences—particularly from women (Jolly, 1997: 133-162), who often come from elsewhere because of marriage—regarding notions of change and stability (Rodman, 1985; Hviding, 1996: 262-265; Jolly, 1997: 133-162; Bolton, 1999) to broaden—or perhaps *dilate* might be more appropriate—the localized boundaries of *kastom* while reinforcing its continuity.

It is interesting to note, particularly within a larger discussion about the degradation of *kastom* by external influences, that while *kastom* is highly localized, Ni-Vanuatu women are not. Marriage, in

particular, often moves women to new communities where the language and *kastom* are completely different. Bislama becomes a critical component to making new friends and adjusting to new ways of doing things. However, this does not mean that the old *kastom* is abandoned; rather, skills, styles, and ideas from other parts of the country are often shared among women and to varying degrees appropriated, illustrating the pragmatic fluency of *kastom*: “That which you find is good, bring it back with you; that which is no good, leave it there. We should bring things back that can change our lives for the better, but improper ways should be left behind” (cf. Jack Waiwo, p. 106). Women in this respect are positioned in a place of situated objectivity vis-à-vis local *kastom* that allows them subtle and often overshadowed control in defining its limits, as Loma does when assuming a dominant role over food preparation, apportioning, and distribution. As in the exceptional case of Grace Molisa (see Preface), however, that control is not always subtle or localized, and refuses to be ignored. She exemplifies the insight and potential women possess for addressing *kastom* as both a tool of hegemonic forces and an instrument of change, a recognition that *kastom*’s seemingly rigid limitations, although socially imposed, ultimately reflect the limitations of individual experience.

A metaphorical example of this flexibility provided by the gendered dialogic in *waa* construction is the lashing for the outrigger assembly. The two traditional styles of knots are *meyebei* (the female counterpart, representing through its appearance a vagina) and *meraiyun* (the male counterpart, resembling a newly-circumcised penis). Few people on Lamén Island can tie either correctly, so doing so has become the specialization of a skilled few, who shared their “secret” (since what was once everyday knowledge has become something of a commodity) during the lashing of Apia’s canoe’s outrigger assembly. Technically, the *meyebei* and *meraiyun* are not knots at all, but continuous loops secured at their ends by pounding. Knowing the *stret rod*, or proper way, to tie the lash is important, but equally as important is understanding that the loops, while occasionally pounded into place with a stone or hammer, have to remain loose enough in just the right places to allow the outrigger assembly some

flexibility of movement, similar to the independent suspension of a car. This flexibility will ensure that, when the sea is rough or the currents are strong, the outrigger won't be so rigidly fastened together as to capsize the canoe or be torn apart. This idea has also been explained to me in relation to the swaying of coconut trees during a hurricane—they may hurl coconuts at your head in a strong wind, but they never fall down on you.

The convergence of these images—loops, roads, *karo*/womb/basket—within the narrative and practice of *waa* construction is a clear indicator of the importance of gendered participation in processes of social and cultural reproduction; furthermore, the practical application of metaphors surrounding the critical nature of flexibility not only supports a theory of social and cultural adaptation vis-à-vis external forces, whether they be rough seas or historical entanglements, but also demonstrates that flexibility within elements of a cultural system is a critical characteristic of the system's overall stability.

Canoes, *kastom*, and *communitas*: Lamén Island myth-making and the sanctification of change

Between the skeletonization of fact so as to narrow moral issues to the point where determinate rules can be employed to decide them . . . and the schematization of social action so that its meaning can be construed in cultural terms (the defining feature . . . to my mind, of ethnographic analysis) there is a more than passing family resemblance (Geertz, 1983: 170).

“It is a matter of observation that as distinctions of mundane structure are reduced in the condition of society that prevails during rituals—the condition that Turner (1969) calls ‘*communitas*’—so may the distinctions of discursive logic be overridden” (Rappaport, 2006: 219). In the case of Lamén Island, *kastom* beyond its discursive trappings draws a blurry distinction between ritual and the mundane. Everyday tasks are often labor intensive endeavors requiring social cooperation, even with the modern technologies that are available on the island. Maintaining gardens, harvesting food, preparing meals, building houses and canoes—these are arduous tasks done methodically using techniques developed long before local memory but embedded in a heritage of generational knowledge

transmission that is assumed by locals to have remained relatively intact in so far as its products are still useful today and significant historical changes in their traditional forms can still be accounted for in oral histories prior to the arrival of missionaries in 1948, a time referred to as *bifo* (cf. p. 17-18).

Although work is arduous, it is nevertheless done at the discretion of the individual, whether or not the work to be done is one's own or a community project with a social commitment. This has led to the ubiquitous and implicit understanding in any social matters of the nature of *aelan taem* (cf. pp. 86, 90). Consequently, this kind of work punctuates long intervals of relaxation and various forms of socialization, during which any physical labor is generally handled by women and centered on cooking and other daily domestic chores. Men spend much of their time elsewhere with other men, engaged in the same pastime as women: *storian*. Men politic and women gossip, but in the larger complementary dynamic of social reproduction, both are the same. Inevitably, this interval will determine when the next spate of community-scale work will occur. As such, it is a paradoxical but integral part of the process of work: without relaxing, no work would get done.

This is as pure an expression of *kastom* on Lamén Island as I could imagine—an amalgam of people, products, and their mutually regenerative processes moving toward an unspecified eventuality using a semi-conscious temporal algorithm “structured” by a “normative *communitas*,” (Turner, 2008: 132). Again, *communitas* is typically placed in a strict context of ritual practice and its relationship to liminality (van Gennep, 1960); nevertheless, I argue that this normative *communitas* exists for the same reason “*kastom*” exists as a topic of political discourse: it operates as a point of cultural comparison at the intersection of tradition and modernity (Thomassen, 2009). Lamén Islanders only comment on *aelan taem*, for example, when it confronts *waetman taem*, as in the case of my own research schedule (cf. pp. 88-92). Political liminality for Lamén Islanders, like the hull of a canoe, is “what lies in between” (cf. p. 40); their identity exists in a place of convergence between *bifo* and *tumoro*, but also on the fringe of geopolitical space between center and periphery. This historical-political backdrop between time and

space thus creates the double-bind scenario that relegates *kastom* cultural production within this liminal zone to a position of categorical ambiguity, where its legitimacy is either ignored or condemned as polluted or impure by exposure to modern practices and anomalous materials that muddle classificatory distinctiveness.

“Positively, [however, Lamén Islanders] can deliberately confront the anomaly and try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place. It is not impossible for an individual to revise his own personal scheme of classifications. But no individual lives in isolation and his scheme will have been partly received from others . . . Any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions” (Douglas, 2007: 48-50).

Kastom in a state of liminality between political discourse and “the way in which people live their daily lives” (cf. p. 16) fits well into Maine’s early assertions that “social necessities and social opinion are always more or less in advance of Law . . . Law is stable; societies . . . are progressive. The greater or less happiness of a people depends on the degree of promptitude with which the gulf is narrowed” (Maine, 1946: 20). In the case of modern *waa*, navigating this gulf is critically dependent upon the deployment of “legal fictions,” which Maine defines as “any assumption which conceals, or affects to conceal, the fact that a rule of law has undergone alteration, its letter remaining unchanged, its operation being modified” (ibid.: 22)—a condition well-suited for restoring modern *waa* to a place of acceptable classification within “*kastom*.” There are other options, of course: 1) physical control of the anomaly, e.g., either completely reverting acceptable *waa* production to the use of pre-contact tools, materials, and techniques, or moving radically away from pre-contact traditions entirely and assuming a total loss of *kastom* vis-à-vis *waa*; 2) accepting modern *waa* as either “*kastom*” as defined by political discourse or *kastom* as “the way in which people live their daily lives,” wholly condemning one in favor of the other; 3) attempting to address the “pollution” of traditional *waa* in the same moral terms as incest, for example, employing a “pollution rule” (Douglas, 2007: 162) in order to enforce conformity by

highlighting dangers; or 4) incorporating the anomalous ambiguity of modern *waa* into the existing mythos (e.g., *kastom* taxonomy) through ritual inclusion in order to “enrich [the] meaning” of their existence (ibid.: 48-50).

In theory, all of these alternate decisions are possible; nevertheless, in reality, they are also highly problematic because they represent “hard and fast” (ibid.: 162) solutions to the more complex issue of legitimization within a context of centrally dominated discourse. Consequently, the use of legal fiction (i.e., the story of the *kleva*, Avio Koli [Young, 1999; cf. this text, pp. 48-49, 98]) in the continuation of *waa* production, while perhaps not a permanent solution, does provide a socially constructed interval of time in which to determine the place of *waa* vis-à-vis the past, present, and future in the narrative Lamén Islanders are re/creating:

“Colonized peoples have not only incorporated and internalized conceptualizations and semiology of colonial discourse at the level of thought, ideology, and political praxis, but through a less direct reactive process they have valorized elements of their own cultural traditions—decontextualized or transformed—as symbols of the contrast between those traditions and Western culture” (Keesing, 1989: 28).

Avio Koli is emblematic of Lamén Island’s attempt to reconcile post-contact alterations to *kastom* with *palanga na sumo*, the “ways of before.” His place in Lamén Island’s history is problematic because his respected (and feared) *kastom* status and legendary prowess in *nakaimas* (black magic) seems, at least academically and thus paradoxically, to conflict with his offhand willingness to abandon traditional norms in cases when foreign innovations would improve existing technology (and, possibly, his own renown), exemplified by his addition of a Western gunwale to Lamén Island *waa*. Even more significantly, his *kastom* status on Lamén Island may have afforded this foreign modification a socially legitimated place within local *kastom* taxonomy, giving the rest of the population the implicit “green light” to try it themselves without fear of, or reprisal for, polluting *kastom*:

J: When I’ve spoken to people, some have told me that when a stylistic change is made—for example, with a canoe—or different materials are used, it diminishes *kastom*. But your father was strong with *kastom*...

A: Yes.

- J: Why do you think your father might want to change something like that? Do you think he thought he was disrespecting *kastom*, or...?
- A: No, I don't think he thought that. He was just trying to create a personal style—a style different from anyone else's. That doesn't mean he was disrespecting *kastom*. When he was finished, everyone went to go look, and now everyone is doing it just like he did (Atis Avio, interview, 2009).

In this way, Avio Koli's successful "attempt to make what was once culturally marginal a new form of orthodoxy" (Allen, 1981: 109)—his ability to establish an albeit precarious balance between social legitimacy and cultural deviation—is not only the strategic hallmark of "those who aspire to social eminence and leadership" (ibid.) in Melanesia; the dynamic tension between conformity and nonconformity also serves as the catalyst for larger evolutionary processes of cultural adaptation that such innovations reify.

The sorcerer's apprentice

Magic is akin to science in that it always has the definite aim intimately associated with human instincts, needs, and pursuits. The magic art is directed towards the attainment of practical aims (Malinowski, 1948: 86).

Jack Waiwo's small canoe was nondescript at a distance. A sizeable man, when he sat on the rear seat, his own figure dwarfed the canoe by comparison; it seemed a canoe entirely too small for someone so large, as if it might easily sink when the water wasn't perfectly calm and glassy. A yellow canvas sail was all that could be seen of the vessel from Lamenu's shore by the time the canoe neared Jack's garden on Epi. If there were swells in the middle of Lamenu Bay when he went out, any sign of him from shore would be intermittent at best, as if he were a dolphin skirting along the undersurface of the water, coming up only occasionally for a quick breath of air.

But no matter the weather, nobody worried about Jack Waiwo when he pulled out to sea in a canoe. Here was a man renowned for being more at home on the water than on the land, a man who had spent his whole life putting into practice the *kastom* teachings of his grandfather-- testing the waters of traditional knowledge, both metaphorically and practically-- and, in doing so, nurturing a



Jack Waiwo is renowned for his maritime *kastom*, the subject of local myth and legend.

remarkably intuitive relationship with his natural surroundings that gave the time he spent at sea a deeply meaningful sense of connection to the wisdom of his own cultural heritage, as embodied by his grandfather. Jack's grandfather was nearly a century old when he died in 1957; Jack learned everything he knew from him by the time he was 15 years old. "Everywhere he went, I was right behind him," Jack recounted. "He told me everything about medicine, the different leaves and so on, but he really taught me about traveling—canoes. Good times to travel, bad times to travel. He was a good traveler himself, a good

captain. How to read everything, the way nature behaves—he understood. And he learned all that from his own father, passed from generation to generation. He passed it on to me, and so I pass it on to my children today" (Waiwo, interview, 2009).

In 2002, Jack Waiwo built a small canoe from *wei*, also known as *bluwota*, or teak, and sailed it alone from Espiritu Santo to Lamén Island, a distance of at least 170 km, in spite of government opposition to long-distance inter-island canoe voyaging. Sitting on this same canoe, now overturned behind his house, Jack remembered: "The police told me I couldn't do it—I couldn't go by canoe, they wouldn't allow it. [But] I was doing it with a singular purpose: my idea to travel from Santo to here was to find out whether or not the teachings of my grandfather were true, because I wanted to write a book on the history of canoes . . . that I could donate to schools. But this prohibition . . . it's still in place."

Traveling as a guest speaker to schools around the country, Jack became a well-known proponent of the revitalization of *kastom* means of travel. On Lamén Island as well, he held an understated but respected notoriety within the community. It was a notoriety that quickly highlighted

the possibility of his spiritual inheritance from Avio Koli, first because Jack was Avio's son-in-law, but also because Jack's prowess with canoes seemed in local narratives to defy natural laws. When I asked Lamén Islanders about Jack as a *man blong kenu*, people spoke reverently about his love of being at sea "for no reason," about his ability to travel anywhere, any time of day, with great speed and apparent disregard for tides or currents, all of which dictated the travel plans of other Lamén Islanders. Some people said Jack's canoe was like Avio Koli's.

Avio Koli was the first Lamén Islander to attach a raised gunwale, locally known as an *iwa*, or rail, to his canoe during the late 1940s. "Before," recounts his son, Atis, "they didn't use rails when they made canoes; they just used bamboo in the same way. My father had a friend named Tiby Hagen, who lived on northeast Epi. He worked on a plantation. He could repair boats, too. My father was a friend of his, and one time he went to watch Tiby work on a boat. He watched the way Tiby put the timber in place, then fastened it together with copper and nails. That's where my father got the idea [for the *iwa*]. He came back, and when he built his own canoe, he decided to make it like the

waetman had done with his boat. He built the canoe, cut wood for the rail, and then that *waetman* brought copper and nails. We use a certain kind of wood like putty; they used that and then fastened the rail with copper. That's where the idea came from—from boats" (Atis Avio, interview, 2009).

My curiosity aroused about Jack's canoe, I asked him if I could examine it and take some photos during our next interview, to which he happily agreed. "I'll bring my camera, too," he said.

Jack and I met a few days later at his house, where we followed a small path through the bush



Jack Waiwo's *kastom* canoe: an influential synthesis of traditional magic and modern innovation.

to a clearing at the shoreline. His tiny canoe sat perched on a few pieces of driftwood to keep it stable and elevated, but ready to roll downward into the water when needed. The tell-tale yellow sail was lashed to a small bamboo mast, boom, and gaff with nylon rope. The mast was supported with nylon standing rigging fastened to the bow and both sides of the canoe along the spars. The lashing holding together the outrigger assembly was a hodge-podge of nylon cord, bicycle tire tubing, and Japanese fishing rope, all of which seemed haphazardly fastened. No sign of attention to the meticulous, formal detail that characterized *kastom* lashing techniques was evident. Was that knot a *meyebai* or a *meraiyun*?

"It's rubber," Jack said. "It's easier to use when it's wet." He pulled a thickly carved paddle from inside the hull and leaned on it, scrutinizing the blocky knob at the end of its neck. I examined the rest of the canoe closely. The outrigger appeared to be a typical assembly of *korana* (outrigger booms), *merawelaŵ* (outrigger boom lashing mounts), and *yeme* (outrigger pontoon), but the *yepi waa* and *karo* (the outer and inner hull, respectively) showed a dramatic redesign more along the lines of a modern sailboat: the hull was traditionally rounded, emulating or "respecting" (cf. pp. 76) the shape of its arboreal source, but the bow was sleekly angled to slice through water rather than having the typically sharp tapering that chopped through water, throwing it to either side. The stern was sleek and narrow, tapering on both sides into a shallow keel below the captain's seat. The walls of the hull were far thinner than that of a typical canoe, so much so that they had to be supported with three small bulkheads mounted fore, aft, and at the base of the mast. With a typical canoe, the size of the inside of the hull would have been determined first and hollowed out while the outside was shaped to accommodate the hole. This would allow for maximum interior space with final adjustments being made to the outside of the canoe, thus making for easier work during the finishing touches. Interior space, however, was a secondary consideration in the case of Jack's canoe; carving began on the outside first to achieve the desired form, then the inside was dug out to make the canoe as light, maneuverable,

and fast as possible. By comparison to more typical canoes on Lamén Island, it seemed entirely impractical. If practicality lay at the heart of *kastom*, then wasn't this canoe its antithesis?

When I asked him about the shape of the hull, Jack said, "When I saw Avio Koli's canoe, I decided to make mine just like his." His comment took me back to my previous interview with Avio Koli's son, Atis:

J: When I've spoken to people, some have told me that when a stylistic change is made-- for example, with a canoe-- it diminishes *kastom*. But your father was strong with *kastom*. Why do you think your father might want to change something like that? Do you think he believed he was being disrespectful toward *kastom*?

A: No, I don't think he thought that. He was just trying to create a personal style-- a style different from anyone else's. That doesn't mean he was disrespecting *kastom*. When he was finished, everyone went to go look, and now everyone is doing it just like he did.

J: Every time I talk with someone about the rail of the canoe, they mention your father and his canoe-- how it used *kastom* magic to move so quickly. Some men believe that his canoe could fly like a bird. It may have simply been the style of the canoe, but I suppose it also depends on your beliefs, your culture.

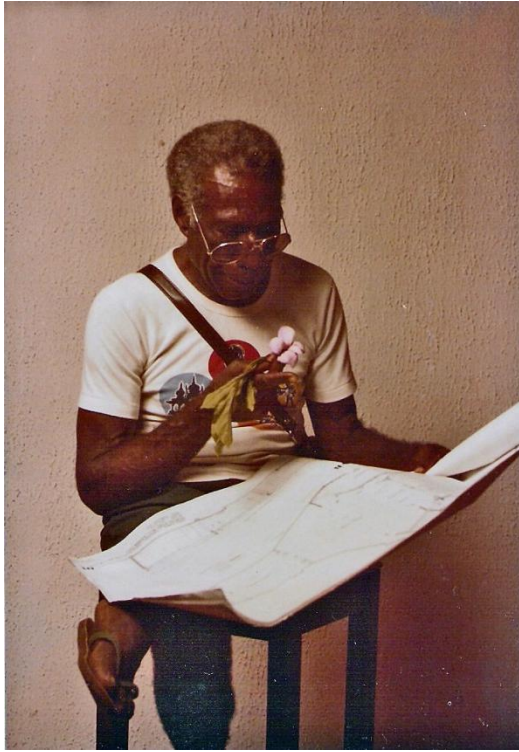
A: Yes.

J: Sometimes it seems like magic and technology are not so different.

A: No, not too different.

As well as being a fieldworker with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, Avio Koli was at one time one of the most powerful *kleva* in Vanuatu (Bonnemaison, 1996: 291). He had a dramatic, infamous, and yet somewhat dubious reputation on the tiny island he once called home:

"Evidently, in his own eyes, Avio was a man of many parts: a chief several times over, a stout pillar of the community and general benefactor, a medical specialist and a magician. But this was not the way his compatriots from Lamén and Epi saw him . . . In the villages, I noticed that everyone laughed whenever I mentioned Avio's name. Chief Timoti Nowo of Nikaura laughed when I referred to Avio's claim to have worked for the church for over twenty years; Lui Kora laughed when I said that Avio had had two wives. 'Four,' he corrected. Several men on Lamén scoffed when I mentioned that Avio was a chief, and they seemed to think the titles he claimed in his CV were fictitious. But on his home island Avio was *persona non grata*, such that anything one might say in his favour was dismissed. Curiously, though, no-one disputed the story of his inherited association with a *leriko* (cf. liusepsep, p. 98). What seemed to me to be the most implausible of his stories was willingly accepted by others" (Young, 1999: 117-119).



Avio Koli, the infamous sorcerer whose understanding of *kastom* revolutionized canoe building on Lamén Island.

Avio Koli was the first man ever exiled from Lamén Island, in 1979, after public accusations of sorcery in the mysterious death of a respected chief named Tapanga, who was purportedly a direct descendent of the first man on Lamén Island (ibid., 119; cf. p. 71, this work). Because of Avio Koli's relationship to the development of modern *waa* on Lamén Island, particularly with regards to the *iwa*, his name was recurrent in every interview, which corroborated Young's experiences above. As much as Avio Koli is reviled on Lamén Island even today, there persists a unanimous and profound respect for both his power as a *kleva* and his innovative style as a canoe builder. In fact, stories of his navigating exploits, much like Jack Waiwo's own, are colored with associations to *nakaimas* as well as his renowned skill and practical application of *kastom* maritime knowledge.

Once while drinking kava together, I asked Jack if he knew that everyone I had spoken to had mentioned the similarities between his canoe and that of Avio Koli's, emphasizing their repeated use of the word "*kastom*." He smiled like someone who has intuited the punch line midway through a joke. I asked him if he employed magic at all when he built his canoe, and he laughed: "No, no. I just built it differently, the way Avio did."

The word "*kastom*" has numerous connotations (See also White, 1993: 475-494) in local daily discourse: it can refer to *palanga na sumo* ("the ways of before"); it can refer to an existing traditional ritual, ceremony, or obligation; it can be used to dissociate local from foreign (i.e., medicine); and it can be used synonymously (as can "poison," and "medicine") with "magic." Magic itself diverges into two

moral and ethical “roads”: black magic, or *nakaimas*, and white magic, commonly referred to as “*kastom*,” although in specific contexts “*kastom*” can also mean *nakaimas*. Again, the potential for confusion simply highlights the inadequacy of Bislama in conveying complex, highly contextual distinctions (as with kinship terms and *tabu*; cf. pp. 22, 89); nevertheless, it reinforces my assertion that “*kastom*” as a discursive practice, while certainly necessary to “compare present circumstances to those of the past; or to compare one’s own culture with that of other people” (cf. Lindstrom, p. 23, this work), generates ambiguity in respective contexts when the “continual dialectic” (cf. p. 25) is interrupted. I argue, furthermore, that the dialectic is not “continual” at all, but is instead “punctuated,” and, therefore, ill equipped to adequately address *kastom* itself as a dynamic process of change. Rather, a punctuated dialectic can only view “*kastom*” as something upon which the forces of change are exerted. Consequently, *kastom* becomes paradoxical: “*Kastom* on Lamén Island will never change,” asserts Jack Waiwo (Interview, 2009). “You can tell a child that a long time ago building a canoe took a long time. People used to burn the wood, then chip out the charcoal to make a hole. A canoe like this, to make it seaworthy, would take nearly a year. But today, change has given us new tools brought by foreigners that make the work faster. So people recognize this, adopt it, and it becomes *kastom* in the lives of young people today.” In this context, Jack was formulating materiality in the context of *kastom* as something that, although transformed in many ways by historic entanglements, retained some intangible, ontologically definitive source:

JW: People realize they have to live with change in their lives. You can’t run away from it. When life is different than before, you have to live up to it. Like I said regarding canoes, many people don’t consider them, but instead choose to take boats. In terms of the self-sustaining life we had before, people today rely too heavily on the services of other people and continue to use them. But I say you must live with change. Maybe one day people will again begin building more canoes, or maybe they will disappear in ten ... to fifty years time. We don’t know. But it’s very important for people to hold tight to their way of life and their *kastom*, their identity.

J: But when you say “way of life,” you mean...

JW: Respect.

That afternoon, I returned to Apia's house to help begin preparing the evening's kava. As Apia and I sat behind the house skinning and chopping kava roots, I recounted the day's events and my thoughts about Jack Waiwo's canoe and what he had told me about the relationship between *kastom*, respect, and technological change. Apia, normally matching my excitement about things with his own, seemed instead to be a bit pensive, almost subdued. It was difficult to discern, but I recognized the look of embarrassment on his face that was always accompanied by this kind of reserved quietude. "Joel, I have to tell you something," he said.

"Uh-oh. What is it?" I asked. In the back of my mind, I could see our canoe damaged or, worse, set adrift by someone in the middle of the night.

"Remember when I told you they cut the canoe out of respect for the shape of the tree?*"

"Oh. Yeah," I said, my worry waning.

"I lied about that part; just forget I ever said that." Once said, he brushed off the whole affair like a mosquito buzzing around his head and returned to cutting, visibly relieved.

I laughed, embarrassed myself for being caught off-guard, remembering how noble that sentiment had seemed at the time—how ideal. "Okay, I will," I lied in kind. Again I found myself suddenly reminded that Apia and I were still both perched cautiously above a precipice separating two worlds, each with its own assumptions about the other, particularly in terms of the role of individual agency— of a sorcerer, a canoe builder, or an anthropologist—in reproducing those worlds. In spite of our years of friendship, we, in some ways, still had our own punctuated dialectic with which to contend.

* Cf. p. 72 for Apia's original comment, in which he consciously fabricates a notion of "respect" into his description in order to satisfy what he perceives to be my expectations; furthermore, even after some group discussion in Lewo, no one corrects him.

Spinning straw into gold: local experimentation and the postmodern alchemy of transnational resource harvesting

. . . *The sea is history . . . As the sea is an open and ever-flowing reality, so should our oceanic identity transcend all forms of insularity, to become one that is openly searching, inventive, and welcoming . . . We are floundering because we have forgotten, or spurned, the study and contemplation of our pasts, even our recent histories, as irrelevant for the understanding and conduct of our contemporary affairs . . . allow[ing] others who are well equipped with the so-called objective knowledge of our historical development to continue reconstituting and reshaping our world and our selves with impunity, and in accordance with their shifting interests at any given moment in history* (Hau'ofa, 2000: 126-130).

“For coastal dwellers,” states Hviding in his opening chapter, “the sea mediates between groups of people near and far. It does not divide, nor is it a deterrent to contact. On the contrary, the ocean expanses . . . have been convincingly described as ‘highways rather than barriers’ (Lewis, 1972: 15). The island peoples of the Pacific were not isolated, but traveled near and far . . . assisted by ingenious knowledge of their maritime environment and by cultural practice deeply embedded in the sea” (Hviding, 1996: 1). So, too, is this notion of mobility deeply embedded in the “two island” ethos of Lamén Islanders; however, this mobility, which, again, for Lamén Islanders follows a pattern of circulation and return (cf. pp. 37-38, 67, this work), is deeply entrenched—indeed, inseparable—from their sense of place. Their mobile identity in this sense, rather than emerging as the result of encounters with modernity, has always been *kastom* and is exemplified by their maritime culture, regardless of whether they paddle canoes or use speedboats. Traditional form is not the singular conveyance of *kastom*; it is the sea itself that facilitates this identity and allows it to extend itself outward and into *Other* contexts. “Nature and culture are inseparable” (Hau'ofa, 1998: 407).

But the expansion of their cultural identity is not wholly sustained by their own outward mobility; rather, it is also greatly dependent—particularly in terms of how the adaptive development of modern *waa* has ensured post-contact cultural continuity—on the influx of foreign materials that circulate literally as flotsam and jetsam on the currents moving through Lamén Bay from elsewhere in

the Pacific. Metaphorically, materials were also “washed ashore” during the tide of colonial-era infrastructural and economic development ventures that failed prior to Vanuatu’s independence in 1980. While materials regularly found floating at sea are generally related to maritime activities and therefore remain useful as such, other materials related to colonial-era projects are usually salvaged from onshore sites and repurposed in a variety of ways. When preparing kava for the evening, while the diced roots are being fed through a Czech-made Porkert #12 cast-iron manual meat grinder (the



Filemon Charlie grinds the evening's kava in a meat grinder.

preferred grinder for kava on Lamenu), someone will invariably point out to me the fact that “*waetman* make these to grind meat, but *blakman* use these to grind kava—*mit blong blakman!*” It’s an ironic statement of solidarity with its “roots” in a widespread local tradition of appropriation and repurposing—taking something “white” and transforming it into something “black” (Keesing, 1992). In contrast, anything that cannot withstand this transformation and proves worthless has its honorary cultural affiliation revoked. If a meat grinder breaks under the strain of kava grinding, a common

idiomatic response is: “Made in China.”

At the stage of Apia’s canoe’s construction when copper stripping was to be nailed across the gap between the *iwa* and the *yepe waa* (cf. p. 110), Apia decided to undertake an experiment. He retrieved a long piece of black PVC piping that, at some point in the past, he had foraged from an abandoned water sanitation project on Epi. He built a small fire next to the canoe and, when the fire had turned to glowing embers, he cut a meter length of the pipe and placed its end in the fire. Melting and aflame, he moved it to the canoe and began to slowly edge the burning end along the length of the gap between the *iwa* and the *yepe waa*, which had already been packed tightly with coconut fiber. I asked him what he was doing.

“I’m melting the plastic into the coconut fiber so that when it cools, it will create a solid seal,” he said confidently. I’d never seen this done before with a canoe, but his confidence was such that I thought he knew what he was doing.

“Have you done this before?” I asked.

“No,” he said, concentrating on the dripping plastic. “It’s *blakman* science.”

I knew already that melting PVC not only generated highly toxic fumes, but that it would be brittle when it finally cooled. I warned him.

“That’s why I’m pouring it onto the coconut fibers; they’ll hold everything together,” he assured me. “The plastic will completely waterproof the space before we nail the copper down.”

I was impressed with the idea, and Apia seemed sure of its success—or at least in his experiment’s inability



Apia experiments with a water sealant by melting PVC and pouring it into gaps in the hull.

to ruin the canoe so close to its completion; any irrevocable mistake at this point would mean the canoe builders had just wasted weeks of their own time and energy—a potentially embarrassing social *faux pas* on Apia’s part (I knocked over a freshly prepared bucket of kava one night while serving it, leaving everyone “thirsty” for the evening, but also robbing the men who had helped prepare it of their payment. Worse, it was the only kava on the island that night. I received countless mock condolences—a brilliantly subtle form of teasing to prolong embarrassment—from people for a week).

The PVC cooled quickly, but also scorched the wood when flaming drops missed the coconut fiber. I followed him around the canoe as he applied it, to smother any stray drops. By the next morning, however, the PVC had set and seemed to provide a perfect seal. Apia looked over his work after breakfast with pride. “That was a great idea,” I said honestly. Apia laughed.

“What’s funny?” I asked.

“*Blakman stael*,” he replied. “You guys just use PVC to carry water, but we’ve got a thousand uses for it.”

A year later, I would return to find the PVC admixture had shattered like candy glass within the first few weeks. Apia’s only response to my query for specifics was, “Condominium.” In other words, it was a complete debacle.

Other, more successful, indigenous experimentation with appropriated materials is exemplified



Foam plugs for the *merawunduldul*, cut from a segment of commercial fishing net floater.

by perhaps the smallest and most understated addition to modern *waa*: the fishing net floater as repurposed for use in *merawunduldul* (cf. pp. 69, 113-115). *Merawunduldul* are the holes drilled, usually, into both the *iwa* and *yepé waa* in order to accommodate the lashing of the *korana* to the hull. Fishing net floaters occasionally drift into Lamén

Bay currents as flotsam from commercial fishing operations

elsewhere. Bright yellow, they are easy to spot at sea, and in that event, considerable energy will often be expended by dedicated canoe paddlers to retrieve them.

Quite simply, the floaters are sliced open when needed, and cut into thumb-sized wedges that fit snugly into the *merawunduldul* once the rigging is completely installed. By their nature, they are ideal for the job, and they can be reused indefinitely. In the past, *merawunduldul* were stuffed with densely packed bundles of coconut fiber—highly efficient at sealing the interior from water seepage, readily available, and easy to replace; nevertheless, the abundance of floater material available and comparative ease with which foam plugs can be reused on any canoe made them a viable alternative that are now used almost exclusively.

Another significant material appropriation in the development of modern *waa* is the use of 1/4-inch hemp rope, locally referred to as “Japanese rope,” which is highly valued on Lamén Island because



A Japanese colored-glass commercial fishing net buoy wrapped in locally valuable “Japanese rope.”

its durability is matched only by its flexibility. As well, it is coarse and “sticky” when wet, resisting slippage. The combination of these characteristics have made it optimal for installing an outrigger assembly, which, when complete, needs to provide structural integrity to the hull assembly while allowing the individual components of the outrigger assembly itself to provide the overall structural responsiveness to withstand rough waters. Rigging was once traditionally constructed by hand from coconut fibers, which had to be scraped clean, rolled and linked to one another. A rare skill today, it is time-consuming and labor intensive, and the rope has become a valuable commodity as a result. Done properly, coconut husk rope is remarkably strong and flexible, but it has a comparatively short life. Like many of the modern components used today, most canoe owners continue using the same Japanese ropes that they have been using and reusing for decades. Japanese rope is most commonly found washed ashore in large, knotted bundles after storms, but it is also sometimes retrieved from the sea when found attached to the Japanese colored-glass floats that occasionally pass through the bay. It is practically ubiquitous on Lamén Island canoes; however, its quantity is limited, making it a social commodity that circulates within the community as well. “A gift economy . . . is not only a system that promotes the circulation of material goods (as in a market economy) but also a system that promotes the circulation of “selves” and thus creates a mystical economy of participation between individuals, organisms, and objects” (Counihan, 1997: 102). The sharing of Japanese rope represents a correspondence between “selves” that is materialized and unified by the rope itself, “binding” individuals together in a pattern of reciprocity and embodying a shared cultural history. Japanese rope thus “ties” a sense of self highly localized in time and space to this larger body of “mystical” spatio-temporal experience. In this way, the “spirit of the thing given” (Mauss, 1967:

8), as it relates to deeply rooted patterns of obligation and reciprocity, allows foreign objects—objects of ambiguity vis-à-vis “*kastom*”—to be “repurposed” and reclassified by their larger role in social and cultural continuity.

An interesting anomaly in the technological development of modern *waa* is the coconut leaf sail (See photo, p. v). It is a simple construction of four large coconut leaves, one of which stands vertically with two others flanking it at approximately 30° to either side and converging toward its base. The fourth leaf rests horizontally across the other three, approximately centered on the height of the central leaf. Tree bark strips (usually from *burau*, or *Cordia subcordata*) are used to lash all four leaves together in this configuration. The sail is placed standing perpendicular to the canoe hull, between the two forward *korana*. Its base is usually braced against one of the *korana*, and a *burau* strip is tied to each end of the horizontal leaf and anchored along the rear *korana* to serve as standing rigging. It is easily assembled and remarkably efficient, with the potential to turn a 45-minute paddle into a 15-minute glide, and comparable to some small outboard motors. What makes this sail so anomalous in comparison to other technological advancements that have spurred the continued production of *waa*, however, is that the first sails used by Lamén Islanders were the canvas sails of European settlers (Charlie Lemaiya, interview, 2009). But today there are only three *sel kenu*, or “sailing canoes,” (utilizing nylon sails) on Lamén Island today—notably belonging to Jack Waiwo, Tom Maite, and Chief Charlie Lemaya, the local expert on sailing and the history of sails on Lamén Island. Rather than replacing any pre-existing sails, canvas sails originally inspired Lamén Islanders to try weaving sails of their own from pandanus, the same material used for mat making. This was a short-lived experiment, however, because of a simple idea that trumped both types of sails, at least in terms of overall practicality and ease of accessibility: the coconut leaf sail. To this day it still has no formal name, but is considered *kastom*. In this respect, its persistence is totally unique; nevertheless, it also exemplifies the agency of *kastom* in modern technological developments.

Finally—and exemplary of the role of legal fiction as an important “tool” in the survival and development of modern *waa*—are 1/4-inch copper nails. While a canoe can be built with only a handful of five- and six-inch galvanized nails, the copper strip that seals the breach between the *iwa* and the *yepe waa* can take hundreds of these copper nails. While they are not hard to find in small quantities on Lamén Island, gathering enough for a single canoe can be a difficult task. In this respect, a canoe operates like a kind of 401(k) plan: people who have copper nails at all have likely already invested them in the construction of their current canoe. Once that canoe is no longer seaworthy— in three to five years, but perhaps longer—those same nails will “roll over” into the construction of the next canoe, and the one after that, *ad infinitum*. Those who want to build a canoe but do not have copper nails have three choices, each with varying potential for success: either accumulate enough copper nails from local sources over an extended period of *aelan taem*; find a friend or relative on Espiritu Santo willing to rummage through the old South Pacific Fishing Company shipyards (cf. pp. 73, 98, 110-111) for original nails—an unlikely endeavor after decades of scavenging; or purchase them elsewhere, most likely from the capital city.

Apia had not had his own canoe since I had left in 2003. His old canoe had sat long enough on the banks by the shore that every copper nail had by now been stolen. All that remained were a few dozen that Apia had stored in a plastic jar in the kitchen house. He was able to collect a few more from around the island and on Epi. Meanwhile, some of his friends on Espiritu Santo had unsuccessfully scoured the SPFC shipyards. Fortunately, I was flying into Port Vila in a few days to follow up on some information at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and I told Apia I would pick up some nails from the commercial hardware store.

Once in Port Vila, however, some confusion about these nails arose. They were nowhere to be found, although Apia continued to assure me they were abundant at the hardware store in town. I told him over the phone that “copper nails” from the hardware store were, in fact, not copper at all, but

galvanized nails painted gold. “Yes,” he said. “Those are the ones.” But the original copper nails from SPFC that I had seen used for canoes were dark brown and often spotted with blue-green oxidation, had square shafts and asymmetrical heads.

“But you said ‘copper nails.’ These aren’t copper at all,” I tried to clarify.

“We just call them copper nails because of their color,” Apia said. “You can’t find copper nails like the originals anymore. They’re all gone.”

“But the gold ones are just galvanized nails,” I said, confused.

“Yes, make sure you get the gold ones.”

“So we’re not going to use copper nails for the canoe,” I reiterated.

“The gold ones,” Apia said. “They’re galvanized, right?”

“Yes,” I said. “They just painted them gold for some reason.”

“It’s so they look like the old copper ones,” Apia said. “As long as they’re galvanized, it doesn’t matter.”

I hung up with Apia to talk to the store clerk, a friendly Ni-Vanuatu youth in an oversized uniform shirt. “Don’t you sell 1/4-inch *copper* nails, the kind they used to use for boat-building?”

“Sure,” he said. Together we returned to where the gold-colored galvanized nails filled a shelving bin. He picked one up and handed it to me: “Here’s what you’re looking for.”

I decided to let the whole issue go. I bought 250 1/4-inch nails, as well as a handful of extra five- and six-inch galvanized nails. The clerk handed me my change and asked, “What are you building?”

“We’re building a canoe,” I said. “We ran out of nails.”

The clerk, looking confused, replied, “You can’t build a canoe with those. Those are the wrong nails.”



Copper nails (top) and their galvanized successor (bottom).

Once I had returned to Lamén Island, I received a phone call from a friend of mine in Port Vila, who had actually managed to locate the copper nails I had given up hope of finding. They sold for 120vt each, or just over a dollar. Even if I had found them, they would have been too cost-prohibitive for me, but particularly so for the average Lamén Islander. Was this why they were settling for cheap simulacra?

“They *are* expensive,” Apia explained, “but we never buy them. We use the ones we have. If we don’t have those, we use these other ones. The copper ones are good because they don’t rust, but the gold ones are galvanized, so they also work.”

“And you think they’re painted gold to look like the copper ones?” I asked, referring to his comment over the phone.

“Yes, so we’ll buy them. We’ll think they’re copper,” he said.

“Do you?” I teased.

“They work just as well, so we don’t care. They’re easier to find anyway, and they *look* like the copper ones.”

The general consensus was that the copper nails of the SPFC were the best nails ever used on canoes. Prior to Avio Koli’s addition of the *iwa* in the forties, nails were unnecessary, but within a short time, they were in high demand and made available through those Lamén Islanders who left to work on SPFC boats and at the facility on Espiritu Santo. Now that those nails were scarce, canoe builders were looking for a replacement that was, first and foremost, rust resistant and reusable. Nevertheless, there was also a common belief that the reason the new nails they had chosen were painted gold was because they were supposed to make people believe they were “copper” in the sense that SPFC’s original copper nails represented an ideal nail. Obviously, there was no way that I could have confirmed this, but it did raise an interesting point about how legal fictions mediate between historical alterations and cultural continuity. In the end, galvanized nails served the same practical purpose as copper nails, but were also

described in everyday discourse *as* “copper nails,” a term which always accompanied stories about local experiences with the South Pacific Fishing Company. As such, Lamén Islanders have not so much manufactured a historical truth, but “repurposed” their sentimental attachment to copper nails and used it to characterize a justifiable modern solution based on and legitimized by a shared history of cultural entanglements.

CHAPTER 3: Vessels of *Kastom*

A people in motion, a place on the move

Linguistic and archaeological evidence (Kirch, 1997; Bedford, 2006; et al.) has placed Vanuatu in a position as one of the earliest areas of settlement in the Austronesian expansion, as well as perhaps the last embarkation point from which line-of-sight voyaging into the rest of the Pacific would have been possible without major innovations in maritime design, technology, and navigational techniques (Finney, 1994; Di Piazza, 2006; et al.). If the earliest archaeological evidence of Lapita culture in Fiji serves as an indication, this may have taken as long as 500 years of experimentation and technological refinement (Finney, 1994; Clark, 2001; 2006). Crossing the Andesite Line was no matter of accidental drift, but an intentional and systematic endeavor (Finney, 1994; Di Piazza, 2006). As such, the contribution of Vanuatu's prehistoric maritime heritage in the eastward peopling of the Pacific cannot be understated; furthermore, the ultimate importance of necessary changes or advancements in what may very well have been viewed as traditional materials and methods up until that time now serves as the case in point for the changes taking place in the modern *waa* of Lamén Island today. Although innovation for Austronesian voyagers may not have been a product of the same foreign entanglements faced by modern Ni-Vanuatu, it was, nevertheless, driven by a very practical desire for survival and cultural continuity when confronted with unknown horizons.

Lamén Island, also called Lamenu ("place for birds"), sits two kilometers across Lamén Bay, off the northwestern tip of the island of Epi, locally called Ura. Vanuatu's Y-shaped archipelago splits apart north of Epi, leaving Lamenu within visible reach of a number of islands which, not coincidentally, were once woven together by canoe travel into a web of pre-contact economic and kinship exchanges that today loosely exists; nevertheless, the islands of Ambrym, Paama, Malekula, Espiritu Santo, and Pentacost, are occasionally still featured in Lamén Island *kastom* stories and everyday *storian*, particularly because many married women on Lamén Island come from those islands.

Lamen Island's population of 440 people makes up approximately 8.5% of Epi's total population of 5,207 people (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2009), although its size is only 1.25 square kilometers. Many residents, however, occasionally occupy secondary homes in Lamen Bay; as such, Lamen Islanders represent the highest population density on Epi. Although nearly all of Lamen Island's residents live closely together on the southern side of Lamenu, facing the bay, traditional land distribution among each *nasara*, or clan, is such that there is little room for adequate gardens beyond small "home gardens," usually sidling the kitchen house itself, which may furnish enough food for a few meals. Consequently, the vast gardens of Lamen Islanders cover the hills of the mainland above Lamen Bay. While other kinds of food exist on Lamen Island—particularly fruit, seafood, and fowl—the land is now primarily the domain of "tuskers," or pigs, the symbolic currency of traditional wealth and social status, which are diligently tended but occasionally allowed to roam freely.

Moist, tropical broadleaf forests on Lamenu and on north Epi have dictated the traditional development of construction materials in the area; nevertheless, the "two island" subsistence approach of Lamen Islanders has favored them with access to an array of foreign materials and technologies, the flotsam of maritime activities elsewhere in the Pacific region, that have found their way into traditional maritime practices. These materials—foam and colored-glass floaters, nylon and "Japanese" rope, plastic containers, swaths of netting and canvas, the occasional rare wood (usually an entire tree)—these objects quite literally enter into circulation to become part of a locally specific economy that manufactures *replacements* from *displacements*. It is this circulation that, along with specific historical entanglements and the "flotsam" of failed colonial-era economic development efforts, has helped foster the continuation of traditional maritime practices and made Lamen Island *waa* unique to canoes elsewhere in the country.

Indeed, this notion of circulation a "two island" existence exemplifies is intrinsic to Lamen Island culture and is displayed in numerous ways, extending outward from perceptions of self to

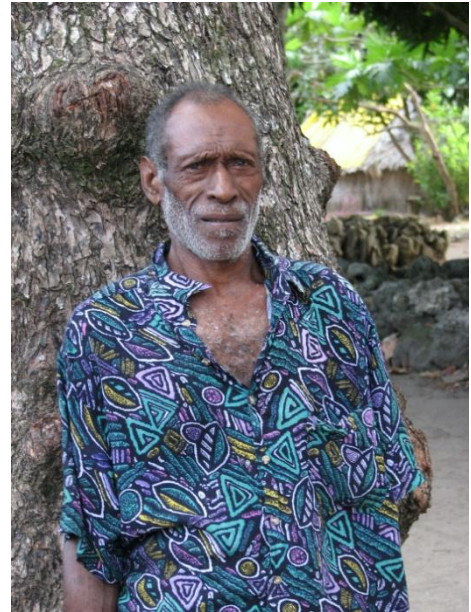
understandings and performance of *kastom* to conceptions of cosmological order. All of this is implied in the words of Chief Douglas Danda: *Yu no gat kenu, yu no gat laef*. This “circulatory system” feeds life into the heart of Lamén Island’s cultural survival and, like lifeblood, it circulates through the rest of the system, not to keep it in suspended animation, but to keep it growing and moving, acting and reacting in response to changes in the outside world.

“Pig tusks are not simply circles, but spirals . . . the circular pattern does not endlessly reinscribe itself, but instead displays a continual outward movement. Although the shape of the new growth replicates the original trajectory, it also takes its own course: it is a part of the same tooth substance, yet it also travels a path set apart from the original ... While being fully embodied ancestors, these living people must also chart their own life courses and are not indelibly constrained by ancestral ways ... any more than they are confined by the systemic constraints of . . . terminology” (Taylor, 2008: 106).

“Places are understood to move” (Bolton, 1999: 44) in Vanuatu, and in this way, to reconstruct the story of Lamén

Island is to learn to build a canoe. The construction of a canoe, likewise, is the recursive enactment of Lamén Island’s social and cultural identity vis-à-vis historical processes, particularly encounters with *mera*, or foreigners. A canoe, like an oral history, can be constructed by any individual with the proper knowledge and skills, but inevitably it is best as an ensemble performance, undertaken in collaboration with a multiplicity of experiences, perspectives, technical abilities, and personal idiosyncrasies—the necessary subjectivities from which social truths and contingent fictions emerge (Clifford, 1986: 1-26).

Mediated by this truth/fiction dichotomy, the historical development of Lamén Island’s canoes—like the island’s story itself—is tightly interwoven with etic encounters, interpretations and elaborations that simultaneously reinforce local conceptions of *kastom* as an “original ‘traditional system’” (Taylor, 2008: 108) while imbuing it with the necessary ambiguity to provide space for creativity and innovation



Chief Douglas Danda shortly before his death in 2010. His words, “*Yu no gat kenu, yu no gat laef*,” inspired this work.

(ibid.:105). *Kastom* thus sustains itself within an institutionalized platform of both emic regulation and elaboration that helps navigate etic cross-currents.

The ethnographer, too, is in no small way an eddy in such currents. My intention during my research on Lamén Island was to faithfully record the oral history of the island and its people as told to me by Orah Joseph, who is locally regarded as the definitive resource for *kastom* knowledge; however, it was not before long that I realized the *kastom* story of Lamén Island, like *kastom* canoes themselves, is as much a narrative of *palaga na sumo*—the ways of before—as it is a critical indigenous analysis of the way things are today, or more precisely, the way things have become. Less a satisfying indictment of foreign influence on *kastom* lifeways, however, it is more a morality play about the indigenous processes behind renegotiating the meaning, value, and place of *kastom* vis-à-vis available resources, new technologies, competing economic models, and centralized representation. Consequently, the story that emerges is a thematically archetypal “fictional truth” (Clifford, 1986: 6): a navigating of the waters, both strange and familiar; an obtaining of knowledge, whether earned or stolen; a balance found amid tumultuous circumstances; a marriage; a baptism; a sacrifice made, willingly or forcibly; a return; and a sharing of the boon accumulated along one’s journey. Traditional knowledge transmission is critical for linking myth to practicality and vice versa. “. . . Truths must have truthmakers . . . If we do not satisfy the demand for truthmakers, there will be nothing much we can say about why these contingent truths are true” (Lewis, 1983: 218-219). For this reason, my recounting of Lamén Island’s story is unabashedly crafted to illustrate these themes while staying true to the transcriptions and personal narrative styles of the community leaders, culture historians, and canoe builders I interviewed on the island between May and August of 2009; furthermore, I try to stay true to what I’ve come to recognize as a particularly Ni-Vanuatu style of storytelling, which often follows a languorous and roundabout “road.” The result is a *kastom* story less essentialized in nature and certainly less segregated from colonial and post-colonial encounters; subsequently, it remains an experiential

continuum that breaches the divide between Darkness and Light, as local myth and modern memory merge to create a unified narrative better illustrating the paradoxical nature of *kastom* as something both fixed and fluid, but nevertheless still extant and relevant, both to Lamén Islanders and those who try to understand them. The following narrative was told primarily by Orah Joseph but includes piecemeal additions by several interviewees and argued interjections by “peer-reviewed” listeners, as well as some of my personal notes, in order to provide additional information I discovered during open, casual conversation over kava rather than as a result of select interviews or directed questions.

In spite of this multivocality, which worked to mediate discrepancies and augment ambiguities, I felt with my Western literary sensibility that narrative “holes” still remained. Holes intentionally drilled into the *iwa* (“rail” or gunwale) and *yepe waa* (body of a canoe) are called *merawunduldul*. They serve as conduits through which ropes pass when the *korana* (outrigger) is lashed to the hull. When the rigging is



Merawunduldul. Like the space between the concentric rings of a pig's tusk, the absence of materiality nevertheless facilitates constructions of substance.

complete, the holes are water-sealed not just by the tight coils of rope passing through (usually nylon or oil-coated) but by carving small foam dowels from pieces of a fishing net floater and wedging them tightly into the remaining space. The dowels are then trimmed on both ends so they are smooth with the hull, inside and out—this prevents the dowel from accidentally being dislodged, but it is also appreciated aesthetically as keeping the hull looking “clean.” In this manner, rope may pass through the holes and keep the canoe intact in rough seas, while the plugs ensure those necessary holes don't also contribute to flooding and to possibly sinking the canoe. Likewise, filling in the “holes” of Lamén Island's narrative required finding regulatory conduits by which the integrity of the emic experience could remain intact against the relentless sloshing about of etic interpretation, while still allowing space for

the emic/etic exchange. These conduits became the canoe builders themselves. Necessary to a better understanding of Lamenu Island's "moving" past, then, was understanding in what ways individual canoe builders "told" their own stories—an indigenous discourse in which the didactic gap between *waa* and the shared word—between language and materiality as communicative devices—became necessarily indistinguishable.

The oral history of Lamenu Island as told by Orah Joseph



Orah Joseph, a local historian and a key figure in the successful revitalization of Lewo on Lamenu.

The following narrative, which includes "peer reviewed" contributions from Chief Charlie Lemaiya and Pastor Willie Mowa, is not simply the story of how Lamenu Island came to be, but an important metanarrative illustrating how constructions of *bifo* often serve to artificially disrupt what is in many respects an experiential continuum in which indigenous articulations of past, present, and future triangulate for Lamenu Islanders a seamless trajectory of "becoming" (Hereniko, 1994: 407).

A very long time ago, before any of this, Lamenu was located along the coast of northeast Malekula, much farther north than where it is today. It shared a small reef with two other islands: Vao and Atchin. The old men of Malekula say that this reef belonged to Lamenu Island once, but the other islands had bullied Lamenu into sharing it. At this time, of course, the islands had no inhabitants, but that did not stop the islands themselves from fighting with each other.

One night, Lamenu uprooted itself from the reef and fled, moving like a canoe across the water. Children in the reef that night saw it moving across the water, and people on the shore watched as it disappeared from sight. If you go to Malekula, you can still see a shallow patch in that reef in the shape of Lamenu Island. It floated south all through the night, until daylight broke. When the sun had finally risen and the day became hot, the island stopped to rest, settling down here, where you find it today.

At that time, no one yet lived on the small island. People from Malekula would come to visit the island, but no one ever made their home there. Everyone was still living on Epi. Lamenu means "place to hunt birds," and that's what people did here. The first people to eventually live on Lamenu Island came from the south, from Emae.

The story goes like this: On Emae, there was once an old man whose body was being consumed by mysterious sores. People there said, "His sores will eat everything!"

We should send him somewhere else.” They gathered as many dry coconuts as they could find and lashed them all together. Then they fetched the old man and sat him down on the coconut raft they had fashioned. Pushing it out into the current, they hoped he might eventually die at sea.

The old man drifted at sea for a very long time. When he became hungry, he would remove a coconut from the raft and eat it. The currents carried him a long way, perhaps even as far as the Solomons! The currents carried him far and wide, and the coconuts sustained him, until one day what little remained of his coconut raft happened to come ashore at Silowe. Surely, everyone back on Emae thought him dead by now!

As it was, there were two sisters living by themselves on Lamenu. On that very day, one decided to go to the reef at Silowe while the tide was still out. When she arrived at the beach, she spotted the old man’s raft as it drifted to shore, and she rushed down to meet him. Seeing his withered condition, she carried him to her house. Her sister still knew nothing of the old man’s arrival, and she decided to hide him away inside her own house rather than tell her.

Time passed, and the old man grew stronger. The woman had taken wonderful care of him. All through the night, the woman and the old man could be heard talking with one another.

“Who is my sister talking to at night?” wondered the other woman. “There’s no one else here!” She decided she would go look inside her sister’s house.

Eventually, the sister who was hiding the old man wanted to go down to the reef. She closed her door, but in such a way that, if anyone were to enter while she was away, she would know. After she had left, her curious sister arrived at the house. Seeing the door closed, she went inside anyway and was startled to find the old man inside, resting in bed. They talked for a long time before she finally left, latching the door behind her again as she had found it.

When the other sister returned from the reef, however, she saw that her door was not latched in the same way she had left it that morning. Furious, she went to her sister to confront her: “Hey, what do you think you were doing inside my house!”

“No,” said her sister. “I didn’t go inside your house.”

“Yes, you did!” she screamed. “I sealed the door with a hidden mark, and when I returned, the seal had been broken!”

“You’ve been hiding the old man from me!” hissed her sister jealously.

In this way they screamed at each other for a long time. Finally, tired of the furious commotion, the old man came out of the house and scolded them. “You two stop fighting!” he yelled. “If it means keeping the peace, I’ll marry both of you!”

Time passed. Eventually, other people from Epi came to live on Lamenu Island, too. We all came from Epi. Many families lived there first, so Lamenu and Epi are one family; everyone here has family there.

But it was still a time of darkness. People here were still killing and eating each other. When people wanted to go to Epi, they had to be careful because there was much warring. People would take canoes over, but they would have their bows and arrows ready in the event of a fight. Fighting could break out any time, between anyone, even over trivial matters. As such, canoes in those days were not like they are today. [Called wabo, or “silence,” (Bonnemason, 1996: 187)] they had noses at both ends so that if escape suddenly became necessary, the canoes would not have to be turned around first but could slip away quickly out to sea.

Around that time, too, Lamenu Islanders ate their last human being. He was found shipwrecked on the beach near Vasoro after having escaped from a blackbirding ship. A chief who was Tabu Fire [an order of highest status] had gone to the reef to go fishing when he found him floundering out on the reef. He went out in his canoe and pulled the man in. The people who saw the man wanted to eat him right away, but the chief instead took the man into his house. Every day, people came to the chief's house: "We want to eat him!" And the chief refused for a long time before finally consenting. They tied him to a tree near the old dancing ground, when ngalo Vasoro was still on the high ground, where the new Presbyterian church is now. They danced and prepared the pwili [earth ovens] before marching him down to the saltwater, where the tabu stone of the chief used to sit. They killed and butchered him near the stone, then took his body back to the pwili, where the women made laplap of him. This was the way of things long before the missionaries came to Lamenu in 1948. This was before. I've heard that the chief's tabu stone was eventually moved and thrown into the bush somewhere near Silowe.

The history of the Presbyterian Church on Lamenu Island begins with the man who brought us the Light, Mr. Graham Horwell. He came, and the people of Barua received the Light first. In Vasoro, only a few people accepted it. As time passed, however, the missionaries came to Vasoro and taught us about the Master, Jesus Christ, and the ways of God. We no longer lived in Darkness, but in the Light—the Light of Master Jesus Christ. We moved from the Darkness into Light. In the Darkness we didn't know anything; we didn't know God. When we moved into the Light, knowledge chased away the Darkness. The missionaries eventually instated a few elders, who also served as teachers in the district school here.*

Time passed. In 1957, a man named Donald Gabby, the owner of the South Pacific Fishing Company, came to us. The missionaries told us he was hiring people from Lamenu Island, Epi, and Ambrym. The majority, though, came from Lamenu Island. We all left to work for the fishing company. Mr. Gabby gave us all copper tags with numbers on them and told us not to lose them. Those numbers were for the payroll, and we had to show them if we wanted to get paid. The copper tags would tell them who we were. He said he was going to pay us every two weeks, but that most of our money was being placed into a bank for us. Many people worked for the fishing company on Santo for years, but we never saw any of the money Mr. Gabby put in his bank for us. As it was, we were paid very little. Eventually the company closed down, and we returned to Lamenu. Today, a few people still have their copper tags in case someone comes to ask for them and they can get their money.

* Orah makes no mention here of Thomas Smaill, the Presbyterian missionary who lived on Epi from 1889 to 1902 (Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand Archives Research Center, 11 May 2012), and after whom the church edifice on Lamenu Island is dedicated. Smaill is, in fact, a well-known historical figure throughout Epi, and, as one of the first elected Presbyterian elders on Epi, Orah is keenly aware of Smaill's presence prior to Graham Horwell, his predecessor. Orah's omission, however, raises some interesting questions about the transformative impact of the Allied presence in the area during WWII and the successful conversion of Lamenu Islanders to Christianity shortly afterward on local memory surrounding historical narratives. It is worth noting that, although Orah was nervous about being recorded and may have simply overlooked Smaill's historical contribution, this omission also went unnoticed by local "peer reviewers." It would, therefore, be logical to assume that generally positive and influential experiences with foreigners during WWII facilitated a social climate for religious conversion that did not exist during Smaill's time; consequently, Horwell has remained a more significant figure in local memory.

Atis Jack was the only man to own a speedboat in Lamenu Bay for many years. If someone from Lamenu needed to use his boat, a fire using dry coconut leaves and husks would be lit on the beach. The leaves would be dipped in the sea first to make a lot of smoke. When someone on Epi would see the smoke, they would send for Atis and tell him to go to Lamenu Island in his speedboat. There were no phones then, and this kind of fire was used to send messages. You could ask for the speedboat, or signal the captain of a passing cargo ship to come take your cargo, or you could announce the death of someone on Lamenu so that their family in Lamenu Bay would know. There are phones now, but fires are still lit sometimes to show respect.

There are more speedboats nowadays. In 2007, the children of the missionaries who lived on Lamenu long ago came to ask if we would like to make money working in New Zealand. Some people went and spent six months picking apples and kiwis. Some people stayed for a year. When they returned, they brought many things we'd never had before. We now have many speedboats on Lamenu Island, and each morning they are filled with passengers going to their gardens. Because of this, life now is much easier than it was before.

But respect has an important relationship to kastom, and our kastom is not easy. When technology comes, and things get easier, we forget about how to do things. If we don't practice it, we will lose it. People before couldn't afford to forget and they used what they had—wood and vines. Today, there aren't those resources like before to build canoes; to find copper is easier. Then we buy nails, and we use those. So when technology improves, and we take the easy road, we lose kastom. Respect is an important thing that, if it can be integrated into daily life like our ancestors did, will make everything easier. Respect is important. When you lose respect, you lose kastom. Respect must find its way back. When it does, people will recognize the truth of its importance. People can change, but they must continue to respect the ways of their elders (transcribed and translated from Bislama by the author, from recorded narrations by Orah Joseph and Charlie Lemaiya and an unrecorded conversation with Willie Mowa, 2009).



Kastom stories on Lamenu Island are not so much conventional lessons in morality as they are pragmatic and familiar cause-effect explanations for natural phenomena; however, such phenomena are often addressed in terms of individual behavior vis-à-vis social (i.e., communicative) contexts, setting the stage for tension and *dénouement*. Conclusions are rarely reassertions of ideal or appropriate outcomes, but instead find satisfactory resolution through their social concomitance with the natural world. In this way, the relationship between a story's tellers, listeners and their environment—their ability to imagine the narrative inhabiting their immediate realities, but also their ability to experience their respective realities as a continuously unfolding, socially embedded “plot”—is critical to a story's

continued relevance. Its meaning emerges, for example, when “at least one character, setting, states and events, sequence, causal connections, goal-oriented action, and resolution” (Gottschall, 2005: 180) are crafted in a way that seizes individual attention enough to warrant a second-hand retelling to others. Storytelling in this way is metacommunicative—an evolutionary adaptation more closely associated with a *function* of human behavior than with the *form* of the work itself: *Storian* “as direct, immediate experience or as mimesis, as the imitation of experience; as training for the unfamiliar . . . ; as a source of individual ‘mastery, security, and relief from anxiety,’ (Dissanayake 1988: 64 ff; 1992: 10,84) as a mode of individual display, or an assertion of individual prestige; as communication with others or a means of group identification; as providing a sense of meaning or order to the world or access to a supramundane world” (ibid.: 162).

Modern *waa*, like *kastom* stories or ethnographies, retain their relevance by incorporating immediate practical realities into a historically rooted and culturally shared narrative of the “familiar fantasy we all know as the everyday, commonplace world” (Clifford, 1986: 134). They embody the timeless (i.e., the occult, non-discursive nature of *kastom*) within perpetually recursive expressions of “now,” (discursive or material *kastom*) experienced as “a return that is not a climax, terminus, stable image, or homeostatic equilibrium, but a reduction of tension as the moment simultaneously approaches, draws near, and departs without having arrived” (ibid.). As such, the personal narratives and individual perspectives of Lamén Island’s canoe builders are best understood by locating them within a larger materialized “Discourse” (Johnstone, 2008: 2)—specifically, the collaborative construction of a traditional *waa*.

The *waa* built during this research was later named *Pang na Pang* by the builders themselves, meaning “today is today,” a name based on several frames of reference. *Pang na pang* can be loosely translated from Lewo as *carpe diem*, although it was explained to me as meaning “yesterday was yesterday and tomorrow is tomorrow; what matters now is now.” Interestingly, this is local vernacular

humor for spending all of one's money at the kava bar in spite of what commonsense prescribes, and with complete disregard for inevitable consequences. Subsequently, it also became the name of the kava bar my research partner and I opened on the island originally in order to help generate research material. Finally, it was a *kastom* name given to me, with no small amount of amusement, by Chief Douglas Danda. Initially, I feared these tongue-in-cheek associations would destabilize the potential for building a convincing academic argument for the poignancy of the canoe's name; on the contrary, however, the naming and the name itself illuminate significant clues about the local poetics of *kastom* as a mode of "'performed' discourse" (ibid.: 182) directly linked to *logos* and, in turn, discursive "*kastom*" as an adaptive falsehood. "Performance ... provides a frame that invites critical reflection on communicative processes ... tied to a number of speech events that precede and succeed it (past performances, reading of texts, negotiations, rehearsals, gossip, reports, critiques, challenges, subsequent performances ...)" (Bauman and Briggs, 1990: 60-61), all of which—if "reading of texts" can also be articulated in indigenous terms as a critical "sharing of words"—characterize the materialization of *waa* on Lamenu Island. The act of naming as it relates to *logos*, or non-discursive *kastom*, and the name itself as the creative manifestation of *logos*, furthermore, expresses the compatibility between immediate experience and *kastom* performance, exemplifying the adaptive nature of traditional forms vis-à-vis etic encounters. Significantly, however, this etic/emic collusion is still vilified in local discourse as the source of *kastom*'s slow deterioration; nevertheless, the contributions of emic/etic exchange are openly recognized in the performative discourse of canoe builders as corroborative in the evolution of modern *waa* forms (Orah Joseph, interview, 2009).

The canoes and canoe builders of Lamenu

(Note: The remainder of this chapter details the technical construction of a canoe, much of which involves the use of Lewo, Bislama, and some international taxonomic nomenclature. Appendices A and B will be useful at this point in clarifying the names of parts and materials used in construction.)

“You can tell a child that, a long time ago, building a canoe took a long time. People used to burn the wood, then chip out the charcoal to make a hole. A canoe like this, to make it seaworthy, would take nearly a year. But today, change has given us new tools brought by foreigners that make the work faster. So people recognize this, adopt it, and it becomes *kastom* in the lives of young people today” (Jack Waiwo, interview, 2009).

“Before,” Apia said, “they would have cut the tree here... and here.” We stood before the *kenutri* (*pur yove*, or *Gyrocarpus Americanus*) he had chosen for the body of his canoe (*yepé waa*). He drew his finger across two imaginary lines perpendicular to the trunk. The lines were about eight meters apart—long enough for a two-man canoe—their distance determined by quadrupling the length of the distance between fingertips with the arms outstretched. An extra half meter was added to each end to account for the eventual trimming of the stern and bow. “This,” he continued, pointing to the foot of the tree, “would have been the “ass” of the canoe; the head of the tree would have been the head of the canoe. They did that out of respect for the shape of the tree.” Some group consultation erupted in Lewo. This seemed like insightful—if not altogether ideal—material, and I quickly scribbled notes into my field notebook. The theme of respect, after all, was going to constitute the problematic meat and potatoes of my research.



Apia Mowa sits atop his beached *waa*, *Pang na Pang*, after a successful maiden voyage.

Chief Morsen looked at the tree and measured the eventual dimensions of the canoe with a naked eye and, almost literally, a few rules of thumb. There was a brief discussion in Lewo while Ben Kalo squatted and placed his chainsaw on the ground next to a small container of fuel. Apia walked over to me and asked, “How do you want to do this?”

“Why are you asking me? It’s *your* canoe,” I half-joked.

“Do you want to use a chainsaw or should we cut it down with an axe?” As the words came out of Apia’s mouth, Ben Kalo

was already tipping the fuel container into the chainsaw. We both knew we were going to use the chainsaw. Apia had already paid Ben Kalo for its use, including fuel and Ben Kalo's time—400vt (approx. \$4 USD), which Ben Kalo gladly exchanged for his evening's kava later at the kava bar. Still, I knew why Apia was asking me.

"It's important to this project that you build your canoe exactly like you *want* to build your canoe," I replied. "You're the one who'll be using it after I'm gone."

"It would be easier if we used the chainsaw," he said.

"Yes, it would," I laughed. "Good thing there's one right over there, paid for and ready to go."

Apia looked over at Ben Kalo and nodded. Ben Kalo carefully removed the sheath from the blade, primed the engine, and pulled the starter cord. The chainsaw roared to life. Everyone took a few steps back simultaneously to let Ben Kalo do his work.

Apia and I consider ourselves brothers, but also close friends. I have known him since 1999, when he was a trainer with the US Peace Corps. He taught me Bislama and a lot about Vanuatu in general. We later worked together as trainers in 2002. He has worked as a merchant seaman throughout the Malaysian peninsula, and has been heavily involved in organizing national political campaigns in Vanuatu since the country's independence in 1980. He is educated and entrepreneurial, and he has decades of experience working with foreigners in a variety of official capacities. He speaks English fluently, but more importantly, he knows how to communicate subtlety with it: humor, irony, sarcasm, embarrassment, self-deprecation, innuendo. He is a master insulter and strategically profane. He likes Patsy Cline, Roger Miller, and Kenny Rogers. When he listens to their music, he goes into the darkness of his tiny wild cane sleeping room and sits directly in front of the CD player, mouthing the lyrics with an expression of nostalgic delight. Those were the songs that got him through college, he says.

So when Apia asked me if we should use the chainsaw—one he'd already gone through the trouble of arranging—or an axe, I could read between the lines. He was concerned with authenticity; or, more specifically, for the purposes of documenting step-by-step the building of a traditional Lamén Island *waa*, that I, in the capacity of a foreign researcher, would not consider the use of a chainsaw acceptable. I verified this later with him over kava. I had discussed with him several times before my notions of reflexivity and the theory I wished to present in my research—that forms and techniques could evolve and still be “authentic”; that idealistic displays at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre only represented snapshots in time, not changing realities—and intellectually he not only understood, but he agreed it was a “true story” of Lamén Island that had never been told. Many people on Lamén Island, in fact, understand this quite well. But to be culturally represented elsewhere—by people, objects, or especially through word of mouth—presents different concerns about “authenticity” as it relates to *kastom*. This is because *kastom* is universal but also highly diverse, so that when canoes, for example, from across the country are displayed in a decontextualized and centralized milieu, they must all implicitly compete to meet the requirements of a centralized definition of “*kastom*.” Not meeting a highly publicized and publicly respected institution’s definition of what “*kastom*” looks like may have no immediate practical bearing on questions of authenticity at the level of “peripheral” localities, but it is, nevertheless, the matter of *public* comparison—an unqualified comparison of gradations of “authenticity”—that can impact localized perceptions of *kastom* as degraded by comparison to other objects created in greatly varying and potentially incompatible social, cultural, and ecological contexts elsewhere.



Thirty minutes with Ben Kalo's chainsaw saved the builders three days of work with axes and adzes.

***Asi karo*: “shaping the basket”**

Inside of an hour, Ben Kalo had felled the tree for the hull as well as a smaller *waetwud* for the *nasama* (*pikinini*, or outrigger float). Starting with the *yepé waa* (body of the canoe), he then made a deep central cut eight meters down the length of the trunk in preparation for *asi karo*, or “shaping the basket.” The tree was rolled onto its widest side, which would serve as the *sog ma si*, or *bed blong solwota* (the underside of the hull), with the cut for the *karo* made directly above on the opposite side. Flanking the cut, two parallel cuts were then made, approximately six inches to either side and angled inward to meet the central cut in the soft pith of the trunk. A lateral cut across both ends of the three



As efficient as a chainsaw may be, it can only get the work of cutting a canoe started. Precision work requires a more personal touch.

cuts, a half-meter from each end of the hull, meant the whole wedge could be easily removed. Without a chainsaw, such a wedge would have been difficult; instead, a series of lateral cuts would have been made with an axe down the length of the central cut, and the outer surface would then have been chipped away to begin the *karo*, the interior.

This process is called *asi skosko*, or “shaping

the ribs.”

To the sides of each half-meter end, Ben Kalo made tapering cuts toward an imaginary central point that would eventually become the bow and stern. This, Chief Morsen pointed out with a swipe of his hand across his face, is known as “shaving the cheeks.” Ben Kalo then began cutting down a nearby *benoa* tree (*pur merpi*, or *Albizia lebbek*) from which *leṽeluwa* (paddles) would be carved.

“Because we are using a chainsaw,” Chief Morsen commented, “we’ll be able to cut the bow and stern of the *iwa* [*rail*, or *gunwale*] from the same tree. It will be better than cutting down another

tree, but because these parts of the *iwa* will be made from *pur yoñe*, they won't last as long as other woods." The stern and bow of the *iwa* are usually made from *navenu* (*pur venuñe*, or *Cordia subcordata*) or *namandal* (*pur miandi*, or *Kleinhovia hospita*), which are stronger than other woods and can be reused on future canoes; however, *waetwud* (*Alphitonia zizyphoides*) and *bredfrut* (*pur klepereñ*, or *Artocarpus altilis*) are occasionally used.

At this point, the work was divided into three groups: the tree for the paddles was placed aside and quickly cut into two halves with the chainsaw. Ben Kalo made a few rough cuts that started to give the two paddles some definition and would expedite later shaping with bush knives. Before the paddles could be completed, however, they would have to sun-dry over a period of three to four days. This would allow the wood to shrink and harden before final shaping, preventing possible cracks and warping. Ben Kalo then went to the *nasama*, the smaller *waetwud* tree that would eventually become the float, and gave it a lengthwise shearing that served to leave one side—now the upper surface to which *merawelañ* (connective supports) would later be attached—reasonably flat.



Chief Morsen balances traditional knowledge with modern practices on a firm foundation of *kastom* respect.

Meanwhile, Chief Morsen had begun to extend the *karo* toward the bow and stern with an axe, widening it on both sides as well with lateral cuts to the inside along the length of the hole. Perpendicular cuts to the *karo* continued to break up the wood inside, making subsequent parallel cuts with the axe much more effective in hollowing out the interior of the hull. After a series of cuts, Chief Morsen exchanged the axe for a bush knife and began to further “shave the cheeks.” Tom Maite, who had been watching from the shade of a tree nearby, made a comment in

Lewo that I was later told by Apia meant, “We should finish the *karo* first.” This brings up an important point of comparison about the importance of individual style on canoe variation on Lamén Island.

Chief Morsen is considered to be a highly skilled local artisan. At 45 years old, he is a young chief who puts a lot of energy toward enacting his official role, but also in doing what he does best: building. “When my mind is set to finish something, I get to it. I’m probably the first person anyone’s ever known who works by moonlight,” he says, laughing. “If anyone asks me, ‘how are you building your house?’ I’ll tell them ‘at night!’” He is a professed autodidact and a “natural” at hand carving, but has also worked as a commercial carpenter on a number of projects around Epi, including the construction of Vaimali Hospital and Epi High School. He never attended high school, but instead returned to Lamén Island, where he first learned “how to make small carvings, build canoes, and learn about *kastom*” (Morsen, interview, 1999, and for all quotes to follow) from one of his grandfathers, Willie Lemaya, who had been hired by Morsen’s father, a local teacher, to teach high school “leavers” traditional and income-generating skills.

Traditional and modern carvings for commercial sale were scattered around his house in various stages of completion. He showed me a *tamtam*, or local slit-gong drum. “Our[s] are not as ornate as ones from Ambrym, you know. This one isn’t for tourists. People *bifo* used to make them like this. I made this a long time ago with Willie Lemaya, but I never finished it. But it’s our style. I think people before were a bit lazy to make them more ornate.” I asked him how he learned to carve. “I just learned by watching. Anything that had to do with canoes, I could do it. From that point on, I’ve held tight to everything that I’ve learned . . . I think about the old man’s words: when you cut a canoe, you cut it without fear; you cut it like you want it finished.” This typifies Chief Morsen’s style as we began to cut Apia’s canoe. With axe or bush knife, every cut was precisely placed and precisely measured, but without hesitancy. His posture was strong but relaxed, and intensely focused on the task at hand. “If you want the work to be finished quickly, that’s how you have to do it. When I work with someone else

and they work slowly, I don't like it. I like to have the work done quickly, so I work quickly . . . I just use my eyes—when I cut, I just look . . . then cut it until it's perfect. I cut strong and I work quickly, but I never forget to check my work. Almost every minute after the cut, I stop and check, so that when the work is finished, it's done neatly and the owner will like it." Indeed, Morsen's style is characterized by accuracy and speed, and this was reflected in the way he began to cut Apia's canoe: he began with the *karo* as a matter of cooperation with the other participants, since Ben Kalo had already facilitated an



Tom Maite takes a break to *storian*. His polite refusal to be interviewed illustrated a critical insight into the non-discursive nature of *kastom*.

easy start to hollowing it out; however, his primary personal concern was to begin "shaving the cheeks" first. This would allow him to shape the hull as sleekly as he liked without compromising the integrity of the inner hull, which would itself be cut very thin afterward. A sleeker hull would also mean a lighter canoe. The canoe would be fast and slice through water cleanly, with considerations of legroom clearly

secondary, while cargo space could be relegated to the *vetarere*, or aboveboard deck. "I like canoes when they're light. It's a big help when you have to pull them ashore or take them down to the water. When they're light, you can really fill them up but still be able to paddle them. You can go anywhere you want. When I finish building a canoe like that, I really like it. I like it because anytime I . . . need something on the big island, I can just get in and go."

Tom Maite, on the other hand, is a man who takes things slow. More than any Lamen Islander I've met, he is a scrupulously devout *man blong kenu*. I have never seen him step foot inside a speedboat, even when the sea was particularly rough. He would simply rather stay home. He is heavysset and lumbering, with powerful wrists and arms like tree trunks. He is soft-spoken and

reflective, a consummate observer whose deceptively languid manner belies both a surprisingly crass sense of humor and a pragmatic, conservative work ethic. As such, he is a man who teaches by example; nevertheless, he is not likely to openly invite participants or observers. Rather, he expects that, if someone is truly interested, they'll simply catch him working on a canoe one day and stick around long enough to *storian*, learn something, or even help. When I asked to do a recorded interview with him for this research, he simply smiled and said, "Hey, no." Consequently, what I did to "interview" him was follow his example: I sat under the shade of a tree and watched him work.

"Morsen likes to start on the outside, shaping the *yepe waa* first," Tom said a few days later in a rare commentary while trimming the *karo* slowly and precisely with a bush knife. "But he should start from the inside so the *karo* can be as large as possible. So you can hold more. You can't do that if you've already made the *yepe waa* smaller." He put his hands on both sides of the tapered bow. "This is too sharp. The bow should stand up in the water, chop through it, throw it to either side." He made the motion of a splitting wake with his hands. Morsen was also working on the canoe that day, shaping the outer hull, but he had stepped away to retrieve a hand drill from his house. As soon as he was gone, Tom put a sly finger to his lips and waved me over as a sign he wished to impart this to me, to illustrate the differences in styles up close. When I asked Apia about this later, he told me that people with different styles may work on a single canoe and occasionally recommend how certain things should be done, but no one had the right to tell anyone else to do what they obviously knew how to do already. Style was not enforceable. To directly confront stylistic differences and place one publicly above the others was tantamount to a personal insult. Differences had to be respected and accommodated; otherwise, the canoe would never get finished and, perhaps, future projects would never get started.

In a Darwinian evolutionary model of cultural change, selective processes occur at multiple levels but originate at the level of the individual. If so, what did the simultaneous suppression and assertion of individual style mean in terms of the "information" culturally encoded in the resultant

product? I could ask the question, “What is the ‘difference that makes a difference?’” as Bateson defines information (Bateson, 1979: 99), in which case my answer would be: “individual experiences converging upon a shared cultural history and diverging together at a new trajectory closely constrained by that history but also characterized by the emergent properties of collaboration,” but this would only explain the appearance of a new style, a difference that could be reduced to simple hybridity; however, in terms of viewing every *waa* as *kastom*, and *kastom* itself as something that is simultaneously changing and immutable, a more relevant question for an evolutionary model is: “What does this change maintain unchanged” (Rappaport, 2006: 7)? “To put it a little differently,” clarifies Rappaport, “structural transformations in some subsystems [make] it possible to maintain more basic aspects of the system unchanged.” In more immediate terms, why is this canoe—already a collaboration of disparate individual styles and varying levels of traditional knowledge and technical mastery—still *kastom*? Some answers emerged during an interview with Chief Morsen:

- M: Canoes are wonderful things. Our ancestors were very wise to create something that we still use today.
- J: Yes! Canoes today aren’t like before, but they have to change because they must remain useful, don’t you think?
- M: Canoes before... if there was a strong wind, those things wouldn’t move. The ends were just flat. Eventually, they were made with a nose on each end, and they could go both ways. Today, they’ve changed again.
- J: Now they’ve got a stern.
- M: And they can move a bit faster. The front’s like a ship now, so when you paddle it, it’s easy to move. So change is like that. Before, it was very hard to paddle a canoe—they were just too heavy. The hole, too, was very shallow. But the changes brought by foreigners, as different as they were, inspired us to make changes of our own. Canoes are *kastom*, but we make small changes to suit our style. We come across new tools that will help us make these changes, and now our canoes can move more quickly.
- J: If you still had to burn a hole in the canoe, you’d be far too lazy!
- M: It’d be a full year before you finished your canoe. But when you have an axe and an adze, work goes quickly. So we have new ideas that bring about small changes, but some things are still the same. You sit and you paddle the same way. You lash together the canoe in the same way. The only difference is you get things done a little more quickly now. And if you have a mast with a sail, you can go even faster. And this means learning even more, because you now have to follow the wind. You must know the tides, and you must know the winds. You must know the winds that will take you and bring you back, and

- which way to go in different tides—the ones most people are using. I don't know how to use a sail, though—I paddle all the time. So all these little changing that are happening, all they're doing is making things go faster.
- J: In your history, then, canoes have become mixed with foreign influences.
- M: Yes.
- J: But they're still *kastom* because you make them with your own hands.
- M: Yes.
- J: You still think of these canoes as your own.
- M: Yes. For example, if someone tries to build a canoe, he may make it just like we do, but it's not the same. If we make a canoe, though, then the canoe is ours. We'll lash it together correctly, and if you ask me the names of every part, I can tell you. If every part doesn't have a name, then it's not one of ours. Every part has a name.
- J: Do you teach them to the children?
- M: Sometimes we use the kids to help us. We say, *come pull this rope*. Then we show them how to do it. So when we showed them in school before, there were kids who knew how to lash canoes. If we could do that every year, the kids would learn.
- J: I was thinking about when we held *Sabona* Day.
- M: *Sabona* Day, yes.
- J: Didn't Class Six learn how to do that?
- M: Yes. But it wasn't enough. That's a good place to reinstate *kastom*, too—in school.

This excerpt illustrates Morsen's style: "Making things go faster"; however, "faster" is an adjective synonymous in local discourse with an "easier" life, and an "easier" life is generally equated with those attitudes that characterize the "loss" of *kastom* on Lamén Island: laziness and a lack of respect for appropriate "roads." This does not describe Morsen at all. Morsen, in fact, couches "faster" in terms of the historical development of, and a deep appreciation for, an "ancestral creation" that has managed to retain its relevance by adapting new strategies that increased its chances of reproduction. Foreign influence, far from representing cultural dilution, presents for him historical avenues of local exploitation that further ensured the survival of canoe building and preserved local environmental knowledge: ". . . if you have a mast with a sail . . . this means learning even more, because you now have to follow the wind. You must know the tides, and you must know the winds. You must know the winds that will take you and bring you back, and which way to go in different tides—the ones most people are using [today]" (Morsen, interview, 2009). Far from lazy, the "road" Morsen establishes as *kastom* is the

one built with his own hands and of which every part has a name specific to Lewo. The experience of *kastom* is literally “hands on” and as immediately communicated as his own language. In other words, for Morsen, *kastom* is not only fast, it quite literally travels at the speed of sound.

If Tom Maite embodies *kastom* when he is “hands on,” however, then *kastom* is also in no particular hurry. His productivity gives the illusion of moving at a glacial pace, but because, like nearly everywhere in the Pacific, this is perfectly representative of local conceptions of time—*aelan taem*, or “island time,” is usually adequate to explain the week-late arrival of a boat or the three-hour-late start of a meeting; or, perhaps, the prolonged intervals between short spates of work—as such, no one seems to take notice. This is important, however, because the concept of *aelan taem* is precisely why the ability of modern technology to make things happen “faster,” and by proxy make life “easier,” on Lamenu Island works at odds with popular considerations of *kastom*. *Kastom* takes time because its products and performances represent an *ongoing* social investment driven by a system of perpetuated obligation. Time is spent in a web of simultaneously operating practices of social and cultural reproduction that have to be symmetrically managed in order to remain adaptive. Modern kava culture (Young, 1995) provides a relevant example:

“Kava causes big problems. We all want to go drink kava in the afternoon instead of sitting down with our children and teaching them about *kastom*, so that it can come back. We’re helping it to stay lost. If we really want it to come back, we have to find time to sit down with the family, to story so the children know. Even the history of our respective grounds—plenty of people tell stories, but they’re making things up because they don’t really know their own histories, and they don’t take the time to story. Everyone owns a piece of ground. It’s not like other places where the government owns it all. Here we’re lucky—the ground is ours, so history is important. And when I give my name to the child of one of my sisters, they must give him that exact name because one day that name will come back . . . This is something that’s come up during community meetings. When people don’t story with their children, much is lost. When you story with your kids, they remember the things you tell them; when you don’t make time to story with them, everything gets forgotten. Not only do they forget, but you forget, too. The kids finish school and come back with nothing to do, just loitering on the road. Everything they learn in school is different. When they go, they mix. They learn how to smoke, they learn how to make home brew, but they’re still young! And when they do these things, their fathers don’t say anything to put a stop to it. Eventually, he’s buying his boy kava and cigarettes! Plenty of fathers make

this mistake—plenty of parents. So we're losing a lot. So everything that we've lost, that we want to regain... it has to start at home. It can't begin with a big community. It will take time and develop gradually; you can't go quickly. If we're lucky, and the children show some interest, we'll be able to do it. But when children have grown up already, and their ideas no longer reflect our own, well" (Morsen, interview, 2009)...

Morsen's concern here about the cultural continuity inherent in *storian* is popularly echoed on Lamén Island. Spending time with children represents not only a quantifiably managed social commitment; the quality of time spent—what the social interaction entails, through what is both done and not done—is equally important, particularly in terms of how *kastom* works as a multimodal form of communication. Certain kinship *tabu* exist, for example, that restrict people from conversing with each other or speaking each other's name, as a sign of respect, in spite of the fact their relationship may be characterized by some ongoing obligation (i.e., an unfulfilled payment of bride wealth, etc.) that requires them to interact regularly. In order for anything to get done, communication not only has to go through indirect channels (e.g., other people), but it inevitably has to move beyond "sharing words" into physical acts or material exchanges that are recognized through complete silence or even avoidance. In adult social exchanges, children are rarely addressed and never introduced; they are expected to be quiet and attentive, or at least nondisruptive (i.e., when Tom Maite refused to be interviewed but instead *showed* me, since, although obviously an adult, in terms of educating me, my cultural disposition reverted me to a "childlike" status). Taking time to directly *storian* with a child, therefore, is a particular act that stands outside of casual adult routines; although it is, of course, by no means abnormal or unusual, it is somewhat formalized, and adults have to make time to do it, perhaps in lieu of other "adult" activities (i.e., drinking kava), because, as Morsen himself recognizes, cultural continuity will inevitably be reflected in their children's behavior as adults. *Storian* with children in this way has become a highly conscious act, illustrating its susceptibility to the disruptive perturbations of modernity (Smith, 2002: 146-149; 157-159); nevertheless, it is still considered part of a well-rounded *kastom* education.

The notion of “finding time” may seem ironic in a place where the tourism industry claims “time stands still,” and, indeed, spending years on Lamén Island almost convinced me this was true. But, as with Tom’s deceptive torpor, the problem of finding *kastom* is as much about finding time as it is about understanding how time is individually constructed and managed among a variety of cultural activities and social obligations across space. Tom, for example, would spend two full days working on the *yepe waa* and the *nasama*, but then would disappear for a few days before returning to check on the progress of the canoe. His work was slow, thorough, and precise; he would troubleshoot technical obstacles such as a cracked *iwa* or a split hull with slow, heavy sighs of deliberation and a jocular, unhurried respite before tackling the problem at hand. The only one in a hurry was me.

As a *mera* with a three-month visa and a project schedule to consider, watching the unfinished *yepe waa* sit for a week untouched was nerve-wracking. In all other respects, I was completely acclimated to *aelan taem* and the way in which things eventually managed to get done or never transpire; however, I also knew how the completion of the canoe would play out if I didn’t make Apia aware of my concerns, since I was working on *waetman taem*. I spent my “downtime” taking care of other aspects of my research on the island, but also managing the kava bar, going to the garden, and participating in the day-to-day activities of the community. The pace of life was slow generally, but there was a lot of ground to cover. More than once did I unexpectedly encounter Tom in the bush or along a stretch of beach shaded by sea oaks, working on other canoes, often with groups of men who sat around him, chatting and laughing. Characteristically, Tom would banter with them and occasionally recline on the canoe to rest and *storian*, but when the work resumed, it was Tom alone who swung the bush knife while the others simply sat, watching in silence. I thought of Morsen’s words during a recent interview:

M: Tom is a good man. It’s good to work with him. It’s not like he’ll tell me something and I won’t cooperate. We work well together, and I respect his opinions. When I work alone, I can do what I want, but when we two work together, we share our ideas and begin. If I want the work to go quickly, I’ll tell

him, so that when we're working at the same time, he can work like he wants on the stern while I work like I want on the bow. But when there are too many workers, it makes the work slow. That's why working with Tom is good: he listens to me and I listen to him. We're brothers, so anything we say is respected. When I work with someone who is *tabu* to me...

J: [laughing] Yeah, you can't say a word to them!

M: I work slowly because I have to defer to them. Or when I work with a lot of people, and everyone's talking, I have to leave because I can't concentrate and might cut through the keel (Morsen, interview, 2009).

I went to Disneyland for my seventh birthday. Once, while riding Space Mountain, the car in which I was speeding along came to a complete halt in the starry darkness, halfway through the ride. After a moment or two, a loudspeaker announced that passengers would have to disembark so the ride could be inspected for repair. Overhead lights and flood lamps suddenly came to life, illuminating what was until that moment in my child's mind the inconceivable vastness of space, and exposing the seamless void for what it really was: a skeletal track of arcing loops and intertwined spirals that rose to the top of the speckled ceiling and descended in slowly tightening circles to an exit near the floor. The whole thing stood serpentine and lifeless in the middle of the enormous room. Skirting the length of the track was a grated walkway along which we made our descent toward a hitherto concealed exit. Down a lengthy corridor, we passed technicians in jumpsuits, coordinating the start of repairs and examining machinery. Far from disappointed, as I exited the building and stepped into the sunlight, I felt as if I'd been let in on a secret for which I hadn't known there was even a question.

Catching Tom "behind the scenes" gave me the same feeling about my own construction of *kastom*. *Kastom* itself seemed so fluid, so unconstructed (Smith, 2002: 46-49); frictionless and unemphatic. I had simply been along for the ride, seeing only what was shown (Geismar and Tilley, 2003: 185, quoting Strathern) and yet missing everything. Building *waa*, Tom treated completion (or the "structure" of *kastom*) as an inevitability and focused on process; or, rather, he was "in time," as well as "on time" (Munn, 1992: 104). However, "time" in *aelan taem*—like the term "*kastom*" itself as stated by Lindstrom in the previous chapter—also represented "a notion . . . to compare present circumstances

to those of the past; or to compare one's own culture with that of other people." "*Kastom*" in this respect, as a discursive construction for demarcating time, is linked directly to the colonial experience, missionization in particular, and the subsequent schism created by comparative notions of *bifo*:

"Indeed, the people view the missionaries' arrival as the founding act of these "new ways" . . . This common post-colonial notion of "new ways" shifts the relations of historic past to present. The present derives its meaning as a departure from earlier ways, but the latter are then dialectically implicated in the very idea of the new . . . Overall there is a different world time—regulated by a changed source of potency and political agents—in which the governance of daily and seasonal activity is grounded. Such transformations are familiar in the context of European colonization . . . The changing regulation of work time in the West with its so-called "commodification" of time . . . also illustrates control over timing as a mode of governance grounding the person and daily activity in a wider world order . . . Considered in the context of daily activity, clock time is quite alive, embodied in purposeful activity and experience. Coordinately, people are ongoingly articulated through this temporalization into a wider politico-cosmic order, a world time of particular values and powers. This articulation may include conflicts over clock time, as well as daily operations carried on in its terms" (ibid.: 110,111).

I had originally told Apia to build his canoe exactly as he wanted to build it. He sheepishly decided to use a chainsaw because it would be faster, implying that it would also jeopardize "authenticity." In this context, he was caught in a double-bind scenario: knowing I was working on *waetman taem* (a precise schedule of expected outcomes), how could he possibly "find time" to construct a canoe he believed would fit my definition of "authentic?" It was time to reconsider the influence of my presence there, a presence only made possible, perhaps, by a history of foreign control over the institutionalized articulations of indigenous time and space.

I stand generally behind Smith's assertions that "connections between time and 'work' became more important after the arrival of missionaries and the development of more systematic colonization" (Smith, 2007: 54), and that an inability to understand how colonized populations "divided their time" among various activities throughout the day was used as ideological justification for the development of a moral hierarchy in which Western conceptions of time and space as linear were reflected in teleological Enlightenment views of Progress and the gross misapplication of Darwinian evolutionary

theory. Now, in the 21st Century, it would be reasonable for me to ask: *What in the world does this have to do with me?* And again I would defer to Smith: “Through the controls over time and space, the individual can also operate at a distance from the universe” (ibid.: 55). She refers not only to the geographic distance between the imperial or colonial seat of power and the subjects under its control, but also to research, which relies primarily on “the concept of distance . . . as it implies a neutrality and objectivity on behalf of the researcher” (ibid.: 56).

Even among Peace Corps Volunteers, there is an ironic sentiment that, no matter how many times you sing *Kumbaya*, you’re still at some level the “tool” of a larger foreign policy agenda of the United States government. The reality, however, is that Volunteers don’t *feel* like tools, and it is this psychological “distance” that makes the program so popular across a broad political and ideological spectrum of potential Volunteers; furthermore, the perceived distance of the program from more overt (and, to a lesser extent, covert) international political agendas makes it appealing to foreign host countries. At the community level, the experience can become almost entirely subjective, well-distanced from a pervasive sense of institutional involvement or oversight, although confronting cultural differences is a constant challenge—for some Volunteers more than others. It can be a deceptively independent feeling, which is monitored carefully: Volunteers are encouraged not to “go indij,” or, in other words, to lose the cultural objectivity that makes them effective development workers.

This was the precipice on which I stood now, as a researcher, and, to some degree, on which Apia stood as my self-conscious research counterpart. The creation of a double-bind scenario meant that we were both working somewhere in the middle of two competing sets of very different cultural expectations; more importantly, we were both unconsciously working under the constraints imposed by a much larger historical legacy of power construction that informs those expectations even today.

After the *yepe waa* had its “cheeks shaved” and enough wood from the *karo* had been removed with a *piyaïsa* (adze) to make the hull light enough to lift, it was carried out of the bush and placed in a

cleared workspace behind Apia's cement house, where it was left for a week to dry, shrink and harden. The roughly cut paddles, the bow and stern segments of the *iwa*, and its port and starboard planks, were carried out as well. Plenty of the *kenutri* trunk remained, so we had it cut into planks, which we later used to build more benches outside the kava bar. Business was booming.

Our new work area sat central to the small kitchen house, the eating house, the small "bush house" of Apia's father, and the three partially completed cement foundations that would inevitably become the homes of Apia's brother and his two sons. In most cases, new hulls are carried or dragged



Apia weighs a kava root in estimation of the evening's supply for the kava bar.

directly to a shady clearing on the beach; however, Apia's decision to finish the hull behind his house came from a number of strategic considerations. First, the intended length of my stay on Lamenu was four months. In order to accommodate the rigid constraints of *waetman taem* the project presented, if the canoe builders were going to collaborate, work would have to be done by each individual as other prior obligations allowed. Because of this, a canoe that could have been finished in a week was going to take the length of my stay. For Apia, this meant trouble: he was in the middle of a heated and drawn-out land

dispute and, during such cases, it is not uncommon for "accidents" to occur to the property of one party or the other. Pigs may die, gardens may be vandalized, or canoes may mysteriously drift out to sea. Six months later, for instance, our kava bar was burned to the ground (when I returned in 2010 to find the kava bar gone, Apia simply explained by saying, "land dispute"). Apia, as far as the project was concerned, was not taking any chances.

Second, Apia was managing the logistics of his own reciprocal obligations to the project, particularly important if things were going to proceed on *waetman taem*. Traditionally, large-scale

projects like building a house or a canoe require some degree of social cooperation that is usually exchanged *per diem* for food and kava. Although this encourages *anyone* to help, the central motivation for doing so is directed toward larger, long-standing patterns of reciprocity rooted in the obligations of kinship. Because Apia, Morsen, and Tom were “brothers” (*brata* generally in Bislama, with Lewo being far more rich in the specificities that link myriad categories of “brotherhood” to formalized conventions of obligation and *tabu*), Apia and his wife, Loma, had to work out the week’s meals well ahead of time. Often, two or three trips to the garden would be necessary during the week, usually undertaken by Loma while Apia helped work on the canoe. Loma, furthermore, was also responsible for all food preparation during the project—a formidable task. Like the canoe builders themselves, she was open to initial consultation about the day’s coordinated activities, but she preferred to work alone because she considered it faster and easier when cooking at home. If multiple women will be cooking simultaneously, they prefer to work individually in their respective kitchen houses, and then eat together later (Loma Apia, conversation, 2009).

Kava, on the other hand, was purely men’s work. Kava preparation, like cooking, is a labor intensive process from start to finish and involves the social maintenance of relationships as much for its production as for its consumption. Specialized skill sets emerge from a competitive market in which “secret formulas” for the best kava “mix” vie for popular acclaim; the physical strength and traditional knowledge needed to produce *merkar* (“strong kava”), coupled with a rudimentary business sense and an informed assumption about potential customers’ activities for the day can ensure a steady income.

For both men and women, the construction and use of canoes requires specialized skills, knowledge, and a considerable expenditure of time and energy. *Waa* embody the gendered cultural perspectives and experiences that locate the present—or, in the case of *Pang na Pang*, the “ethnographic present”—in a shared and continuously unfolding cultural history. This continuous reproduction of identity, as evidenced by the names given to individual parts of Lamén Island canoes, is

rooted in *logos* and dilates outward into a somatic dialogic (Barlow, 1997: 4-36) to one of cultural metaphor, and finally to that of political artifact. Like canoes, kinship, and reciprocity, however, “there is considerable flexibility in the alignment of categories, and room for individual manipulation . . . The terms of [any] system are flouted and manipulated through a constant flux of negotiation and reconfiguration” (Taylor, 2008: 105).

The *karo*, or “basket,” is a term that also means “womb,” or *basket blong pikinini*. A *karo* is literally a woven coconut basket used to carry food from the garden. The relationship here between *waa*, the womb, and the garden (particularly as it relates to food acquisition in a “two island” context) is one overtly centered on the desire to live. *I no gat kenu, i no gat laef*: “One cannot live without a canoe.” I choose to use the term “live” rather than “survive” out of consideration not just for what canoes can do, but for the quality of life they provide for Lamén Islanders who use them. In this respect, a canoe is a thing of pleasure as well as work:

JW: On Lamén Island, in order to get to the mainland, you need transport. Before, there were many sailing canoes, many canoes. Just about every household had its own canoe. In the morning, you could just go down to the beach if you wanted to go to the big island; you wouldn’t have to wait for anyone to take you across. You’d paddle your canoe across, do your work in the garden, and come back. When the sun was setting, you wouldn’t have to wait for anyone to bring you back. You’d paddle your canoe back. Today, now that speedboats have become a part of the lives of the people here, money has also become an important part in their lives. You can see people go down to the beach and wait for the boat to take them across, and they’ll keep a little money in their pockets so they can pay their way to the big island. From what I can see, people don’t consider canoes too much—that if you paddle your own canoe across to the mainland, you don’t have to pay anyone, whereas if you take a boat, you spend 100 vatu here, 50 vatu there, 50 vatu again... In everyday conversations with people, I hear people say what a good day it would be if they just had a canoe, how they’d be on the big island already.

In my case, I’ll explain it like this: if I didn’t have a canoe, I wouldn’t enjoy my everyday life. What I mean is, if there’s a boat, I can pay to go across; if I have a canoe, I can use it and I don’t have to pay anything. Without a canoe, for me—one of my hobbies is paddling—I like to paddle, and I, for one, without a canoe, would not enjoy life very much. I can enjoy both sides, but without a canoe, there’s no balance. I’m close to my canoe, but boats are over there. If the wind is strong and the water is rough, or a woman is pregnant and has to go to the hospital, you must use a boat. But my life is the canoe. My everyday life is the canoe. I enjoy paddling. It’s good exercise. Maybe the tourists will realize that the people on this small island don’t suffer from high

blood pressure because we paddle canoes so much; whereas, people who take the boat all the time might end up with diabetes or something. Paddling is good exercise. When you think about good health, you can't forget the role of *kastom*—of our canoes—on this small island.

J: This is interesting. Do you think the idea of health—of physical health—has always been a consideration in terms of using a canoe versus using a boat, or being lazy?

JW: Well, health is about exercising your entire body. When you paddle a canoe, you use your arms, you use your whole body. It's good exercise, and it keeps you in good health.

J: But are people actually thinking about health? It seems to me something that's never really talked about.

JW: Yes. Plenty of people don't realize what they're doing when they paddle canoes. But other people see that those who paddle canoes look strong and healthy. And when you have good health, you're happy. When you don't exercise your body too much, you get sick, and you're not happy (Jack Waiwo, interview, 2009).

In Jack Waiwo's mind there is an inseparable relationship between *waa* and *kastom*, but also the use of *waa* as the "balance" (e.g., he sees the practical value of speedboats) between living and simply surviving: "If the wind is strong and the water is rough, or a woman is pregnant and has to go to the hospital, you must use a boat. But my life is the canoe." A canoe means strength and physical health through the work and exercise provided by *kastom*, but also mental health—an individual feeling of enjoyment and happiness. Financial considerations for using a canoe are tied directly into an individual dependency on "waiting" for others rather than larger practical economic concerns; freedom is viewed more in terms of autonomy and mobility than money, and this is important because local tolerance of *aelan taem* while "waiting" for speedboats is far less *laissez-faire* than when something expected to occur simply occurs at a later date. This is because money is pooled among passengers and exchanged with captains prior to disembarking, as a demonstration that the trip will be worth the captain's while. This kind of pre-emptive interpersonal exchange is not performed anywhere else on Lamén Island; in fact, compensation for services rendered is never discussed openly between parties involved because it publicly acknowledges someone as indebted to another *financially* and is a point of personal shame, often because monetary debt is specifically quantified and difficult to repay. A reciprocal exchange between two people is traditionally based on an implicitly ongoing obligation and a value judgment of what will be accepted as an appropriate amount; if the amount is unacceptable,

rather than refused, it is kept as a reminder that future exchanges with that person are a bad investment. Apia's brother, Alex, for example, was called "Alex Tumoro" because he would drink kava one night and promise to pay "tomorrow." But "tomorrow," meant *never*, as I was later informed by everyone at the kava bar. His requests for kava, however, could not be refused because to do so would address an interpersonal indebtedness in a public sphere, which would shame both parties and embarrass bystanders. This *tabu* is considered the leading cause for the eventual failure of kava bars on Lamenu Island to thrive over the long-term, in spite of their popularity.

Exemption from this tabu was the operant dynamic between boat captains and their passengers since money is exchanged *in good faith*, a notion that exists implicitly in traditional reciprocity, but which has emerged into the socio-economic consciousness on Lamenu Island with the introduction of the Western business model through home-based stores and commercial boats, none of which any longer accept *ol kaon*, or credit. The difference between the two economic modes is one of ambiguity and specificity, the traditional model allowing for broader definitions of obligation and repayment over unspecified timeframes, while the Western model establishes the contractual exchange parameters that justify asking for payment in advance. For speedboat passengers, consequently, when a captain arrived three hours late to pick up passengers socially rescripted as paying customers, he was met without direct reprimand, but only because people had been sitting on the beach sharing their increasing animosity; nevertheless, the growing reliance on speedboats coupled with a lack of competition, particularly from canoes, means passengers may believe they have little personal choice without returning to a "harder" life—a newly imposed *bifo*. In this context, the real currency of exchange for those who choose to use speedboats is personal freedom over time and space:

"If I want to go by boat, but I show up late, I'm done for—I can't go. But when I have a canoe, it doesn't matter—it doesn't matter how late I am, I can still go and come back. I like that. When I finish a canoe, I like it because I can do that. If you've got a little work to do in the garden, or whatever, you can leave, go to the garden, and come back when you want. If you don't have a canoe, but there's no boat either, you just have to stay

put. So I like having a canoe because no one can boss me around—I can go and come as I please. If I have work to do, I have work to do” (Morsen, interview, 2009).

For Lamén Islanders, who live with the demands of a “two island” system, the connection between personal freedom and physical health is immediate, since maintaining an adequate garden, particularly during planting and harvesting seasons, is a painstakingly laborious process vital to survival. As such, issues of health, nutrition and lifestyle are closely intertwined, particularly in the context of newly introduced technologies.

Although the *karo* had been roughly opened with Ben Kalo’s chainsaw, the precision work of *asi karo* would have to rely on smaller tools that could be used inside the hull once it was hollowed out. *Asi skosko*, or “shaping the ribs,” which had been avoided at first because of the chainsaw’s usefulness in cutting out a wedge to open the *karo*, would have to be undertaken later with an adze and bush knife in order to make the *karo* large enough and the hull walls thin enough to be efficient. Inconsistencies in the wood caused by knots or rot would have made this impossible to do with a chainsaw even if the *karo* had been large enough, simply because the chainsaw, although quick and easy, lacks the tactile sensitivity and premeditated control of a well-landed cut from a manual blade. Because of this, shaping the *karo* is a gradual and painstaking process that requires both physical strength and remarkably precise hand-eye coordination.

Mounting the *iwa* –

There was a powerful kleva [sorcerer] named Avio Koli. Whether or not you feared him depended on if you were his friend or not, but everyone respected him. He was strong in kastom magic, and there are many stories about the amazing things people had seen him do. He was accompanied by two small liusepsep—two wise men of the bush—who gave him his power. Liusepsep were renowned for tricking people and stealing pigs on Epi, but they would share their knowledge with Avio. So he could do unbelievable things. He could put a leaf into his mouth, chew it, and when he removed it, it would have become money; he could talk to people on Ambrym using kastom magic; he could transform into different kinds of animals; he could fly to other islands by singing a magic song, and if you held his hand when he sang, you could fly with him. Some people believe his canoe, which he called Mendasawa, could fly like a bird. Mendasawa means “old canoe,” or, “as it was done before.” Nevertheless, he was the

first man to use an iwa [rail, or gunwale] on his canoe, and it wasn't long before all canoes from Lamenu Island were made that way.

The story goes like this: Avio had a friend on Epi named Tiby Hagen, who owned a plantation there. Mr. Hagen could also repair boats. One day, Avio went to watch him work on a boat. He watched the way Mr. Hagen put the timbers in place, then fastened them together with copper and nails. That was where Avio got the idea to build his own canoe in this way.

*He returned to Lamenu to cut the wood to fashion rails, and Mr. Hagen supplied him with copper and nails. The cracks between the iwa and the yepe waa [hull] were filled with pur kowa [pounded tree pulp of *Bischofia javanica*] and the iwa was fastened to his canoe with copper and nails. That was the first time, and that's where the idea came from—from the whiteman's boat. Avio was trying to create a personal style—a style different from anyone else's—but when he was finished, everyone went to go look, and now everyone does it just like he did.*

People began salvaging the copper strips and copper nails from the old boats of the South Pacific Fishing Company on Santo after it went out of business in 1980. Both can be very difficult to find these days, but there are still plenty on Lamenu Island. Some of them are sixty years old! People use them again and again, stripping them from old canoes when they need to build new ones.

The above narrative is a quiltwork assemblage of multiple conversations and one recorded interview with various members of the research project in response to my question about the origins of the *iwa*, or gunwale, on Lamenu Island canoes. Although their accurate recollection of dates and the foreign names of white settlers on Epi during the time these events occurred varied, available literature on foreign settlers on Epi during the early 20th Century (Young, 1999) corroborated closely with local memory; furthermore, a common denominator to narratives regarding the origin of the *iwa* was Avio Koli (cf. p. 45-46, 48-49), a prominent and controversial figure in Lamenu Island's history, whose own life story (ibid.: 116 ff), along with local recollections, places the first use of the *iwa* at some time after the local presence of Allied troops during WWII but prior to the arrival of the first missionaries in 1948. Conversely, Haddon and Hornell's three-volume work, *Canoes of Oceania*, first printed in 1936, recognized the "former" presence of "large canoes with planked sides" (Haddon, 1975: 21) on Epi; however, whether "planked sides" refers to the presence of an *iwa* is uncertain, but the brief and certainly generalized description of Epi's canoes also states "there may be a platform" (ibid.), a term more accurate than "planked sides" to describe the only other likely feature on a Lamenu Island canoe,

the *vētarere* (sideboard cargo decks lashed across the booms). As such, the presence of a gunwale in some form or another on Epi prior to 1923 seems tenable. Generalizations aside, however, even the documented presence of a gunwale on canoes around Epi as early as 1923 holds little evidence for the possibility of an *iwa* on even large Lamén Island *waa* before its first reported use by Avio Koli in the 1940s. This is because the term *iwa* does not refer to gunwales in general, but a gunwale specifically designed to be mounted on a Lamén Island *yepé waa*.

The *iwa* is comprised of four main pieces: the *mela waa* (bow) and *pěre waa* (stern), along with their connecting port (*vakere*) and starboard (*vayeme*) planks. In our case, the bow and stern were cut from the same tree as the *yepé waa* because of the adequate size of the tree, but generally these parts are often cut from stronger woods such as breadfruit (*pur kleperev̄*, or *Atrocarpus altilis*), allowing them to be reused again and again for decades on future *yepé waa*. The port and starboard rails are usually made from either *navenu* (*pur venuve*, or *Cordia subcordata*) or *namandal* (*pur miandi*, or *Kleinhovia hospita*) and can be replaced easily when needed, an important factor when eventual wear on the rails can compromise the lashings and the integrity of the entire outrigger assembly, particularly in rough water.

Before mounting the bow and stern sections of the *iwa*, both are laid in place and looked over carefully before being removed and shaped with bush knives to roughly fit the shape of the hull. Tom's quick trim gave the bow piece a tapered V shape with a sloping middle, which he then remounted onto the bow of the hull for a recheck. Not yet satisfied, he removed it again, took an adze and, with a few strokes to the tops of the hull wall, the bow end of the *iwa* sat snugly atop the *yepé waa*. Again he removed the bow component, laid it on the ground beside the canoe, and began trimming it down with the adze, adjusting the slope in its center to match the angle of the *karo* (interior hull) from the point of the bow. With a bush knife he cut away at the interior of its legs to make them thin and pliable enough for any width adjustment they might need once positioned on the hull. He then remounted it to the

bow of the hull and anchored it in place with a single nail angled upward through the end of the outside of the hull. The whole canoe was then turned on its side, and the finer trimming to align the shape and



Blakman stael: to us it's a sewing machine; to Lamén Islanders it's a hundred things.

width of the component to the hull was undertaken with the adze. Once trimming was complete on both sides, the canoe was turned upright. Approximately halfway down the length of each leg of the *iwa's* bow, two holes were drilled approximately eight inches apart with a manual hand press downward through the tops of the component's legs to a depth approximate to the center of each leg. Four six-inch

galvanized steel nails were then hammered into the holes, securing the legs to the hull; the nails were driven completely down into the holes with a nail punch made from the needle bar of an old sewing machine (See image above). Tom continued to match the shape of the *iwa's* bow to the *yepe waa*, eventually wedging a block of wood between the legs themselves to spread them and align them to the hull walls. A little more work with the adze had the bow of the canoe coming to a smoothly tapered point.

The mounting of the stern end of the *iwa* was undertaken in the same way; however, because the legs of the stern component were considerably longer than those of the bow piece, one leg split open and had to be cut short. Once the bow and stern components were properly aligned to the top of the *yepe waa*, the ends of their legs were each secured to it with a diagonally placed nail through their ends. The tip of the stern was trimmed with a bow saw and tapered downward with a bush knife to smoothly meet the rising stern edge of the *yepe waa*. In most cases, rather than a smoothly angled stern, a handle called an *amēle pēre waa* is carved at the tip of the stern, resembling the stubby shoulder stock of a rifle, and allowing the canoe to be turned around easily when beached; however, because *Pang na Pang* was relatively small and light, it was unnecessary.

The next day Morsen arrived to install the port and starboard rails, a relatively straightforward process that involved measuring the distance between the legs of the bow and stern components and cutting the length of the rails accordingly with a bow saw. The rails were cut to provide a tight fit and pounded down into position with a hammer. Because the rail was straight compared to the slight curvature of the hull, a short piece of wood was inserted perpendicularly between the center of the rail and the hull on the opposite side, enough to bow the rail gently outward. Once the rails were in place, they were secured with diagonal nail placements through a point near the ends of the rail down into the adjoining component. Starting at the center of the length of the rails, three vertical holes were drilled halfway downward through the top of each of the rails; holes at either end were approximately 8 inches from the ends of the rails. As with the bow and stern components of the *iwa*, six-inch galvanized nails were hammered in as deeply as possible before using the nail punch to force them to the bottom of the holes, where they could adequately penetrate the *yepe waa*.

The stern and bow components of the *iwa* stood higher to varying degrees than the rails themselves. This meant Morsen would have to split a nearby plank from the *kenutri* and use a length of it to fill in the gaps and make the top of the finished *iwa* level. He split the plank lengthwise down the middle with an axe, occasionally striking the head of the axe with a hammer to wedge it through the plank, until there remained only two narrow lengths of wood. Tom had arrived and began measuring the wood to the rails. He cut the pieces accordingly with the bow saw and laid them on top of the rails. It was a rough fit that required some whittling with the bush knife before it would sit flush with the rail. As with the rail itself, Morsen drilled three holes into each of these pieces of wood and nailed them securely down into the rails, making sure not to place the nails too close to the nails of the rails themselves, which could end up splitting the rail. Once the adjustments to the rails were secure, Morsen trimmed the top and sides of the rails with a bush knife to make them flush with the bow and stern components of the *iwa*. Still unsatisfied, Morsen picked up a small piece of wood and shaped it

into a long, flat wedge with his bush knife. He placed it on the leg of the bow component, against the end of the adjoining rail, and eyed it closely. Taking a small nail, he hammered it into place and carefully shaved off a paper-thin layer from the top. He eyed it again, how it flowed almost seamlessly from the end of the rail right into the upward curve of the bow.

***Asi yeme* – shaping the float**

Standing on a beach in Lamén Bay, I ran into a man from the island of Tanna, who worked for Digicel, the new wireless communication company that had recently installed two microwave towers on Epi. He spent each day walking from village to village, surveying local mobile phone users about the quality of their coverage, but was sleeping at the Paradise Sunset Bungalows in Lamén Bay. One evening, I joined him at a local kava bar, where we talked about our respective work in the area. We discussed the technical differences between canoes from Lamenu and those from Tanna, and he expressed his admiration for people who lived on “two islands.” Having been raised near Port Resolution in southern Tanna, he had grown up using canoes, but primarily for fishing. He told me that, in his village, the body of the canoe was symbolic of the community, inside of which everyone sat together. The float, also known in Bislama as *nasama*, or in slang as a *pikinini*, or “child,” because of its Lilliputian resemblance to the hull, symbolized the future of the community, while the booms of the outrigger connecting the hull to the float represented the role the community played in raising its children, providing stability. “The *pikinini* is still outside the community and needs the proper support,” he said. “It may be very small compared to the canoe, but if the *pikinini* is not supported correctly and should be lost, the whole canoe will capsize—the whole community will go under. This is what my father told me.” I told him what Lamén Islanders had told me years ago: Like members of a community, every part of a canoe has a name that binds it to this specific place. Likewise, names cannot be given indiscriminately to children because some day those names will come back to the *nasara* (the

patrilineage and its associated ceremonial land). If a name from somewhere else is given to a child, their connection to the *nasara* will be lost (Morsen, interview, 2009).

Back at Apia's house, Tom had begun to shape the *pikinini*, or what Lamén Islanders call the *yeme* in Lewo. He laid the four-meter *waetwud* on the ground and shaped the "cheeks" at both ends with an axe. The emerging shape at the bow and stern dictated which side of the tree would inevitably become the upper surface of the *yeme*, through which wooden stakes, called *merawelaĩ*, would be hammered in order to attach the float to the *korana*, or outrigger booms. Consequently, the upper surface of the *yeme* had to be flat. To do this, Tom made a series of lateral cuts with the axe, approximately four inches apart, down half the length of the tree, beginning at the tree's thicker trunk end (as with the *yepe waa*, the trunk's "ass" would serve as the float's "head"). Tom then turned the upper surface of the *yeme* on its side and, continuing with the axe, easily cut his way down the length of those lateral cuts, leaving a smooth surface behind. Once the wider half of the tree had been roughly shaped, Tom stood it on its narrower stern end and continued flattening the upper surface of the *yeme* down the remaining length of the tree with his bush knife. It was subtle work, with Tom eyeing each cut carefully before removing onionskin-thin layers to give the *yeme* a proper shape: although the aft end of the *yeme* was left relatively flat to increase stability, the overall shape of the *yeme* was given a slight rocker that would reduce drag and improve maneuverability. Any remaining skin on the *yeme* was removed with a bush knife (not only for a "clean" aesthetic, but to reduce rotting), and the finished product was left leaning against a tree for a few days to dry.

While Tom had been working on the *yeme*, Morsen had continued aesthetic refinements to the *yepe waa*, trimming the top and sides of the *iwa* meticulously with a bush knife, exact, but with undaunted swings. Again, it was a "clean" aesthetic he was attempting. To my eye the *iwa* was finished and securely mounted enough to provide ample structural support to the outrigger booms; however, Morsen continued trimming it down, eyeing it closely with every few shaves, feeling for perfect

smoothness in the continuity of its patchwork surface from bow to stern. Once, rather than shave any further, he found a seemingly incongruous piece of wood and, after shaping it into a thin wedge, nailed it to the *iwa* for an almost seamless fit. As he did so, a young man named Pulpe Alick arrived to watch and perhaps help. He watched for a few moments before quietly straddling the *yepe waa*, positioning himself perfectly to both observe and hand Morsen his tools if necessary, but also to relax. Watching Lamén Islanders work is a time-consuming business because of *aelan taem*, but also because few social activities are exclusive of others and, inevitably, any kind of work is punctuated by eating and permeated with copious amounts of *storian*.



Demonstrating his interest in both modern tools and traditional canoe building, Pulpe illustrates that *kastom* is alive on Lamenu and being passed on to future generations.

Pulpe had been a student of mine ten years before, when he was about eight years old. Now, as then, he was not shy around his friends, but when he was with adults, he was quiet and respectful. He was soft-spoken and attentive; friendly and helpful. It imbued him with a sense of the kind of maturity and social engagement I imagined parents on Lamén Island strove to produce in their children when they spoke of raising them “in the ways of *kastom*.” He

wore his hair up in short, neat dreadlocks that he had, somewhat successfully, managed to dye blond.

Pulpe watched for a few hours, occasionally giving the *iwa* a few thin shaves with his bush knife and even trying his hand at the hand plane while Morsen and Tom eyed his work carefully from over their plates of food. Pulpe spent the next hour hand planing the entire hull. Later, Morsen and I discussed this during an interview:

J: Yesterday, down at the *nakamal*, I watched Tom, Louis, and Pulpe building a small canoe. Watching Pulpe, it seemed he had a real interest in how to lash together the outrigger—

M: Small Pulpe? Pulpe was working on it?

J: Not so small; the young man with dreadlocks.

M: Yeah, that's the one. He came to help us on the small canoe.

J: Yeah, he was trying to use the plane. I wasn't sure if he was just interested in the tools, or... He's a lot like you: he has a real interest in how to use tools—

M: Yes...

J: —but also how to build canoes.

M: Yes...

J: And his work was pretty good!

M: Yes!

J: Do you think there's any chance in the future that there'll be a school to teach children in that way? A *kastom* school? Something to help the youth reconnect with *kastom*?

M: We can do it. We started something at the school here—Sabona Day. We had a Sabona Week. We started it, and it started very well. But it depends on the parents, and on the older men and women. Anything you know, you share it. If that could happen every year at the school, we'd have more and more to teach. If we—every parent, or the old folks, who still know those kinds of things, would participate... We ask them, but they just hide. I don't know if they're shy, or... I don't know. If they're shy, I don't know why.

J: Could it be shame, perhaps, that they may have already lost the knowledge?

M: Plenty of them know things. They still know how to sing songs. Some still know how to make different things by hand. But almost every old person still here today doesn't know how to cut a canoe. You can count the ones that do. The men you've come to work with, they're the only ones left who know how to build a canoe. As far as houses, there are some who don't know how to build a [western style] house, but local houses with local materials, they're easy and people know how to build them. Houses like this one, however [indicating his own block house under construction], you have to know how to do things like this, and like this...

J: Yeah, it's different.

M: So in my lifetime, we haven't taught them much. In the way you and I have been discussing, though, with the youth, it's possible. But if we want it to work, it has to begin in the home as they're growing up. They need plenty of time to sit down and talk with their fathers. But one thing that destroys this is the way we drink kava. We don't leave time to talk and share things. The fathers drink kava while the kids are growing up, and when they're grown up and finished with school, the fathers go drink kava together, their kids go drink kava together, and everything quickly gets forgotten. This is a big problem today. If we want to see the return of *kastom*, we must find ways to control kava and to discipline people. Kava is something you use for ceremonies. It's something you must respect. Today, we drink it, but without any respect.

J: Like drinking alcohol.

M: Exactly, yes. If our chiefs and everyone else abided by the ideas we're talking about now, we'd have plenty of support to control it. Then it would help if we could have—we could tell every boy under the age of 18 that they are not to drink kava. When we do that, it will mean that only some people are allowed to drink kava. Children will not be allowed to drink. Before, no women were allowed to drink kava here; today, women go drink. So today, everything's gone wrong. When women start drinking kava, they'll no longer sit down at night to make mats. They'll drink their kava, eat, and fall asleep. There'll be no time to make mats or to teach their children how to make them, or to help them with their homework. All of that will disappear. Some of us—I'm one who

drinks kava, but I wait until the children are asleep before I drink. I don't like to drink kava when the children are watching.

J: [laughing] Yeah, I drink kava every night, but I don't have children.

M: And that's okay, really. That's fine. But for us it's a problem. When the children eventually become youth, they no longer have time to sit down and learn anything from their elders. Instead, they go out to the kava bar, and their fathers go out, too, and nothing gets shared that the youth can hold on to.

J: That's interesting. A *nakamal* is not the same as kava bar. I think of both as an opportunity for *storian*. But in a kava bar, you never see a youth drinking kava with his father; they don't drink together, or talk, or anything. It's different. All the youth drink over there, all the men drink over there, and all the old men drink over there.

M: So nothing gets shared. In my lifetime I've been lucky. I don't usually drink kava. After 25 years, I've only just started. But for 25 years, I never drank kava. My father, too, he doesn't drink kava. He might drink a little, but rarely. Maybe two or three times a year. So when I was growing up, it was often that we would sit down together and my father would talk with us (Morsen, interview, 2009).

Morsen's words struck a tremendous chord of irony in me, since much of what I had learned about local life and culture on Lamén Island specifically, and in Vanuatu in general, I learned from countless hours of wonderful *storian* in kava bars. As a foreigner new to the country, kava was the culturally embedded social lubricant that I felt allowed me access to an oral library of cultural knowledge and understanding my neophytic language skills and cultural competency might otherwise not have. If I went to Joe's kava bar, I was sure to be schooled in Lewo by the old men and regaled with tales of 19th Century cannibalism and WWII in exchange for explaining what astronauts found when they landed on the moon. I even drank kava with Isabelle Donald, the country's third female Minister of Parliament, there once—out back and out of sight of the scowling *olfala*. If I went to Charlie's, I knew I would hear all about the day's events, local gossip, and likewise recount my own inept blunders to the laughter of listeners; at Atis' kava bar, the young men would be sure to interrogate me endlessly about American pop-culture and the nuances of attracting American women; at Moses' kava bar I could sit in silence or step out onto the whispering beach, where children hunted ghost crabs by moonlight; and if I wanted to hear about local politics and matters of *kastom*, the chiefs' *nakamal* was the place. This was the social milieu of information and knowledge sharing in which kava consumption became central to my cultural education and community integration. Even in its most informal moments, the commensality of kava

drinking embodied for me a ritual aspect that, quite literally, evoked a wonderfully practical feeling of transcendence that facilitated learning. In this way, I came to view both the *nakamal* and the kava bar as *kastom* “schools.” For Lamén Islanders, however, this is clearly not the case, because connotations of *skul* in the Western sense are popularly viewed as antithetical to a *kastom* education; kava bars, similarly, are viewed as the secularized or populist expression of *nakamals* and a widespread digression from the *kastom* frequency, form, and function of kava consumption (cf. p. 86-88). Pulpe, therefore, could never learn to build a canoe by sitting in a kava bar, although I might, at least in an academic sense. *Kastom* education, as opposed to learning *about kastom*, however, will always remain a visceral, hands-on experience for Lamén Islanders.

Indeed, Lamén Islanders recognize the ways in which *kastom* education has been impacted by the shifting cultural currents that sweep able-bodied and impressionable youth to other countries in search of work and relative wealth, even as foreign influences that disrupt or at least temporarily confound traditional modes of social and cultural production wash in on the tide of an uncertain future. As Morsén illustrates, however, Lamén Islanders do not feign ignorance of their own complicity in allowing such disruptions to persist. Rather than view themselves as victims of modernity, they believe that *kastom* has the ability to establish a balance between traditional values and modern realities—that the two are not mutually exclusive, but must necessarily be integrated in new modes of institutionalized educational reform:

- A: In terms of respect, it has an important relationship to *kastom*. When education came, children began attending school. Before, our only school was *kastom*. The education system today comes from the *waetman*, so today we find ourselves forgetting our traditional ways. What we’ve started thinking about lately, however, is how we can teach our children about *kastom*—we need *kastom* education. We introduced this at our last meeting, and when we hear back from all the families, we’ll have to decide how our children are going to relearn traditional ways.
- J: Can you say a little about your plans to do something like that?
- A: If we do something like that, it will have to go back to each *nasara*, where their fathers can tell them—as you and I’ve been discussing—about not talking to people who are

tabu to them, and not going places that are *tabu* to them. They can tell them, *this place here, you have no right to go there. It's tabu to you.* So here, we have to find a teacher who can teach them traditional ways again.

J: So does this plan only involve *ngalo* Barua?

A: So far, but we've been discussing holding a combined meeting in order to involve everyone. Then, we can take the issue to the Council too in order to begin putting respect back into *kastom*.

J: Why do you think raising awareness about respect is important to this small island community?

A: Respect is an important thing that, if every youth—everyone—can integrate into their daily lives like our ancestors, will make everything easier. Respect is important. When you lose respect, you lose *kastom*. But when you show respect... The *waetman's* education has respect, but so does *kastom*. When you reintegrate respect into *kastom*, however, you'll see that the *waetman's* education becomes more beneficial and appropriate. That's the main thing. Respect must find its way back. When it does, people will recognize the truth of its importance. Like you said, a lot of change has come. People return educated, but they must continue to respect the ways of their elders.

J: But there are different kinds of education. For example, all the people who've gone to New Zealand, who come back and their way of doing things has changed a bit.

A: Yes, they come back and they're different. What we tell them is, *that which you find is good, bring it back with you; that which is no good, leave it there.* We should bring things back that can change our lives for the better, but improper ways should be left behind (Avio Jack, interview, 2009).

For Chief Avio, *kastom* is not only compatible with, but enhances, the recognized practical value of Western education. As such, he endows individuals with full agency in knowing what *kastom* does and does not permit, using "respect" as an innate moral compass. Morsen's own views reiterate the idea of creating a *kastom* school; however, while he implies instilling youth with a newfound respect for traditional values, his explicit concern is one of revitalizing traditional forms concomitantly with practical economic opportunities:

J: When you think about the future of Lamien, how do you see *kastom*? For example, I've heard several comments about the community trying to start a *kastom* school to revitalize traditional knowledge.

M: That's right. We're trying to do it—we had the same idea—to include all the youth. Me and Apia. We tried to get all the youth involved, around the time the cruise ship was coming. We tried to revitalize a few minor things, such as *kastom* dances, but... it didn't stick. We learned some *kastom* songs—about turtles, for example. I think we did that when you were here.

J: Yes. I think last year you performed for a film crew that came, but...
 M: Yes, that's right.
 J: But before that too.
 M: We did a *kastom* song about turtles, and another about the dugong.
 J: Oh right! When I was working at the primary school—
 M: *Sabona* Day, yes. We did a *kastom* song about canoeing that we used to sing when we paddled. That's all we did, just something small. We need the old people to show us these things, but the old people today, they're all talk—they don't do anything. So we try to revitalize things ourselves, but we don't know enough and things get forgotten. Every time an old person dies, they take so much with them, and it never gets recorded. By the time we recognized this, it was too late—we'd already lost plenty of old people. (Morsen, interview, 2009).

The concern both of them share in terms of a *kastom* school, significantly, is not so much one of finding willing students, but one of finding qualified teachers. I thought about the paradox in this: that

kastom could simultaneously demonstrate both degradation as a result of a diminished pool of traditional knowledge experts *and* signs of its own nascent germination in the untilled minds of neophytes. As Pulpe himself evidences, and if the success of Orah's Joseph's efforts in introducing Lewo to a new generation of speakers is any indication, learning *about kastom* is something in



Chief Avio weighs a kava root as one of his sons sits quietly and watches closely.

which children and youth are interested; what *kastom* itself will look like in the future, however, is a different matter that will depend greatly on how future generations express *kastom* from a practical, hands-on standpoint. If "*kastom* on Lamén Island will never change," yet changes can "become *kastom* in the lives of young people" (cf. Jack Waiwo, p. 52), then "teaching" *kastom* has to mean sharing an understanding of past, present, and future as an *experiential* continuum involving wide variability but with a single common denominator: respect. Since Morsen believes, as almost every Lamén Islander does, that teaching respect begins in the home, then the misconception that *kastom* "teachers" are scarce reflects a popular uncertainty about how "*kastom*" has been institutionally defined outside the

home and how parents artificially qualify themselves as “teachers” vis-à-vis that definition. The sincerity of interest that Pulpe *brought with him* to work on the canoe, unsolicited, and the way in which the more experienced canoe builders accepted his presence without question and guided him, however, implied that his *kastom* education was well underway, regardless.

Nelem kapa – reinforcing the iwa

When the *iwa* first made its appearance on Lamén Island *waa*, it was nailed to the *yepe waa* in the same way I’d seen done with *Pang na Pang* a few days earlier. Once nailed in place, the inevitable gap between the *iwa* and the *yepe waa* had to be sealed all the way around in order to prevent water seepage into the *karo* (the “basket,” or inside of the *waa*). This was done by pounding the red inner bark of *pur kowa* (*nakoka*, or *Bischofia javanica*) into a soft, sticky pulp that hardened when dry; a strip of *piyapa* (*nambanga*, or *Ficus microcarpa*) bark would be placed firmly along the length of the gap as well, sticking to the inserted pulp, but occasionally nailed into place with small nails if available.

Lamén Islanders’ involvement with the South Pacific Fishing Company (SPFC) from the 1950s until the company’s official insolvency in 1980 left an enduring legacy of new material exploitation in canoe building, particularly with the acquisition of the copper insulate and copper nails originally used on SPFC fishing vessels. Lamén Islanders who took advantage of having relatives at the SPFC shipyards at Palekula, on the island of Espiritu Santo, ended up receiving plenty of the company’s wasted materials, especially after the company went bankrupt, and the scavenging of materials from abandoned assets was at an all-time high. I asked whether this might not have been considered stealing; however, many Lamén Islanders who remember their experience with SPFC viewed it as an equal exchange for their years of labor, much of which they claim went uncompensated. Consequently, Lamén Island, even now, utilizes the same copper insulate strips and copper nails from SPFC’s early fishing vessels to continue their tradition of canoe building.

Tom sat down with a jumble of copper strips that had, two years before, been removed from Apia's previous canoe along with hundreds of its carefully extricated nails. His first order of business was to pound the copper strips flat again with a hammer. While he did so, Apia, wielding a small pair of sewing scissors, appeared with a large sheet of reflective roofing insulation left over from the ongoing construction of his brother's house nearby. Morsen, meanwhile, sat nearby, whittling away at a number of short *lamoliye*, or *purmaliu* (*namariu*, or *Acacia spirorbis*) stakes, which would eventually become the *merawela*ʻ, the structural brackets for the outrigger.



Copper strips seal the gap between the *iwa* and the *yepe waa*. Reflective roofing insulate underneath seems to work well in indigenous theory.

Tom turned the *yepe waa* on its side. Taking the copper strips he'd flattened, he placed them along the gap left between the hull and the *iwa* to ensure proper placement and adequate length. Apia had already cut the reflective insulate into strips corresponding to the width of the copper, and he laid both atop the gap to check their corresponding fit. Once satisfied, Tom and Apia worked together to nail the copper strip down along its edges

(one on the *iwa*, the other on the *yepe waa*) with 1/4-inch "copper" nails (SPFC's originals were in short supply) spaced a finger's width apart, the reflective strips pinned flat underneath across the gap. The strip would eventually continue all the way around the *yepe waa* (see Chapter 4 for Apia's experiment), segment ends overlapping each other by a few inches, while any vertical gaps (i.e., where the port and starboard rails meet the bow and stern components of the *iwa*) were covered in the same way, the strip extending above the top of the rail and folded over it to drop a few inches down the inside of the hull wall. As the copper was laid down and nailed, it was hammered flush to the surface of the hull to ensure a tight, smooth fit and to avoid the possibility of accidentally cutting skin or snagging clothing.

Once installation of the copper was complete, any telltale signs of the reflective material underneath would be trimmed away with a knife for a “clean” look.

***Fasem kenu* – assembling and lashing down the outrigger assembly**

The final stage of canoe construction involved a number of components, all of which would be lashed together with Japanese rope: the *korana* (outrigger booms), the *ŵetarere* (cargo deck), the *merawelaŵ* (structural brackets for the floater), and the finished floater itself, the *yeme*. Before final assembly could begin, however, a series of holes, called *merawunduldul*, would have to be drilled into the *iwa* to serve as conduits for the rope anchoring the *korana* to the *iwa*. *Merawunduldul* are particularly important because, once the *korana* is secured, the rope passing through them also serves to reinforce the relationship between the *yepewaa* and the *iwa* while reducing stress on the nails and copper that bind them together. Typically on larger canoes, *merawunduldul* were drilled in three staggered sets of two holes on each side of the canoe, with one hole through the *iwa* above the copper trim and the other through the *yepewaa* just below it. Because *Pang na Pang* was a relatively small vessel, however, both holes in each set would be drilled side-by-side through the *iwa*; although they could have been staggered, this was viewed as unnecessary.

Three arbitrarily chosen branches were found nearby and placed atop the upright *yepewaa* in the estimated positions desired for each *korana*. On larger *waa*, the three *korana* are situated equidistant to one another, centered roughly down the length of the canoe and extending off the starboard side; however, with smaller canoes, although three *korana* are still used, the central boom is positioned closer to the forward boom in order to eventually accommodate the smaller *ŵetarere* that normally sits nearer the starboard bow to counterbalance the weight of a single person astern. On a larger canoe, the *ŵetarere* crosses all three *korana* and is either positioned to starboard or on both sides simultaneously if the size of the canoe permits a considerable cargo load. Similarly, a smaller canoe can

have forward *ŵetarere* on both sides simultaneously, although each would have to be approximately half the size of a single starboard-mounted deck.

At this point, a few interested observers had arrived; inevitably, there erupted some discussion in Lewo about hole placement with regard to proper balance and weight distribution. The discussion was animated, and it seemed that the builders were earnestly considering the opinions of these newcomers. As advice was proffered, the branches were moved to various positions along the hull as if to illustrate competing theories. Eventually, the branches were found their desired positions, and Apia marked drilling positions for *merawunduldul* along the *iwa* with a piece of charcoal, below and to either side of the branches. Holes in each set were level and approximately four inches apart, but positioned in the vertical center of the *iwa* to avoid splitting the wood. Morsen then turned the hull on its side and used his hand press to drill the holes accordingly.

Apia dug a shallow trench in the ground next to the hull, approximately as long as the *sog ma si* (underside of the hull). The *yepe waa* was turned upright and made to sit snugly in the trench. Tasso Omai retrieved three readied *korana*, which had been resting against the fork of a nearby tree. Apia, Morsen, and I had cut them several days before from a small grove of *pur yopa* on Morsen's land on the northwest side of Lamenu. *Pur yopa*, an indigenous tree I have been unable to identify, has a gray, lichen-covered trunk with thick, low-spreading primary branches from which numerous secondary branches a few inches in diameter emerge vertically upward to grow long and straight. These secondary branches, *la yopa*, are optimal for use as *korana* for these reasons, but also because, when dry, they remain remarkably strong and lightweight (a similar alternative to *la yopa* is *la kimban*, also called *la koika*, literally, "to kill fish," so called because they grow near the shoreline and, inspired by Allied soldiers during WWII, Lamenu Islanders used to climb them to gain distance when throwing dynamite into the reef to catch fish—an activity that was quickly banned by local chiefs. *La ngoiyé*, also known as *la pangji*, or "broom handle," is a possible alternative; it has also been used in the past to fashion diving

goggles). Morsen cut three *la yopa*, which we then carried to the beach to remove any branches, skin completely and leave in the sun to harden and dry.

Now, the three *korana*, each cut approximately to the length of the canoe, were laid across the *iwa* and positioned atop each set of *merawunduldul*. The starboard ends of the *korana* were elevated to a horizontal position by resting them on a hastily constructed but level spit recycled from an old *korana* placed across two short, forked branches planted diagonally toward each other in the ground. Once in their final position, each *korana* extended approximately three feet off the port side of the hull.

Properly rigging a canoe is specialized work, and two very specific styles of lashing are preferred in order to secure the *korana*: *meyebei*, considered the “female” style because of its finished resemblance to a vagina, and *meraiyun*, the corresponding “male” style that comes to resemble a newly circumcised penis. These styles are used arbitrarily, depending on the preference of the builder, but they are always found in tandem on a finished canoe. When I asked the builders responsible for the rigging why this was so, there was considerable consultation in Lewo among the group as a whole. Since my conversation with the Digicel surveyor on Epi several days earlier, I was hoping their consensus would support a hypothesis I had silently harbored regarding the somatic metaphors used in *waa* construction vis-à-vis Lamén Island’s gendered social organization; however, in the end, no consensus could be reached. Even the definition of *meraiyun* involved contentious debate (some members of the group thought it might mean “face of the coconut”). In fact, the conversation was an obvious point of snickering embarrassment for the group because of its lingering upon anatomical references. These two riggings, like nearly everything else, were traditionally taught by practical demonstration rather than through mnemonic devices; I assumed the crass anatomical associations were more symptomatic of canoe building’s traditional role in male social reproduction than of anything purely didactic.

Once the *korana* had been securely lashed to the port and starboard sides of the *iwa* by interlacing them through each set of *merawunduldul*, the *yeme*, or floater, was placed on the ground

just beyond the spit supporting their ends, approximately two meters. The floater's distance from the canoe along the booms was an educated guess on Tom's part regarding the length of the *yepe waa* and the size of the *yeme* itself—primarily its ability to counter the weight of the canoe with passengers and cargo. There was little or no discussion about the accuracy of its placement as it was centered parallel to the *yepe waa* underneath the three *korana*.

Marius Yoan arrived with his donated bundle of finished *merawelaŵ*, the connective struts for the *yeme*, made from local hardwood branches known as *la sambaraŵ*. Although the wood is rare on Lamén Island, it is the traditional ideal because *merawelaŵ* are pounded directly into the flat upper surface of the *yeme*. The *yeme*, on the other hand, is made of soft *waetwud*, which, when wet, expands to grips the *merawelaŵ* and provides remarkable vertical (y-axis) support while remaining structurally pliant in rough swells. Each *korana* is supported by four *merawelaŵ*, a crossed inner set and a crossed outer set of stakes, each pounded several inches at an inward-directed angle into the *yeme*, creating a seat for each *korana*. In particular, it is important to note that each crossed set of *merawelaŵ* means that one stake must necessarily fall on the outside and one on the inside of their particular intersection, and this fact is critical to the *korana*'s lateral (x-axis) integrity while in the water. The positioning of the *merawelaŵ* are always the same on the two forward booms of a smaller canoe because they are situated forward, while the positions of the *merawelaŵ* on the aft boom are reversed. This allows the *yeme* lateral flexibility that responds to the force of strong currents and reduces stress on the outrigger assembly as a whole.

With the *merawelaŵ* in place and the *korana* loosely seated above each intersecting set, small wads of coconut husk fiber were balled up and placed in the cradle of each set to firmly cushion the *korana* before lashing it—this time with single strands of unbraided nylon fishing rope—to the two *merawelaŵ* in much the same way as the *korana* were lashed to the *iwa*, using both *meyebai* and *meraiyun* styles. Once the rigging of the assembly was complete, small foam wedges were cut from a

commercial fishing floater and packed tightly into each *merawunduldul*. The starboard ends of each *korana* and the *merawelaĩ* were trimmed down with a bow saw to about six inches from their mutual intersection; furthermore, the portside ends of the *korana* were trimmed for aesthetic “cleanliness,” but left long enough (approximately two feet) to facilitate carrying the canoe ashore when necessary.

It was decided the *yeme* was slightly smaller than it should have been if *Pang na Pang* was going to carry cargo other than two passengers. Consequently, it was decided that the *ĩetarere*, the forward cargo deck, would be split in two, with one half on the port side of the hull and the other on the starboard side. A few *pur venuĩe* (*navenu*, or *burao blong solwota*; *Cordia subcordata*) trees had a few days earlier been skinned and cut into eleven segments of approximately one meter each; now those segments were evenly distributed between port and starboard sides on the two forward *korana*, with the last segment eventually added to the starboard deck. With Japanese rope, each segment was lashed both to each other and the *korana* using a left-to-right looping pattern that, when doubling back, also incorporated loops that lashed the rope between each segment tightly to the boom, creating a cross-hatch design over each segment while securing each independently to the *korana*. The ends of the rope were trimmed and tied off in a simple knot, tucked under the lashing and lightly hammered down.

***Wasem kenu* – “christening” the canoe**

The paddles Ben Kalo had cut with his chainsaw, and which Apia had spent a few days shaping and carving once they were dry, had not turned out well. Whether or not the design elements of *Leĩeluwā* before the influence of Western contact were informed by strict traditional construction methods and stylistic elaborations, paddles today on Lamén Island, while often shared among individuals, are nonetheless individually tailored. *Pur merpi* (*Albezia lebbeck*) is a favorite wood for paddles because of its durability and resistance to warping, but also because over time it achieves a smooth finish that makes for comfortable and responsive handling. Other woods are used occasionally

as available resources allow (with notable exception to *waetwud*, which, although abundant, is far too soft). Apia's paddles had been cut from *Pur merpi*, but equally as important as the wood are the fit of the handle, the overall length and width of the paddle, the length of the blade, and the handle-to-blade length ratio—dimensions all relative to the particular needs and desires of the user. Once Apia had finished carving his first paddle, he was already displeased because it was too thick and, therefore, heavy, yet the blade was too short. He threw it in the firewood pile and sought out Halpy Tala, a favorite paddle carver, whose *leṽeluwa* are often coveted items at community fundraisers. A few days later, Halpy arrived with a set of simple but finely shaped paddles. The canoe was ready for its maiden voyage.



Halpy Tala displays his prized paddles.

The first time a canoe is set in the water, it is a simple affair. The purpose is to check for any cracks or holes in the *yepē waa* that might have been missed with the naked eye during construction, to evaluate the responsiveness of the canoe with relation to the placement of the *yeme*, as well as to check the buoyancy of the *yeme* itself within the relatively smooth waters of the reef, and to test the comfort, fit and efficiency of the *leṽeluwa*. People who until now have been casual onlookers of the construction of a canoe are all aware that this is the first time it has touched water; now they become active participants in its christening: while the canoe's owner paddles around the reef to inspect the work and take the canoe through its paces, people on shore scramble to collect buckets and fill them with water. Once their buckets are full, they hide in the tree line along the shore, or sit casually on nearby perches as if ignorant of the proceedings, their buckets hidden just out of sight. The canoe returns after a short while, and as its owner comes close to shore, the builders stand near the shore, supposedly to help pull

the canoe ashore and to hear the owner's critique of the work. When the canoe is within a few feet of shore, everyone makes their move, grabbing their buckets and rushing the canoe with yells of excitement. The builders and the owner feign surprise, as if to run, but they're quickly surrounded and find themselves the victims of a massive communal deluge that leaves everyone soaking wet and the canoe filled with water. Laughter erupts on all sides, and the owner begins to bail out the canoe with a small container, lightening the load before dragging the canoe ashore. Any repairs or refinements that need to be made are taken care of promptly once the canoe is pulled to rest beyond the reach of high tide. The canoe will not touch saltwater again until someone with religious authority within the church has publicly presided over it by blessing it with prayer.

The sudden public performance by actors who, up to this point, have had nothing to do with what has been a relatively exclusive activity (because of its specialized knowledge set, but also because of the limited sphere of reciprocity and obligation the canoe's owner may inhabit within the community), reflects the transformation of the canoe from individual need to socially legitimated performance. The ritual, like baptism, enfolds not only the object but those responsible for its creation within a larger social and cultural continuum that assumes responsibility; unsolicited public participation implies that material form is overshadowed by the critical importance of process: the static thought-concept "canoe" is subsumed within a dynamic reality interweaving material objects, the people who produce and use them, the reasons for their creation, and the ways in which they are used.

When *Pang na Pang* touched the water for the first time, no one was around to see it except a few of the project participants. I felt it wasn't the right time to test it. I was hoping for a bit more social spectacle, frankly—people rushing about in a frenzy of giggles to find buckets, the nonchalance of their return, the expectation of the canoe's coming ashore; I'd seen "christenings" dozens of times before, and it was always great fun. It was late morning, however, and everyone had either gone to their respective gardens on Epi, or they were working in New Zealand and wouldn't return for weeks, perhaps

months. I, too, was nearing the end of my stay on Lamén Island, and, as such, the canoe would have to be “christened” by our small group alone. Apia and I skirted the reef and returned with no sign of water seepage; the canoe, as well, was small and suitably maneuverable for its purpose: to get to the garden and back. When we returned from our circuit around the reef, no one rushed from the beach with buckets of water, but Orah Joseph was there, standing in the water as we came ashore, and with a great, unexpected laugh, he splashed a few handfuls of saltwater up into our faces and a few across the canoe (I had been told that one of the practical reasons for soaking the canoe was to cure with saltwater those places on the canoe that usually stayed dry unless the canoe somehow capsized; doing so made the wood more water-resistant). I appreciated his attempt at single-handedly undertaking what was normally such a social activity. I laughed, too, but I felt a bit saddened. We pulled the canoe ashore to rest beneath a nearby sea oak, where it could dry and await a final word of prayer.

Fulfillments of *kastom* obligations on Lamén Island are generally public spectacles, designed as much for satisfying uninvolved witnesses almost as much as the people whom the ceremony involves, since for both the giver and the receiver, larger reputations are at stake. Although building a canoe for someone is not obligatory by any means, completing one in the context of a pre-arranged agreement is; furthermore, owning a canoe carries the same social implications as appearing *fatfat* (cf. pp. 36). As such, *wasem kenu* is both a public announcement that an obligation has been fulfilled on both sides, while public participation in the ritual represents public acknowledgement. A blessing through prayer is generally expected as an opening accompaniment, as the *waa* enters this new phase of its existence. Unlike *kastom* rituals, however, prayer does not require a public production since God is both the one to whom all are obligated *and* the intended witness. A blessing thus requires only a recognized elder or pastor of the Presbyterian Church, who undertakes the fulfillment of the obligation on behalf of the community.

Ironically, the compatibility of *kastom* and contemporary religious beliefs on Lamén Island (cf. p. 13-14) meant that the *wasem kenu* ritual and the subsequent Protestant blessing could both take place with the community absent—a poignant consideration of the shifting social contexts to which *kastom* can adapt in order to ensure systemic continuity. Since evolutionary processes of selection are catalyzed at the individual level, however, stressors such as the loss of natural or cultural resources and large-scale population reduction (cf. p. 3, 60, this work; Schoeffel, 1994: 358-360) may result in a shift in cultural forms because the influence of their original social or environmental context has been altered. Likewise, removal of a cultural object from its original social context may result in a shift in how it is assigned meaning. In either case, the shift—as highlighted throughout this work—is one based on localized priorities that may differ greatly. In other words, when Orah threw water across the canoe, I, as the ethnographer, recorded his action as something called “*wasem kenu*,” a term I assigned to a specific *kastom* meaning based on my previous experiences on Lamén Island; however, for Orah, the performance may have been about *reproducing* that *kastom*, as if under ideal social circumstances, for the purposes of demonstration rather than out of a sense of propriety. Rather, his priority may have shifted from one of community recognition of cultural production to one of an institutional documentation of “*kastom*.” Indeed, it was *kastom*; nevertheless, its inherent meaning had become obfuscated in the tug-o-war between competing priorities.

CHAPTER 4: Conclusion

In this work, I use the term “punctuated” (cf. p. 52) without reference to the theory of punctuated equilibrium in biological evolutionary processes (Gould, 1977), but rather in terms of an essentialized model of reality, which isolates identifiable *kinds* in order to explain the similarities and differences between them, focusing on “replacement of one form by another or on the transformation of one form into another” (O’Brien, 1990: 180-181). Counter to this is a materialist view of reality, which “. . . does not assume that reality is a unified system[:]

“Phenomena (‘things’) do not exist but are always in a state of flux, i.e., in a state of becoming. In other words, relations between phenomena are not timeless, nor can universal statements be made about the relations, because no static set of phenomena exists. Space and time are kept separate, and relations between phenomena are space- and time-bound. Under this view, “kind” is not empirical, though at any given moment in time and space we can create kinds based on observation” (ibid., 1980: 181).

Reflecting on my own experience with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (cf. pp. 10-11), I am not criticizing the VCC for promoting an essentialist viewpoint, which is certainly not the case. Rather, I am asserting that Geismar’s notion of a “continual dialectic” within the context of the relationship the VCC, as a centripetal influence, maintains with its peripheral constituents *cannot* be continual in any realistic sense, but, at best, can only exist as an important ideological trajectory toward “becoming” (cf. p. 70). The dilemma with representing *kastom* in a centralized and decontextualized environment is that the focus of observation is artificially narrowed to one of comparative typologies. *Kastom* is recontextualized under a generalized rubric of cultural diversity within a framework of national unity—a priority for establishing a larger identity in an international milieu—that has to overlook the specific, highly localized processes of change (Lindstrom, 1994: 77-78) vis-à-vis idiosyncratic entanglements, which are not always the discrete transformative events that decontextualized objects may imply. The movement from dilemma into danger thus becomes conflating centralized observations with a realistic sense of cultural continuity:

“I have argued that . . . the state structure which was inherited by the anti-colonial movement is itself antithetical to customary governance principles—which are fluid and context-specific (that is, unwritten), very locally-based (operating most effectively at the level of the clan) and founded on traditional spiritual and cultural beliefs. The new leaders of the state found that in fact they could not achieve what they had thought they could achieve when they were outside the state system” (Regenvanu, 2005: 40).

This is the proverbial “rock and a hard place” between which *kastom* on Lamén Island now finds itself.

Its position there is the product of an inherently asymmetrical dialectic with centralized representations of *kastom* redefined by processes of generalized comparison. This static and standardized definition of *kastom* is channeled back into the community via the dialectic and reabsorbed because of the respected (and generally underestimated) influence centralized institutions have garnered in the post-colonial era. Furthermore, within idiosyncratic localities, the influence of indigenous VCC fieldworkers (Bonnemaïson, 1996: 290-293) and intermittent foreign anthropologists (Kirsch, 2006: 53; Rappaport, 1975: 238) in documenting and interpreting culture from an honorary or presumed position of cultural authority (Kwa’ioloa, 1997: 2-3) must also be taken into consideration in terms of how centralized rhetoric and foreign representation is disseminated into local discourse about *kastom*:

“I will put it like this: when I started working as a woman fieldworker I found that it was a little hard because I thought that *kastom* was only for old men to perform, but over the years, and as we have gone through different topics, I have found that my work is very interesting to me. I have also found it helpful in teaching my children, and also in teaching other people about our *kastom* that has been lost for a long time, and that we can learn about it and promote it. I find that I work a lot with the community, and I’m very involved and committed to the activities of Chiefs and women. In this I find that my work becomes easy. I am glad to have a chance to revive some things of the ancestors that were lost, and that through research I have come to know many more things than the old men, many of whom think that once we are in the daylight (as converted Christians) *kastom* is lost forever. They think that when you become Christian it is not possible to go back to the *kastom* ways of the past” (Alick, 2011: 216).

On Lamén Island, this has generated an artificial sense of displacement in which local blanket discourse, viewing *kastom* as “the original state in *illo tempore* or the perfect model society that is the object of desire . . . [now] largely degrade[ed] and corrupt[ed]” (Geertz and Jensen, 1991: 15), has alienated

kastom from its intrinsically practical context: “the way in which people live their daily lives.” Even Avio Koli, in this sense, became an anachronism. Thus, the seeming paradox posed by Plato’s *Ship of Theseus* (cf. p. 28) and likewise reflected in local perceptions of *kastom* as something “difficult to grasp” yet something to which one should *holemtaet* (hold tightly), is also present in the persistence of modern *waa* vis-à-vis *kastom*. *Kastom* has unnecessarily been relegated to a modern place of ambiguity and, consequently, its products are considered “polluted.”

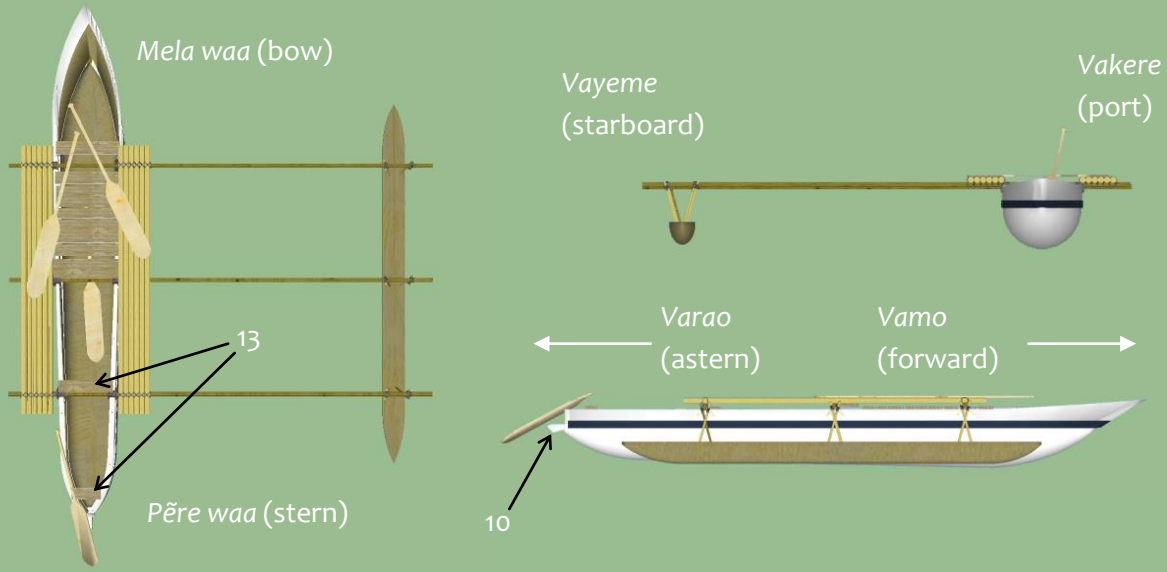
Kastom on Lamén Island is simply and universally defined by the Bislama word, *rispek*—respect. The relationship between *kastom* and respect, however, is not purely semantic, but rooted in *Logos* as I have defined it in this work (cf. pp. 12, 28). It is the relationship between formlessness and form as legitimized by the creative act: “When power and dynamism are demonstrated, the physical materials cannot resist these forces. A mark left on the material things signifie[s] the awesome presence of power . . . dignified . . . with reverent mythical stories. The spirits, as the essence of creative power, are concerned with redeeming the community life from competing power structures” (Namunu, 2001: 252). As my research demonstrates, the production of *waa* on Lamén Island is characterized by an ethos of respect that nevertheless disregards strict form and conventionality: an “extension, and materialization, of mental energy . . . a connection between art and agency defined through the sublimation of technology into magic, the inspiration and affect such material manifestations of human creativity may impart” (Geismar, 2009: 51). If semantic distinctions about *kastom* can be transcended—or, better, realigned with “the way in which people live their daily lives,” the continuing tradition of canoe building can clearly and categorically be legitimized as *kastom*. In short, Schrödinger’s cat could be let out of its box. The significance of this could logically extend beyond *waa*. It could be a perhaps radical—but not historically divergent—re-envisioning of *kastom* itself within the larger dialectic, bridging the liminal gap locally between *kastom* and modernity while reconfiguring the dialectic to situate *kastom* discourse and material representation into a more symmetrical position between center and periphery, where mutual

agency in *kastom*'s condition could be more effectively facilitated (Keesing, 1992). Until local agency in the perceived loss or survival of their own *kastom* is recognized on Lamén Island, however, a living *kastom* will remain "lost" to many of them. It is in this respect specifically that *waa* and their builders, as vessels of *kastom*, are more important on Lamén Island today than at any point in their history.



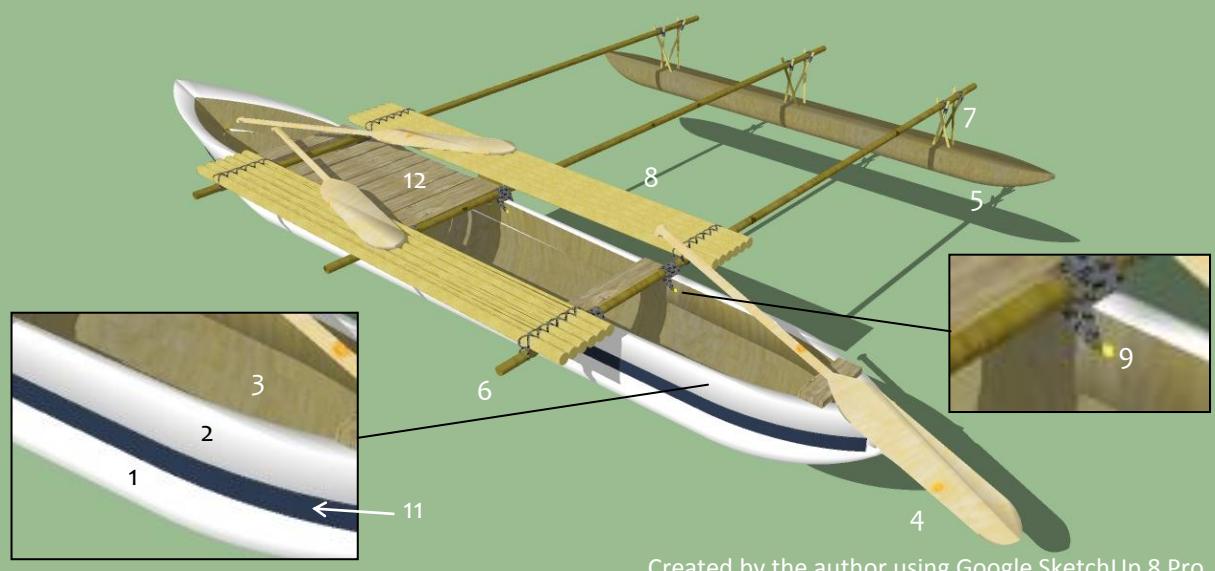
Kastom is as *kastom* does: Apia paddles his newly completed *waa*, *Pang na Pang* ("Today is Today"), into the reef on its maiden voyage. As its name suggests, *kastom* on Lamén Island both confounds and conforms. 2009.

Waa Lamenu



Components

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Yepe waa | 8. ǂetarere |
| 2. Iwa | 9. Merawunduldul |
| 3. Karo | 10. Amēle pēre waa |
| 4. Leǂeluwa | 11. Kapa |
| 5. Yeme (Lewo), Nasama or "pikinini" (Bislama) | 12. Optional removable planks for cargo |
| 6. Korana | 13. Optional planks for seating |
| 7. Merawelaǂ | |



Created by the author using Google SketchUp 8 Pro.

APPENDIX B: Popular local woods used in *waa* construction on Lamén Island

Component (a-z)	Bislama	Lewo Lamenu	International
		(<i>Pur</i> : tree; <i>La</i> : branch)	
<i>Iwa</i>	<i>Namandal</i>	<i>Pur miandi</i>	<i>Kleinhovia hospital</i>
<i>Korana</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>La yopa</i>	<i>n/a</i>
<i>Korana</i>	Lit., <i>blong kilim ol fis</i>	<i>La kimban; la koika</i>	<i>n/a</i>
<i>Korana</i>	Lit., <i>handel blong brum</i>	<i>La ngoiyé</i>	<i>n/a</i>
<i>Leñeluwa</i>	<i>Benoa</i>	<i>Pur merpi</i>	<i>Albizia lebbbeck</i>
<i>Merawelañ</i>	<i>Namariu</i>	<i>Pur maliu</i>	<i>Acacia spirorbis</i>
<i>Merawelañ</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>La sambarañ</i>	
Putty (pounded pulp)	<i>Nakoka</i>	<i>Pur kowa</i>	<i>Bischofia javanica</i>
Putty sealing strip (tree skin; predecessor to <i>kapa</i>)	<i>Nambanga</i>	<i>Piyapa</i>	<i>Ficus microcarpa</i>
<i>Ñetarere; iwa; yeme;</i> standing rigging for coconut leaf sail (from tree skin)	<i>Navenu; burao blong solwota</i>	<i>Pur venuñe</i>	<i>Cordia subcordata</i>
<i>Yepe waa; iwa; yeme</i>	<i>Huremi, waetwud</i>		<i>Alphitonia zizyphoides</i>
<i>Yepe waa, iwa; yeme</i>	<i>Kenutri</i>	<i>Pur yoñe</i>	<i>Gyrocarpus americanus</i>
<i>Yepe waa</i>	<i>Nananara, bluwota</i>	<i>Wei</i>	<i>Pterocarpus indicus</i>
<i>Yepe waa</i>	<i>Bredfrut</i>	<i>Pur kleperañ</i>	<i>Artocarpus altilis</i>

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