THE TREE AND THE CANOE: ROOTS AND MOBILITY IN VANUATU SOCIETIES

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CAN the tree, symbol of rootedness and stability, be reconciled with the canoe, symbol of journeying and unrestricted wandering? At first sight, apparently not. Nevertheless, Melanesian civilisation uses this dual metaphor, this apparent contradiction, to define traditional identity. On the island of Tanna in Vanuatu, they say that man is a tree that must take root and stay fixed in its place. The local group, on the other hand, is a canoe that follows "roads" and explores the wide world.

For traditional society, this metaphor would not present a paradox. In a previous study, I have shown that although mobility was in the past territorially controlled and socially selective, it could in some cases be very wide-ranging.[1] Present-day mobility, however, has changed in nature: its extension to urban metropolises within and beyond Oceania is felt by many to be a threat to the identity of Melanesian and Polynesian peoples. Such a value judgement implies some definition of identity. During several years in Vanuatu, my research focussed on cultural structures and their connections with land tenure in the societies of Tongoa, Tanna, and central Pentecost (Figure 1). At the heart of these enquiries was the relationship between man and place. Circumstances gradually led me to widen my scope, and I made a transition from a classical geographical approach to a more cultural one, thence to what might be called an anthropology of space. Within that context, I attempt here to elucidate what "kastom" (customs) and cultural identity mean in a Melanesian society.

IDENTITY THROUGH PLACE

Cultural identity in Melanesia is a geographical identity that flows from the memories and values attached to places. Membership in a clan or social group, individual or collective identity, is inherited through a network of places, the sum total of which constitutes a territory. Each local group is thus a kind of 'geographic society',[2] defined in relation to the space within which it resides, or a 'territorial

[1] Bonnemaison (1979); compare Bonnemaison (1985).
[2] Raison (1976); Jackson (1983).

ONE

Vanuatu.

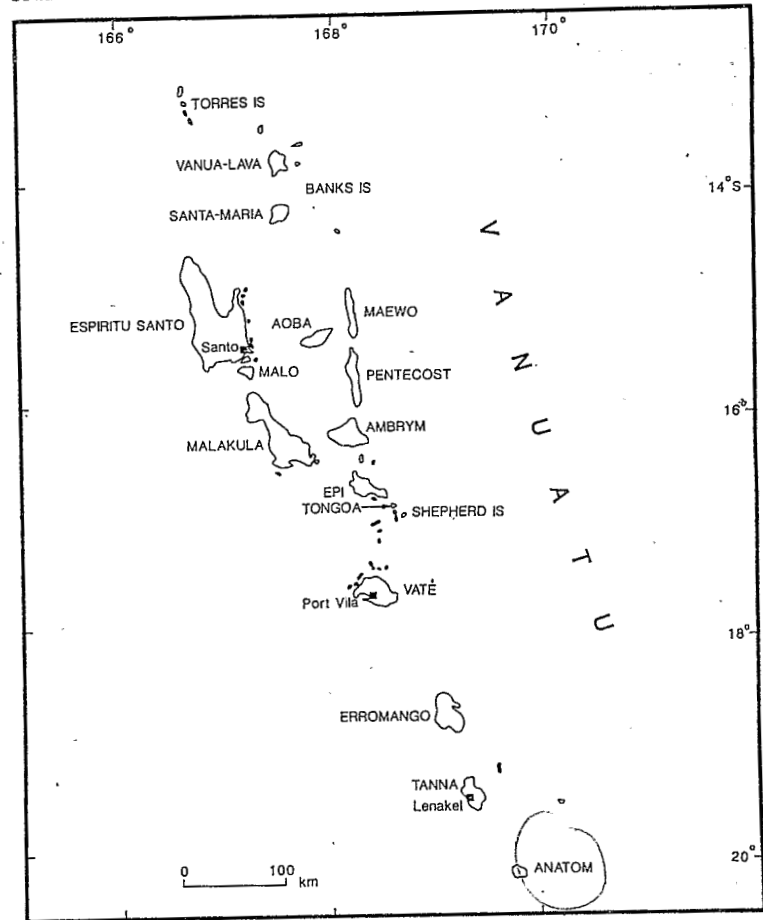society', deriving its identity not only through appropriation of a common territory but also from identification with that homeland.[3]

In traditional thinking, cultural identity is merely the existential aspect of those places where men live today as their ancestors did from time immemorial. This fundamental feature recurs throughout Melanesia. It has been formulated clearly by Robert Lane[4] and, more recently, by Margaret Rodman in her remarkable study of the Longana area in eastern Aoba (Figure 1). For her, 'Personal essence

[3] Bonnemaison (1981).
[4] Lane (1971).

and identity are infused into the land. No longer simply a thing, land becomes a place . . . Longana think of themselves as sharing a territory not only with other living residents but with the memory of their ancestors and the future of their children'.[5] It is in this essential relationship between man and place that the feeling of identity is forged. The bond is such that a man cannot for long leave the territory where his ancestors first appeared; if he did, he would alienate his identity. This doctrine of attachment to the place of first appearance of clan ancestors, found in many parts of Melanesia[6] and in aboriginal Australia,[7] also provides the basis for the political control of space. Together, these constitute an affirmation of the values of groundedness and a certain ideology of territory. In such a social and political context, mobility can no longer be conceived as a simple removal from one place to another or as a neutral and informal phenomenon. Rather it is a journey in the cultural sense of the word — an experience imbued with meaning and ritual, inherent in the action of movement and sanctioned beyond the territory of identity, concluding with an encounter.

Journeying in traditional times was thus by no means a matter of free wandering. It was, on the contrary, carefully controlled by the group, which endowed it with a purpose and celebrated it as a rite, even sometimes as a cultural initiation. Travellers would leave their territory as if entrusted with a mission by the entire social group and surrounded by its active assistance. In particular, departures for other islands by outrigger canoe involved a whole social organisation, lengthy material preparations, the acquisition of navigation techniques, and special rituals.

Everything seems to indicate that in many island societies of Melanesia such journeys were infrequent, although necessary at times. Primary to the definition of Melanesian identity is not mobility or journeys, but rootedness at the heart of a living space full of meaning and powers. The first reflex of Melanesians who, after long wanderings at sea, landed on hitherto uninhabited islands was to invest themselves culturally and physically in their newly discovered lands. This quest for rootedness is reiterated in the oral tradition of southern and central Vanuatu through the poetic code of myths of origin.

The Chain of Identity: Myths of Origin
from Tanna, Southern Vanuatu

At Ipai, on the west coast of Tanna (Figure 1), a series of key mythical cycles tells how the world appeared. The spirit Wuhngen first

[5] Rodman (1981): 72,74.
[6] Malinowski (1974).
[7] Eliade (1972).

created the land (*tan*), a kind of soft, inert matrix to which he then sent stones (*kapiel*), the hard substance that gave the world shape and created the landscape. The *kapiel* reached land by floating. When they invaded the island they had the gift of speech and magical powers, which gave them mastery over the natural elements. Originally these stones were mobile. They flung themselves into a fantastic kind of circling dance that ringed the island without interruption but followed precise routes. Thus the important roads of Melanesians on Tanna have a mythical origin, girdling the island in three tiers at different altitudes. They are called *nikokaplalao*, which means 'to encircle the canoe' (see Figure 2).

TWO
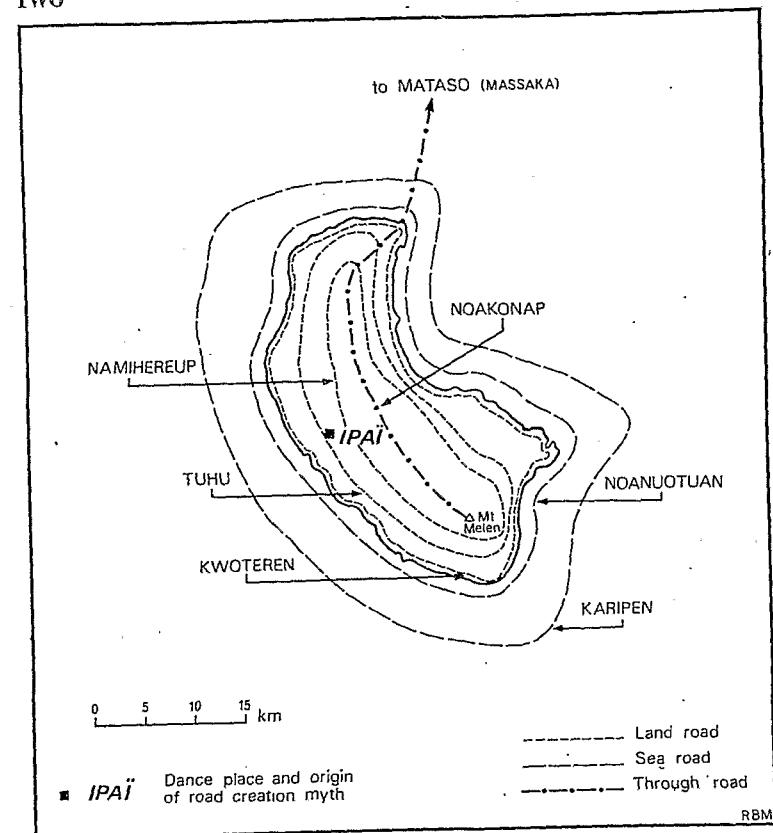
Roads of mythical origin, Tanna.

Space was at that time quite open, without boundaries, places, or territories. The first *kapiel* society consisted of wandering and quarrelsome hordes that nonetheless had a taste for great things. Each stone was trying to realise itself to the fullest extent by testing its magical power by creating the world. On the other hand, none would accept that one of their number might by its powers become greater than the rest. The result was incessant competition and endless wars that were waged along the roads until weariness, a great weariness, overtook the stones one by one.

When the wandering stones felt their work was complete, they began to establish themselves one after another, at first because of chance circumstances, later by being part of a momentum that regrouped them in clusters along the traditional roads to form *nahwuto* ('companies'). At Ipaï, people say the first wandering stone to stand still did so because of weariness, a second followed suit from an injured leg, a third through muscle cramps. The immobile stones then became places and the places in turn became magical spaces ("tabu ples" in Bislama; *orika ussim* in Tannese), each more or less powerful according to the magical power of the stones themselves. Such magical powers are varied and specialised, ranging from mastery of climatic phenomena to that of the growth of certain plants and, more generally, the powers of sudden materialisation and curing sickness. Some *kapiel* are also the seat of political or psychological powers, such as the stones of intelligence, courage, and skill; of kept promises; of success in enterprises undertaken in rituals, war, or love (see Figure 3).

At night, the magic spirit of the stones emerges from the sacred places and wanders the island, often taking human form to create the troubling world of the *yarimus* ("devel" in Bislama). The first men only emerged later from some of the stones by the seashore, their forms at first indistinct and their beings — half magic and half human — barely distinguishable from the universe of stones or of spirits from which they had issued. They had neither women nor real food, being content to live alone and eat raw fern roots.

Space itself was bare and hostile. Men wandered without shelter or protection from sun, rain, or the cold of night. The growth of vegetation, first in the form of lichen and then of real trees, provided the first protection. At the foot and in the shade of banyan trees, men hollowed out the first dancing grounds (*yimwayim*) and built their houses. They then spread gradually throughout the whole island, following wherever banyans sprang up and scattering their houses.

This process of humanisation reached a decisive stage when yet more canoes at last brought the first women and, with them, the stones that were the source of cooked food magic ("hot kakai" in

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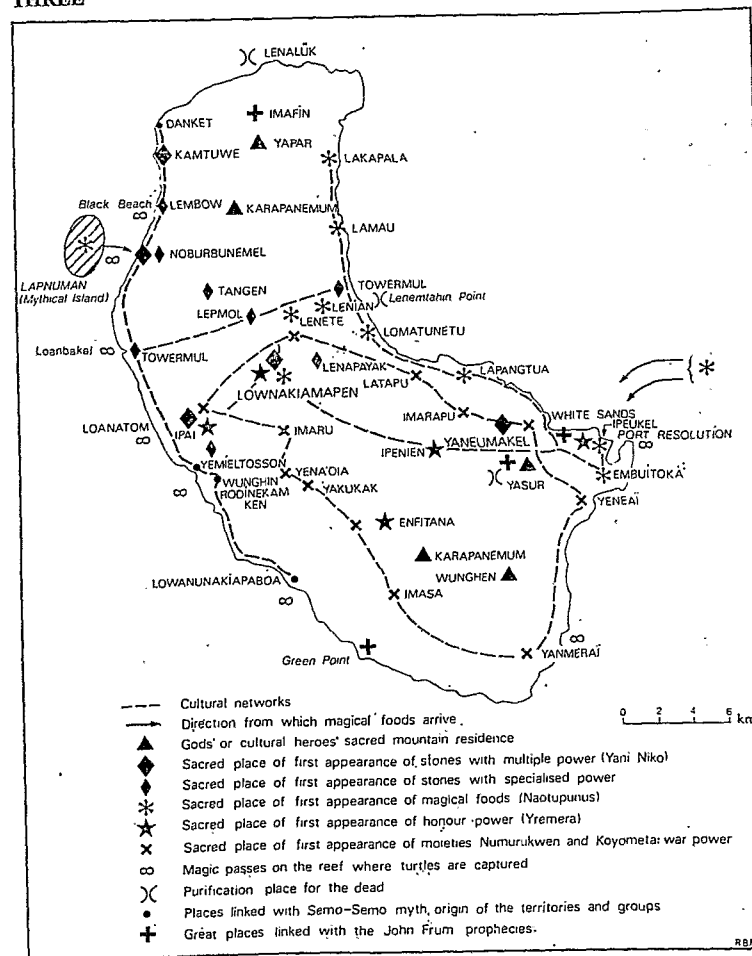
Magical spaces, Tanna.

Bislama). These food stones (*naotupunus*) also brought fire, the symbol of humanity. Whereas man's identity is tied to the world of stones of cosmological magic, that of woman is linked with food and the equally magical world of gardens. In short, the stones of identity for women are food ones. Upon their arrival, human beings took on a more definite appearance, leaving the world of nature to enter that of culture and ritual. Then, through the culture-founding acts of exchange of women and of cooked food, the groundwork of local society was laid and its first rites instituted.

Later myth cycles document the continuity of cultural creation, in particular by the increasing sophistication of ritual exchanges, the emergence of new political powers, and, finally, the evolution of territories. A monster named Semo-Semo, an eater of human flesh, laid Tanna waste and only a single woman survived. Alone with twin sons conceived by a sea-water vine, she organised the murder of Semo-Semo. After long and perilous combat he was killed, his body divided up, and the pieces scattered about the island. The people who had been eaten reappeared where the body parts landed, at which moment each received both a name and a territory. The origin of the 115 great nations of Tanna is thus traced to this initial killing; the identity of each large traditional group results from the symbiosis established by the myth between the name, the place, and one of the pieces of the victim's body. Since that day, each independent geopolitical group on Tanna is assimilated within a particular canoe, or *niko*, consisting of one or several clans and organising its space around a network of strongholds and magic places that constitute the territory of its identity.

The initial act of sacrificial violence thus instituted the territories *(ima)* and identities of the canoes of Tanna. To a certain extent, this myth of Semo-Semo illustrates the ideas of Girard:[8] society is divided, yet held together by the death of an initial victim and the dispersion of the body. Tannese cultural unity is a direct consequence of this myth. The first cycle of the founding myth ends with the magical appearance of man and the creation of territories; men are no longer mobile stones but rather build an identity on the semiology of place.

The mythical saga of the stones of Tanna constitutes their ideological basis of identity. In the earliest times, stones wandered about in groups and fought. There were no places, no men or women, no society, but only warlike hordes constantly on the move. This time of wandering was one of power; the forces contained within the stones are the source of all powers, and men issuing from them share the identity of those stones with the powers they contain. In Melanesian thought, men only became fully men when the horde of wandering stones stopped being mobile and left room for the network of places of territorial society, and also when the canoes *(niko)* of Tanna sprang from the body pieces of Semo-Semo. The appearance of places, of social space, and of an ideology of attachment to place thus occurs along with the appearance of men. If mobility is a sign of power, it also brings war and anarchy; conversely, attachment is a sign of identity, peace, and order. Each of Tanna's canoes, each clan, lineage segment, and man bearing a custom name is a link in the chain of localities that confers on them an

8 Girard (1972).

identity and a number of powers. The transition from horde to society goes hand in hand with the passage of powers into stones, from stones into places, and from places into men. The identities of men travel along this magical chain without there occurring in nature a break between any of these elements: the powers, the stones, the places, and the men all participate in the same magical essence. The space controlled by men is a living territory woven from a mosaic of places, imbued with the values of memory and animated by magical forces and powers at the origins of the world. In between those powers and men, places are both the mediators and the vectors of identity.

It follows that in this 'geographical society' man is compared to a tree whose roots thrust deep into the sacred earth. The banyans around the most prestigious dancing grounds are symbolic of men and bear the names of ancestors who founded the clans (Figure 3). If the banyan leaves the soil, it dies, its land and political rights are extinguished, its magical and life-giving powers fade away. Woman, on the other hand, is compared to a bird: her roots are wings. She is destined to establish herself elsewhere according to the hazards of cultural exchange and to bear the children of others. In myths from the west coast of Tanna, women first appear as pigeons or winged goddesses; they were the beings who brought cooked food to men when arriving to live with them. Whereas the earth is a resonant masculine domain, rich in sacred powers and the hearth of rootedness, the air and sky are light feminine domains linked with movement, with freedom to wander about, and with the world of reciprocal exchange. In the words of a Tannese male: 'Men were rooted to the soil but women were like birds who fly above the trees, only descending where they see good fruit'.[9] Margaret Jolly makes the same comment but interchanges the metaphor when quoting the words of a "kastom" village leader in south Pentecost: 'European custom is like a bird that has settled, that has flown to our shore just now. But our "kastom" has been here, like a banyan tree, since the world broke up. It was here at the start'. So the "kastom" of Melanesian men is a tree, whereas European "kastom" is just like women's: a bird without roots, roving and slight, compared to the rooted, towering strength of the banyan of "kastom".[10]

Order Through the Law of Place

What is the underlying reason for the strength of this relationship between men and places? It does not appear to be fundamentally economic: in Tanna, where soils are fertile, shifting agriculture using slash-and-burn methods dictated a certain mobility of gardens, of

9 MacClancy (1980): 22.
10 Jolly (1982): 338.

agricultural activities, and of tenure that hardly fits with this ideology of attachment to cultural places. Nor does the quest for productive land seem to explain the origins of territorial division, for some groups have appropriated agriculturally mediocre areas while neglecting vast and fertile ones. Eastern Tanna, inherently less productive because of recent surface deposits of volcanic ash, supports densities of more than eighty inhabitants per square kilometre, as great as or even greater than those in the Middle Bush area (Figure 4).

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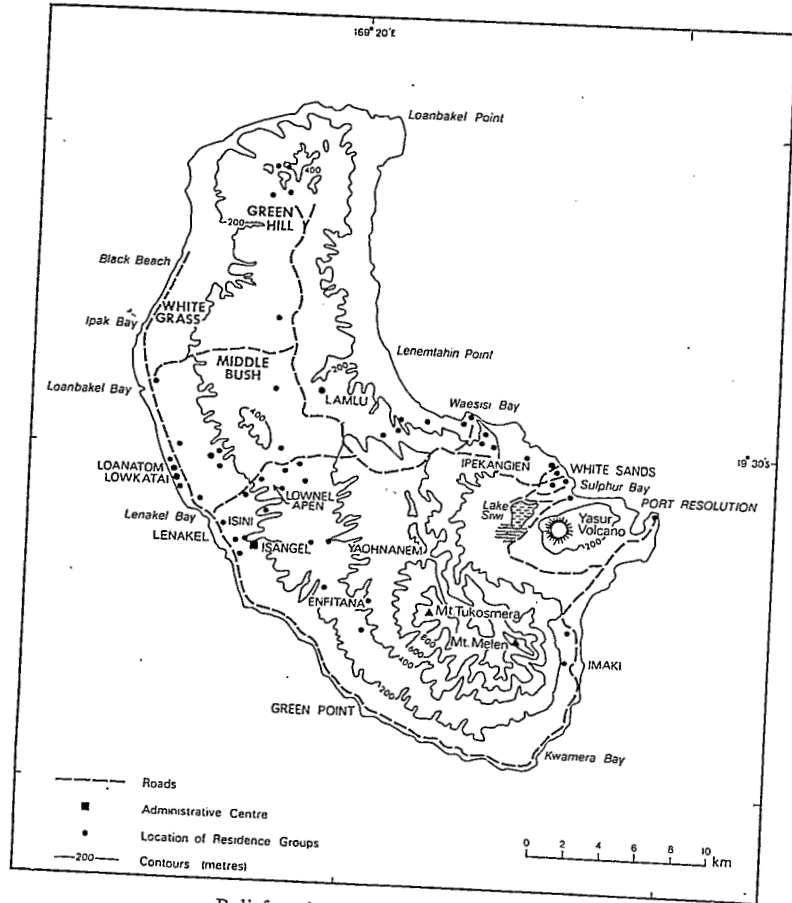
Relief and residence groups, Tanna.

At least in this specific case, it appears that achieving the greatest security was the overriding factor. The spatial organisation of canoe territories reflects this preoccupation. Social space in Tanna is structured by networks of central places bearing symbolic and ritual significance: dancing grounds in the shade of the great banyan trees; sacred or "tabu" places connected with magic stones; dwelling sites and garden areas. Around this living heart, the peaceful dwelling place of followers of custom, there is usually a rather extensive and encircling belt of forest, punctuated by places of identity and security. If the territory's heart is an inhabited homeland, its periphery is a forest given up to wandering evil spirits. Only by day and with precaution does one venture into these fringe areas, hunting or gathering reserves where from time to time men may make a few temporary gardens to cultivate food crops. The forest, although a place of uneasiness, is also a protection and, because of this, a controlled space. Roads leading into it are under the surveillance of leaders of groups settled along them and traditionally no one went beyond a certain safety limit without first obtaining their agreement — otherwise the result would be war and frequently the risk of death for offenders.

These canoe territories are organised according to natural topo-, graphic entities — such as a catchment area or clearly marked-off sections of plateau—the most effective boundaries being such physical features as the contour of a deeply embanked creek, shorelines, and ridge crests. Thus there exist virtually no uninhabited areas on Tanna, or at least no spaces that remain unappropriated, although groups are separated from one another by no-man's lands of varying extents. Space is organised, then, as networks of territorial heartlands that form clusters, relatively closely packed but interspersed with empty zones — either forest or, as are sometimes found towards the northern end of Tanna, tree-dotted grasslands like White Grass (Figure 4). This spatial structure, a chain of humanised localities, is organised in a nexus that is unequally distributed through space but moulds itself perfectly to that space.

In regulating the distribution of people, this geographical nexus at the same time ensured some degree of social harmony. Occupation of ground, defined by the antithesis between living centre and dead buffer zone on the periphery, meant that geopolitical groups were kept rigorously separate. Within the closed space of Tanna, risk of war was traditionally reduced through this avoidance procedure. Whereas unrestricted wandering led in mythical times to perpetual warfare, Melanesian society reduced occasions for conflict by fixing men in one place and isolating them within the encircling forests. Nowadays, expansion of cash crop areas, plantations, and livestock enclosures has transformed these buffer zones into pioneer lands that are the

subject of most land appropriations and disputes. Such extension of the heartlands pushes back the forest frontier, thus bringing groups into contact with one another and presenting the problems of defining boundary or frontier in a new light.

It does not follow, however, that traditional warfare disappeared, for Tanna society was particularly warlike, but war was a cultural rather than an uncontrolled act. Ritualisation of war civilises it; there were particular seasons for its waging (following crop harvests) and places that were open — generally grassland kept such by burning off along the hilltops and on downslopes — where armed groups challenged each other and might arrange to meet.[11] In principle, warfare left villages and gardens — the places of peace — untouched, thereby sparing the lives of noncombatants. Likewise, the purpose of war was not to conquer other people's lands but to settle personal quarrels or questions of prestige, alliance, and enmity. The law of relationship that attached men to their place of origin gave them a homeland, thereby excluding any right to conquest over an opponent's locality. In traditional wars, men did not fight to defend or extend territory but for the glory of the men of high station who lived there.

By attaching men to and identifying them with a nexus of places, Melanesian society responded from the outset to the problem of cultural regulation of war and peace. Another consequence of this social organisation is political fragmentation and the impossibility of large chiefdoms, for nothing is more foreign to Melanesian civilisation than the notion of supraterritorial power. The sovereignty of groups within their own spaces is based on a territorial ideology that goes hand in hand with a will to egalitarianism, even anarchy. This tendency continues today and favours political subdivision and cultural diversity. Everyone is master in his own place, as long as he is what is called in Bislama a "man ples"; that is, a man who derives down the whole chain of his ancestors from the place where he lives. In Tanna this affirmation goes even further. The "man ples" is also a true man ("really man" in Bislama): he who has retained his full identity. Any others — wandering fugitives from traditional wars, exiles, or groups relocated to the coast — are men without roots, deprived of any customary power and, in principle, of any land or political rights. A group accepting refugees into their land 'holds them in its hand' and can even give them new names, changing their identity and thereby allotting them inferior political and cultural status. Equality only exists between local groups living within their territories of identity; it cannot exist with rootless, mobile groups that have lost power and belongingness.

[11] Humphreys (1926).

Through the "man ples" doctrine, Melanesian society is obeying a law of place that constitutes an ideological enclosure from which it is difficult to exit. In such a system, mobility would appear in principle to be ruled out and at first glance even pointless, since a man's first duty as member of society is to assume his identifying space.

Power Through the Doctrine of First Appearance

In central and southern Vanuatu, the concepts of identity and power are associated with the idea of stock or first appearance, expressed in Bislama as "stamba" and derivative from the English word stump or stock. The "stamba" is the place from which issues identity and the magical, social, and political functions, as well as mastery of territorial rights governing access to land. Each territorial canoe, clan, lineage segment, even each custom name borne by men refers back to a "stamba", a root-place conveying identity and power. This root-place is always where the founding ancestors first appeared.

Consequently, places — like men — have their own relationships. From the root-place of original appearance of a chain of identity there derives one and sometimes several chains of secondary places that reflect the distribution in space of the power contained at this source. The same applies to all founding myths. Men, women, food, rituals, and political and magical powers, or post-contact events like the expansion of Christian religions or the messianic John Frum movement,[12] always appear in a particular spot and then spread along chains of secondary places. The "stamba" is the source of such diffusion, for it contains the initial force and political authority, just as underground roots contain the life and strength of a tree. It follows that links in the chain grouping places together with respect to primordial places also govern the relationships between men and clans, whose identities are associated with those same places. The strength, both political and traditional, of clans and individuals mirrors the authenticity of their root-place and their greater or lesser primacy in the chain of magical appearances.

This doctrine of first appearance is also the basis for sharing out land rights and spaces of authority. Root-men, apart from being the keepers of powers contained in the "stamba", also guard the theoretical mastery of that part of a territory associated with those places. When conflicts of authority or land disputes arise, the first action is to trace the spatial chain of successive authority to determine which person has the right to settle the matter.

[12] On the John Frum movement, see O'Reilly (1949); Guiart (1956a,b); Brunton (1981); Lindström (1981, 1982); and Wilkinson (1978).

On Tanna, as in much of Melanesia, it is the founding myths that perpetuate the memory of root-places and thus of territorial rights. Everything points to earliest settlement having been accomplished in successive waves rather than all at once. The first canoes landed in different places at different times and their members were given power of primacy. The origin myths of west-coast Tanna have thus transferred into magical language the memory of the actual arrival of the original canoes. Men in the guise of wandering stones first traced out routes on the island and tested their powers, little by little taking root in territories. Preserving or recording those circumstances was less imporant than fixing in the memory those first places of which men took possession, because that preserved the essential rights of the original occupants. The process of men's distribution in space emerges in this way in any maps of cultural places that have been attempted. Strongholds and "stamba" are thickly scattered near the seashore, certain bays, and reef passages (Lenakel, Loanatom, Loanpakel, Black Beach) but become sparser towards the mountains and the world of high slopes (see Figure 4 and compare with Figure 3). This density of sacred places along the coast indicates that the first Melanesian civilisations evolved in a littoral and lower-slopes environment and that, moreover, they long retained their traditions of mobility and of interisland relationships. The spread of men into the island's centre and the world of upper slopes came later, in a dispersion doubtless connected with population growth. The perspective then altered as society acquired a view oriented more to land and mountains; the ideology of rootedness in a territory and of control of mobility doubtless is contemporary with this conquest of an island's interior. Conversely, a maritime tradition, one of greater mobility, is maintained within coastal groups.[13]

Melanesian thought conveys a notion of fixity by associating men's identities with root-places and the identities of territorial canoes with nexuses of places arranged in hierarchial order according to when they appeared in time and space. The social order and its hierarchies appear frozen by the sequencing of places in the same way that men's destinies are bounded by the configuration of their territory of identity and space of power. But this is only one aspect of societal discourse; the realities of existence are always more complex and overflow even the most rigid ideologies. Although man has to make his horizons coincide with those of his locality, he is also a member of a territorially defined canoe: a structure mobile by definition and destined to follow routes and travel the world, or at least some world. In ancient society a voyage was no mere roving, but a cultural journey.

[13] Bonnemaison (1972).

JOURNEYS IN TERRITORIAL SOCIETY

The Land Canoe

A society's symbols and structures often refer to the time of its origins and thus record the decisive act of social and political creation. Societies continually reliving their foundation express a dream of unity in the reminder of such earliest times. This is particularly clear in central and southern Vanuatu, where social organisation is modelled on the original canoe voyage and its group of seafarers. When, instead of scattered settlement along the coastal belt, the people of Tanna reached the stage of occupying all the space in a world now fully populated, the island was divided into *ima* or political territories — an event recounted in its own way by the myth of Semo-Semo. To each of these territories, identified with a canoe, was associated a variable number of clans and lineage segments united through common mythical ancestors, who were themselves attached to a number of primordial sites.

The canoe metaphor gives an image of social space; this enclosed but mobile arena is a kind of wandering territory within which each clan segment occupies a precise place and a function complementing that of other segments. The efforts of everyone ensure that the canoe moves forward and stays on course. Traditional social organisation is based on symbolism of the initial voyage. A canoe is characterised first of all by an emblem, a symbol of honour and identity; in Tanna this emblematic function is assumed by the local *yremera* aristocracy. Local missionaries translated the name *yremera*, quite accurately, as 'lords'. These lords are people who, seated at the front of the canoe, are the masters of prestige and of exchange relations with groups of outsiders. Their political power is limited but they hold a responsible position; they are living emblems, men of high station rather than "big men".[14] The helmsman steers the vessel and sits at the stern; in Tannese, he is the *yani niko*, literally the canoe's master or voice. In traditional society, the *yani niko* is the closest to what is understood elsewhere by the term chief. The canoe master is in effect the captain, the one who steers in the name of the *yremera*.

On land, the *yani niko* is alternately chief of war and of peace, commanding the warriors and organising rituals and ceremonial exchanges upon the conclusions of cycles of warfare. Apart from this, he is guardian of the territory and its boundaries; he knows everyone's land rights. While the lord is present as a figurehead, it is the canoe master who acts and speaks in his name, directing the canoe's initial journey and, once landed, assuming responsibility for the collective

[14] Bonnemaison (1979).

destiny of the local group. Although aristocratic titles are hereditary honours, masters of canoes are partially elective. From among clans having the blood of *yani niko* is chosen a man who seems most competent to undertake these functions.

Apart from the men having either honourary or real power, the canoe requires the help of magicians to follow its course. The *naotupunus*, or nurturers, look after the edible roots needed to keep the travellers alive. In large canoes, these roots were kept in earth in a miniature garden where rudimentary gardening was done every day. The nurturers, associated with the world of women, are today the masters of agrarian magic. Every canoe also had its guardian of

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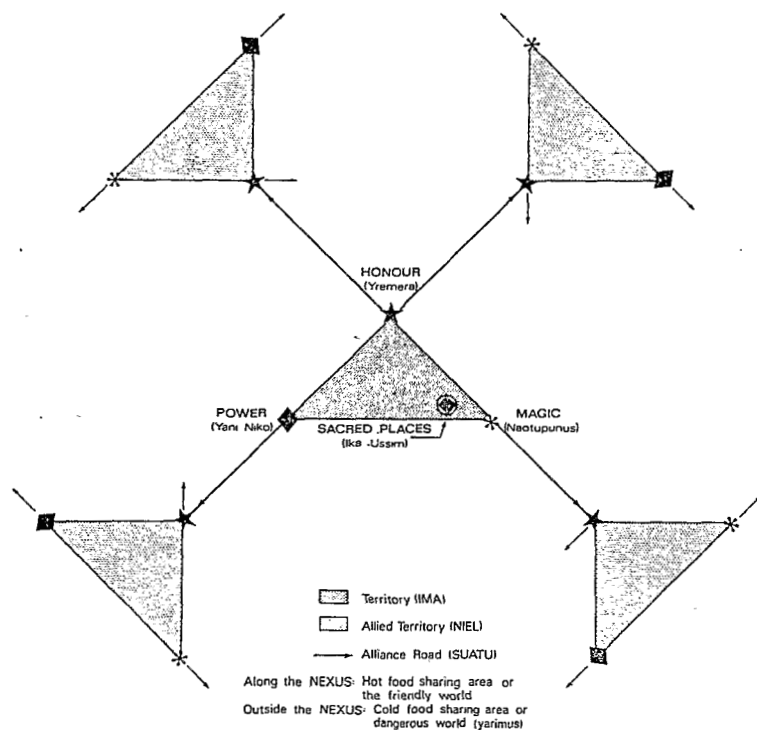
The land canoe; symbolic representation.

fire, responsible for keeping the hot coals permanently alive to enable the cooking of food. It also carried one or several magicians who were to either avert storms and adverse weather or attract favourable winds. All of these functions, instituted at the time of the initial voyage, are found nowadays in the different clans that constitute the canoes of Tanna, rooted in specific places and transmitted through local lineages by means of custom names (see Figure 5).

In this sense, Tannese society is tripartite, with three major functions: honour (the *yremera*), power (the *yani niko*), and various kinds of magic (the *naotupunus* and others). Every social construct reproduces this three-dimensional architecture and from the complementarity of these functions, formerly concentrated in one canoe, is today's social group born. Each clan, lineage segment, and hamlet in Tanna is attached to one or the other of these specialised titles and each large canoe congregates on the same territory as complete and diversified a range of them as possible.

A related symbolic structure is found in the Shepherd Islands of central Vanuatu (Figure 1), where the initial voyage occurred in more recent times and the links with the present population are clearer. After a volcanic eruption devastated the island of Kuwai sometime in the fourteenth century, Tongoa and neighbouring islands were repopulated by canoes sent by the big chiefdoms of Efate.[15] Each of these canoes later became a specific local group anchored around a central place — the *nakamal* or men's house — and rooted in a territory. The social organisation also reproduces, at the symbolic level of division of powers, the organisation for the initial voyage. The chiefs, or *nawotalam*, are the living emblems who directed the canoes' course; the *nare*, or ordinary men, are the crew. The custom titles are each associated with a function recalling the first voyage: the helmsman *(tariliu)* is very often the master of land tenure, the *atavi* is the chief's spokesman, and the various guardians of magical functions constitute the greater part of the crew. Social structure is, however, considerably different, since the *nawotalam* aristocracy have real power in the Shepherds, whereas on Tanna it remains honourary. This power is manifest in Tongoa by the *nawotalam* conferring custom titles on his *nare* and by the periodic payment of personalised tribute to the chief — the *nasautonga*. Such a hierarchial relationship, reminiscent of the chiefdom systems of Samoa, does not exist on Tanna, where society is far more egalitarian.

The social structures of central and southern Vanuatu are illuminated once the trouble is taken to consider them symbolically in terms of

[15] Garanger (1972).

Melanesian thought. The nations of Tanna, like the political groups of Tongoa, are canoes whose organisation reincarnates on land the social organisation that facilitated their original sea voyage.

The Field of Alliances

The idea of the canoe involves equally the idea of route and of haven. The ports or landings of Melanesian canoes are named passages through the reef encircling the island, where the canoes are dragged ashore once the voyage is complete. All reef passages in Tanna are thus appropriated by coastal clans and groups; territorial limits embrace the coral shelf and extend as far as the fringing reefs. Therefore no man could build a canoe unless he was already master of a passage. For the "man bus" of the interior, access to the world of the sea and to the outlying islands depended on good relations with the masters of passages and sea routes.

A star-shaped network of routes radiates from the port and from certain locations in the island's interior that are considered to be gateways. To venture along these routes, whether over land or sea, presupposes right of passage and, as a further prerequisite, alliances with those groups whose territories are to be crossed. Certain places therefore serve for welcoming and meeting allied groups in foreign lands. Travellers taking these routes consider such places as being within the wake of their own canoe; places where they can rest and feel secure. Traditional Melanesia thus contains two kinds of places, those within the canoe, which constitute the territory proper, and those beyond and sited along the wake or track of the canoe. The latter, located beyond the territory, form a second circle of security that may extend over great distances and constitute a foothold on other islands. These extraterritorial places thus introduce alliances with groups of different identities.

In all the languages of southern and central Vanuatu, traditional alliance is evoked in terms of roads. To have allies is to be at the centre of a network of paths along which mobility is without hindrance. Beyond the territory proper, these roads form part of the space of identity. Each territory in traditional Melanesia thus consists of a chain of hierarchically ordered places connected to routes that open onto external alliances.[16] In this view, Melanesian identity is determined by both rootedness around the central place and controlled mobility along roads traversing the country of alliance (see Figure 5).

The external ally sets a limit to this space of identity, and that territory stretching as far as his own territory is integral to a nexus of supraterritorial alliance (see Figure 5). In Tanna, the circle of alliance

[16] Bonnemaison (1981).

thus constituted is termed "hot kakai" (hot food). Within it, people share cooked food, symbol of human fraternity. War between allies is forbidden and would be sacrilegious. The notions of ally and of road always imply an exchange relationship through the marriage of sisters. Those who share the same food also share an identity, are of one blood, and are of associated places. They can move freely from one to the other, accompany the other in case of danger, and loan each other land for making gardens.

More precisely, such a relationship unites what on western Tanna are called *napang-niel*. *Niel* refers to the pile of gifts heaped up in the middle of the dancing ground and offered to one's associates; *napang* (hole, in the sense of shelter) is the place that shelters men, the village, and the dancing ground. Each *napang-niel*, or "frend long kastom", is situated at the end of a road *(suatu)* of marriage alliance and preferential economic relations. These external allies by the roads are all "same mark" and thus described by members of the same canoe as being another part of themselves. Melanesian thought seems not to establish any difference at the level of identity between the canoe and its wake.

A similar star structure can be found in the Shepherd Islands in central Vanuatu, where territorial relationship involves dual allegiance. Chance calls at intervening islands by large sailing canoes making their voyage from Efate to Tongoa planted seeds of alliance by leaving some men with local chiefs. When this was not possible, they conferred one of their titles on a child of the group that had been encountered. The men who were distributed in different islands, whether in fact or symbolically through their names, then entered into a relationship of dual allegiance, linked by identity to the territories and chiefdoms of their adopted names and belonging through residence to the groups that had accepted them. The result is a relatively complex structure of crossed allegiance, because identity has overflowed the bounds of residency. The Shepherd islander, in receiving a customary title that associates him with other territories, is placed at the centre of a knot of interlinked relationships. He will have a dual, sometimes multiple, identity and perhaps even be simultaneously chief and subject according to which side he turns to and the road of alliance he takes.

Thus, in central and southern Vanuatu the space of identity traditionally extends through star-shaped areas of alliance. The territory, to some extent integrating external friendly places and the roads to them, is less a consolidated domain to defend and more a web of places laid end to end by a chain of political and cultural alliances. In such a system, territorial organisation is not the classic type, with centre radiating to periphery — it works rather through networks and nexuses of places and routes. To continue to exist, the path of alliance

should be periodically reactivated by the passage of men and goods. The mobility required by this is justified ideologically by the fact that identity between allied places and groups is of the same character, and from this emerges its real nature: mobility in traditional society occurs within an area of friendly relationship where kinship, cultural, and political ties are multiple.

Conversely, outside the nexus of alliances no such relations are possible, for here is the domain of "cold kakai" (cold food). Exchanges are not impossible but involve only uncooked root crops or live pigs — cold food shared by spirits (yarimus) and not by men. The significance is obvious. Beyond the field of alliances are only strangers of whose human nature one is never completely convinced and who may equally be the malevolent and deceitful yarimus. In case of war, an enemy killed in combat whose body was eaten was not considered a man; they say on Tanna they were eating a yarimus. The domain of "cold kakai" is thus one of dangerous relationships and ever-possible warfare. Strangers of unknown identity are beyond the bounds of what is human; there could be no roads with them and consequently no relations. In sum, traditional mobility seems subordinate to identity and travels are only undertaken within the country of fraternal humanity and within a shared identity space.

Territorial Mobility

The rootedness of Melanesian societies does not necessarily restrict the mobility of their membership. The frequence and geographical extent of journeys could be great, particularly for coastal groups living in a maritime environment. Some Tongoan groups, such as those of Panita and Pele, have traditional alliances with Erromango island (Figure 1) and thus claim territorial rights, despite being separated by more than 200 kilometres of open sea. In contrast, they know little of some of their neighbours within Tongoa, with whom relations have always been hostile.

Traditional mobility in this kind of society can be described as territorial. The routes followed over land or sea are appropriated by social groups as if they were an extension of their own territories. Men define themselves as much by their roads as by their places, and routeways are subject to jealous supervision. This is particularly so on Tanna, where roads have names, frequently their own origin myth, and guardians or political chiefs for each section. Since routes are allocated in the same way as places, it follows that there is total control of men and their mobility, while the idea of territory conceived as a chain of places and paths implies that movement be circulatory. To a certain extent, the territorial mobility of traditional times can be reduced to three main types of journeys: initiation, exchange, and refuge. For each, movement occurs within a closed circuit and

along carefully indexed routes, is oriented towards fraternal contact, implies an obligatory return in either the long or medium term to place of departure, and ought not proceed beyond the bounds of alliance country.

Initiation journey. A well-known traditional journey made once in a lifetime involved young men from small islands off north Malakula going to neighbouring Aoba — thought to be the island of Tagaro, mythical hero of the entire northern part of Vanuatu.[17] This journey formed part of a complex ritual akin to a pilgrimage: canoes from Malakula followed a precise route and landed at the particular places of allied groups with whom ceremonies were conducted and exchanges made. Such a voyage was considered the final stage of the ritual cycle of initiation, explicable according to myth by the common but distant origin of people from north Malakula, the island of Malo, and west Aoba.[18]

Similarly, once installed, young chiefs of Tongoa retrace the initial voyage of their ancestors. They first travel around their territory of identity to rediscover its boundary, then visit allies and social partners situated beyond, thereby reaffirming on their own account the traditional relationships of alliance. The initiation journey was in some societies selective and reserved for important men who undertook it in the name of their own group; ordinary men either did not participate or did so only as subordinates or servants.

Exchange journey. Ritual voyages lead to exchange relations, for in traditional Melanesia social intercourse cannot occur without generous reciprocity, the complex accounting of which often transfers from one generation to the next. In this way, people of the northern islands obtain the pigs needed to attain the grades that denote social advancement, just as those of the southern islands depend on alliance networks to organise sumptuous exchange ceremonies like the *toka* festival on Tanna. To mount such rituals — often involving impressive numbers of participants, large groups of dancers, and enormous amounts of goods for exchange — all the human, material, and magical resources of the alliance area are pressed into service. Mobility is then accentuated and territorial boundaries within the alliance area are continually being crossed. With very important rituals, the resultant chain of relations can incorporate regional groupings that involve a whole island or several linked ones and represent perhaps several thousand people.

Although territorial mobility makes exchange possible, thereafter it is constantly renewed by the requirements of the traditional economic

17 Layard (1942).
18 Webb (1937); Bonnemaison (1972).

system. After having surveyed his space through the initiation journey, traditional man is bound to travel regularly through it both to make gifts and to reciprocate those previously received. Local groups are at the centre of a dense and geographically extensive system of relations, and consequently benefit from a wide range of connections. In this sense, territorial mobility appears to be a political privilege, controlled by the socially most important clans and particularly those claiming prior existence. To have roads is not only a sign of power but also a means of increasing one's importance through organising large and complex ritual exchanges, which are both the mark and the privilege of that power.

Refuge journey. The roads also served as routes along which there were secure places to take refuge when necessary. One of the functions of the alliance area, woven by blood ties and fraternity among men, is to provide a place of asylum in case of misfortune. All Melanesians carry the image of a past when warfare was frequent. Wars were part of the social game in the same way as ceremonial exchanges, of which they were the other face and complement, so that the traditional enemy was always clearly identified. Society on Tanna, for example, was divided into two political phratries: Koyometa and Numurukwen. These constituted two networks of alliance geographically dispersed over the island that, based on their solidarity, would wage war against one another. As soon as warfare erupted, it would spread around Tanna, breaking out in one place after another until some ritual mechanism terminated it. All the great custom rituals have the same purpose: to institute peace and soothe warlike passions through generous exchanges.

This notion of a clearly designated enemy is paralleled by the notion of an ally. In the cycles of warfare that would recur periodically, a defeated and threatened group usually would take refuge with allies rather than attempt a desperate defence of its territory. The alliance area hence functioned as a zone of security, the roads of which needed to be known well. If a local group did not keep alive the whole gamut of its alliances, it would have no possibility of refuge from warlike attack or even of assistance should its food gardens be destroyed by hurricane.

As already noted, cases of territorial conquest by one canoe of another appear to be a perversion of the war game and thus were widely rejected. An enemy group might be destroyed, but once the raid is completed its territory is in principle abandoned. In any case, it is inhabited by magical forces and spirits foreign to the conquering group; to occupy the enemy's territory by force, without any prior blood right, amounts to being exposed to serious danger. The identity of places exists above and beyond that of men and their personal

destinies. The ideology of territory, postulated in the principle of the inalienability of places, does not admit the substitution of one population for another. Within a territory, on the other hand, the situation where the land of others was taken over by the strongest warriors or by chiefs occurred frequently, particularly in the northern islands of Vanuatu.[19] The flexibility of the intraterritorial system of land tenure could thus work against the weakest.

To be able to occupy land by right of conquest, it would have been necessary either for all legitimate occupants to have been exterminated (an extreme solution and difficult to achieve given the expedient of flight) or for the invaders to claim very close ties of relationship with the original inhabitants — impossible on principle, because warfare was prohibited between allies sharing the same food. On Tanna, however, many land disputes remain latent to this day, precisely because this rule by which vanquished groups return to their territory has not been observed. Three or four generations after their flight, many clans still seek to reoccupy their land, largely because the process of warfare was suddenly obstructed by the "white peace" of missionaries or colonial administrators. Since traditional mechanisms of reconciliation through rites could not operate, groups were immobilised on the spot and in the state in which they found themselves when the island was pacified.

It seems that all three types of territorial mobility occurred quite frequently. To a certain extent, traditional man only departed the better to return, travelled only in his canoe, and did not deviate from its wake. The purpose of travel was to reinforce the dual circle of identity and security: recognise allies, sacrifice at initiation rites, undertake exchanges, flee from danger. The idea of permanent or long-term migration, of breaking with the places of identity, seems not to have existed in traditional Melanesia — it was culturally impossible.

Journeys of shame and exile. Melanesian society, without writing and without supraterritorial chiefdoms, exercised social control through territorial regulation. The law of place and roads imposed an order that by structuring space also structured society. Yet around the edges of territorial mobility there existed the possibility of unforeseeable and aberrant behaviour, as represented by the journeys of exiles and marginal peoples.

Melanesian society is based on consensus — whomever does not agree on a particular question either accepts the general view or leaves the group. Thus there is no recognised minority within the theoretical unit of the social group. In such circumstances, as borne out in oral

19 Rodman (1979).

traditions, neither exiles nor those blamed for suspect magical activities were unusual. Any climatic disaster or epidemic was attributed to evil spells, and those suspected of being to blame, the scapegoats of the social majority, had to leave their territory of origin. Such a decision was extremely grave and amounted to a sentence of social death, for territorial expulsion meant loss of identity and of land rights. The exile became a nameless and homeless creature whose name was given to someone else. His only recourse was to take refuge with another group, if at all possible to become adopted and given a new identity, although he might be attributed only inferior status and be restricted to such lowly tasks as the guardianship of evil places. Groups of people descended from such exiles are common nowadays in Tanna. In principle, they must take second place to the true men ("really man"); they may legally be dismissed and obliged to relocate yet again should they not observe this rule of political subordination.

Mobility, once taken beyond the law of roads and of territorial control, leads into the trap of marginality; those who wander either voluntarily or involuntarily from the paths of alliance are lost. Beyond his own home, a man who is not supported by his clan and who strays from his canoe and his roads is no longer anyone. Losing his place, he also loses his soul. He is no longer recognised by his ancestors and, on death, will be unable to rejoin them along the mythical roads that originate from the clan territory, as well as being denied the rites that would permit such a passage. Unless adopted elsewhere and allowed to establish fresh roots, he is doomed after death to become a wandering soul.

THE COLONIAL CONTRADICTIONS

New Forms of Journeys

As recent writers have emphasised,[20] Melanesians did not passively submit to the new situation of cultural and colonial contact with the metropolitan world. Their own society and beliefs, adapted to a territorial microenvironment, were revealed to be without any real answer to the intrusion of European society and the new space — physical and social — of which that society was the expression. Many naturally sought in the new models imported by whites, particularly in Christianity, 'a framework both intellectual and social which would enable them to react effectively to the culture contact situation'.[21]

In the case of movement, the breaking of traditional constraints produced a broadening of recognised space and increased personal

[20] Shineberg (1967); Philibert (1976, 1982); Scarr (1967).
[21] Philibert (1982: 76).

liberty. Once the initial period of enforced labour recruiting and violence was over, the new mobility induced or imposed by colonial structures seemed to many young Melanesians to offer adventure. The voyage of initiation had been reproduced in another form: to see the world to as great a distance and in as enriching a manner as possible. There was the goal of acquiring the tools, goods, and gadgetry of whites, and, beyond that, of satisfying an extraordinary cultural curiosity. Melanesians, upon contact with the mysterious and dominant world of the European, tried first to understand. To do so, it was essential to see for themselves where the whites came from and to follow the chain of their cultural places back to its source. A Tannese story embodies this search for the white man's secret in a kind of journey that could be termed philosophical.

During the time of Tanna Law, at the beginning of the century when the Presbyterian Church reigned unchallenged over Melanesian society,[22] the pagan groups of Middle Bush were being subjected to strong pressures from Christian propagandists. Enforcers of Christian belief suppressed any cultural manifestation that was traditional — songs and dances were forbidden, polygamous chiefs were arrested and humiliated, ritual *kava* drinking was prohibited. The few clans of "man bush" that still resisted held many meetings to decide what to do. Should they yield their customs to the kind of Christianity these people wanted to impose, or should they resist to the utmost and, against all odds, wait for the storm to pass? Before making up their minds, they decided to obtain more information.

Ya'uto, a man from Middle Bush (Figure 4), was entrusted with exploring the land of the white man to discover if what missionaries told the Tannese was so and if European society conformed on its home ground to what pastors preached to them and with the standards they set. He lit a fire at Lenemtahim Point, a deserted area on the eastern coast, and was picked up by a New Caledonian ship that belonged to Dick Pentecost, the crew of which were from the island of Lifou. Ya'uto was not seen again on Tanna for several years. The story, recorded in a song and several dances, tells that this sailor and "man Tanna" visited Sydney, Noumea, Suva, and even, they say, Hong Kong and America. When at last he returned, he brought with him a friend from Lifou called Willy Pea. Their verdict was final: 'What they tell us about the outside world is not true. We must be wary of the missionaries. The white people live quite differently in their own countries: "Talk blong missi em i tink tink blong em no more" (what the missionaries say concerns just themselves). So it is better if we remain faithful to the custom roads'.

[22] Guiart (1956a); Brunton (1981); Lindström (1982).

Ya'uto and Willy Pea spread the word at secret meetings held throughout the island, well away from the missionary brigades. An outburst of traditional festivities and night dances announced the reawakening of customary practices among the pagan groups and nowadays in the Middle Bush Ya'uto is considered a "stamba" of the "kastom". According to my enquiries, this episode occurred between 1910 and 1920, well before the arrival of the message of John Frum, who appeared on Tanna shortly before 1940. That message furthermore was directed towards groups already converted to Christianity — to whom he preached a return to the spirit of "kastom" — rather than towards the pagans who had kept it. This story illustrates the fact that Melanesians did not merely acquiesce to European pressures. They pronounced themselves either for or against the models being thrust upon them, particularly Christianity, and more or less on the basis of some factual knowledge. In many of the northern islands of Vanuatu, in contrast, wage labourers returning from Queensland were highly supportive of Christianisation.[23]

The sudden mobility now within the reach of the Tannese gave them some frame of reference on which to base a response. From many points of view, Melanesians experienced going away for wage labour as if it were another cultural journey. For many local groups in regular contact with whites, the departure of their young men meant exploring a new path of alliance destined to enlarge the domain of human fraternity. Taking the white men's roads and boarding their ships amounted to establishing a relationship, an egalitarian alliance, that ought to have revealed the way to the secret sources of their power. Partly for this reason and as long as it lasted, going to work in Queensland, which made it possible to learn about and live in contact with European society, was valued far more highly than labouring on plantations within the archipelago itself.

To some extent, Melanesian attitudes towards these introduced movements were translations of the three main constituents of territorial mobility. There is the initiation voyage, to see and learn about the world; the journey for exchange, to acquire European goods; and the refuge voyage, flight in some cases from conflict with one's own society and, in a general way, disavowal of traditional structures felt to be ill-adapted or powerless in the emergent new world. For Melanesians this journeying was to widen the horizons of alliance, but Europeans organised these transfers of labour in accordance with the cold logic of a profitable system of production. In the former case, it was a question of encounter, of a desire for mutual communication, sometimes a philosophical quest; in the latter, of simply exploiting a source

[23] Allen (1968).

of adult labour. Even when Melanesians generally failed to find at the end of their journey the generosity or the welcome they expected, they did learn from this experience several important lessons about the reality of the society that sought to impose itself upon them. At the very least, it enabled them to destroy the myth that whites embodied a higher spiritual power. The Indians of South America, whose only knowledge of Europeans was an image of powerful warriors and avid empire builders, never had this chance.

The Missionary's Dream: A New Religious Root

The missionaries made it their goal to reconstruct Melanesian society around a religious identity. In many areas they struck the final blow to the traditional order, which they saw as pagan, and in exchange tried to substitute a Christian one. Many Melanesian places of identity and dwelling sites, loaded with meaning and symbols, were abandoned. The forest in which they had previously lived was associated with the idea of dark bush, the world of darkness and paganism in contrast with the brightness of the coastal areas, where the missions were, and with the "niu laef" (new life) of their converts.[24] From that point, it was as if Melanesians transplanted to the coast had ceased to be men of custom. It seemed that trees, the symbols of their identity, and canoes, the symbols of their social structure, were both condemned to disappear from the Tannese horizon.

To build the "niu laef", pastors tried to anchor the Christians in a new village society. They quickly sought to limit the converts' mobility and as far as possible to protect Christian areas from outside influences. The traditional canoes were to be replaced by new ships founded solely on the solidarity of the church. There followed a new political division of space, a reflection of religious differences among the missionaries themselves. The traditional area of security within which one shared hot food became one of religious brotherhood; while the area of relations was increased, territorial compartmentalisation lost none of its structures and was even reinforced. The new mobility tended to proceed in terms of the places and lines of force of missionary activity: churches, schools, hospitals. Modern administrative and economic establishments usually sited themselves in these same places.

In both a figurative and literal sense, the mission ship replaced the interclan canoe of the past. As far as possible, the missions established themselves as autonomous states in their new territories. They favoured the economic autarky of their communities, particularly by encouraging local entrepreneurs, which should in theory have made superfluous the movement of wage labourers to European plantations. Alongside

[24] Philibert (1982).

this, new structures of political power were established and a network of pastors, elders, and teachers chequered the landscape and provided a framework for social life. But in seeking to fix men in the shadows of churches and to constitute a new village society, the missionaries were bound to come into conflict with the divergent interests of the colonial economic system.

The Planter's Dream: A Mobile and Uprooted Labour Force

Very early, missionaries vigorously denounced the methods of labour recruitment and what they considered the sinful world of coconut plantations. The settlers replied that these were attacks on personal liberty and pointed to Presbyterian pastors as sworn enemies of economic development. Planter settlers wanted workers, and consequently their purposes were served by a mobile Melanesian society inserted into the circuits of capitalist production and consumption they controlled. The missionaries, on the other hand, were trying to create a stable society and to produce the model pastoral and evangelical symphony they had failed to compose at home. Melanesian society and space thus became the stakes in this game and were subjected to contradictory pressures. Settlers and missionaries justified their attitudes by the established fact that there was no longer any real custom, nor even any authentically Melanesian society. On this cultural void, this *tabula rasa,* a social system had to be rebuilt. The missionaries' project was to erect a religious society with fresh roots in its new parishes, whereas the planter settlers dreamed of prosperity and a mobile labour force integrated into a decompartmentalised society of market specialists. These two contradictory projects, both products of the same Western world, could only cancel each other; the missionaries' success would mean the settlers' failure and vice versa.

The result was an uneasy compromise that varied from island to island and from region to region. The European planters were never able to obtain the absolutely mobile labour force they needed to develop their land. Melanesians would agree to work only in small numbers and for short periods, and in the 1920s the settlers, giving up in despair, turned to imported labour from Asia. They then had at their disposal the mobile and uprooted labour force for which they had been clamouring, but had to pay a higher wage that soon bankrupted the smallest of them.

The quest for a colonial economy was to end in quasi-failure, but the missionaries' plans did not fully meet their expectations either. Melanesian society was not transformed into one of Christian villages — there were rejections, as in Tanna, and the lines of force of traditional society lay dormant beneath the surface, waiting to re-emerge. The partial demise of the settlers' dream and the incomplete realisation of the missionary model reflects the fact that in both cases their initial

analysis was based largely on false premises. There existed neither a *tabula rasa* nor a cultural void; Melanesian society was far less destroyed than it appeared to be. Even more important, it retained in its heart of hearts a memory of its identity and an ability to reconstruct itself according to its own standards. In this sense, the independence of Vanuatu in 1980 would serve as a cultural revelation.

AGAIN THE TREE AND THE CANOE: MELANESIAN IDENTITY TODAY

After the Second World War Melanesian societies, more integrated into the international economic system, found that not only did the flow of people increase,[25] but it also became one of the major geographic features of the region. It is as if economic development carried within it an upsurge in mobility and thus a certain break with the closed worlds of territorial societies, whether traditional or missionary. Ward has written that movement to cities and towns is often a matter of 'voting with one's feet'.[26] By leaving for the urban lights, the youngest age groups of the Melanesian world are choosing a new way of life that may not necessarily mean improvement to their socioeconomic situation. The town is seen as a place of freedom and a symbol of modernity; the cultural charge it carries is enough to ensure its magnetism.

Does the present increase in mobility, continuing despite unfavourable economic conditions, mean that Melanesian identity has changed in nature? Has economic development and a consumer society, not previously achievable by the planter settlers, been attained quietly in the space of a few postwar years? If so, is current mobility the sign not only of a new identity but also that the traditional culture, linked with the semiology of place, is dead? In my view, this is not the case. Behind the outward appearance stands a society that is astonishingly true to itself.

The Persistence of Territorial Mobility

Melanesian mobility is still largely circular,[27] congruent with a mental attitude that indissolubly links identity with faithfulness to the territory of origin. The strength of the territorial bond is what best defines this circular mobility and is demonstrated in many ways: regular and frequent returns, news from home and of one's kin constantly flowing between places of origin and destination, migrants staying in groups defined by territorial and ethnic links. In the place

[25] Ward (1971); Bedford (1973); Vienne (1974); Chapman (1975); Chapman and Prothero (1977); Bonnemaison (1977).
[26] Ward (1971).
[27] Bedford (1973).

to which they have gone, in their residence or at work, migrants reconstitute places of hospitality as an extension of their territory. Around a more stable nucleus consisting of those who usually have jobs requiring formal qualifications, the frequent renewal of the migrant population as people come and go is based on territorial solidarity.[28] These "companies" partly control both the labour market and residential organisation at these places of destination. The longest established have often jointly bought urban land, where little societies reconstitute themselves on miniterritories, with their own space and new hierarchies. Thus they reproduce in an alien milieu the structure of the canoe and the area of alliance, without which there could be no connecting road for those in movement. Young bachelors, who find in being mobile a means of temporary escape from the constraints of rural society without completely severing their ties, are particularly well represented in these group structures. Territorial mobility, circular in form and creating canoes adaptive to the present economic world and its flow of labour, permits constant touch with the original homeland and its solidarities. Melanesians alternate between town, plantation, and village as long as they have "roads" and "companies" to which to attach themselves. Thus they reproduce within a modern economic space the circular pathways peculiar to their culture and their traditional worldview.

Not all who move fit this blueprint. Some slip through the networks of their original milieu and lose contact with kin — their movement becomes 'uncontrolled'. In 1972 and 1973, a period of economic boom in Vanuatu, I concluded after studying urban migrants in Port Vila and Santo that this new movement was increasingly overflowing the bounds of territorially defined mobility.[29] Easy jobs and plentiful money were initiating a break in the cultural structures of movement. Uncontrolled mobility was assuming the appearance of a rural exodus and it seemed less likely that one day these migrants would rediscover local village society and its structure of values. On this point I partially disagreed with Bedford,[30] whose research had been undertaken before the onset of this economic boom. Bedford was, however, right; it happened that economic depression, by abruptly halting the increase in urbanward movement, also ended the evolution of this uncontrolled type of mobility. In the past few years, the world economic crisis has dissipated the mirage of easy money to be made in town; in such difficult times, security comes from village and community values that attach to group structures. The current movement of Melanesians therefore means neither rural exodus nor loss of identity. To a large extent, it continues

[28] Bonnemaison (1977).
[29] Bonnemaison (1976, 1977).
[30] Bedford (1973).

to occur within the cultural framework of territorial mobility, where permanent links with the connecting homeland are inseparable from and derivative of the group structures of mobility.

Return to the Place of Identity

The independence of Vanuatu was achieved in the name of "kastom" and land. Today, the very word "kastom" is brandished as a rallying cry by the government, by all political parties, and even by Christian leaders in those areas where it was most energetically uprooted by their predecessors.[31] This concern with customary values as those of Melanesian cultural identity goes beyond a mere proclamation or appeal to principle. In the islands and villages, the words "kastom" and land have the same connotation. Many understood the end of colonial power to mean that men would reclaim and return to their original identifying places, as if this would occur alongside Melanesians reclaiming their political sovereignty. Government fostered this sentiment by announcing very soon after independence was gained, and writing into the twelfth chapter of the constitution, that the land of Vanuatu would 'come back to Custom', that is, to the "man ples", the rightful occupants as defined in terms of custom and genealogical affiliation. This measure was aimed first at land alienated by European colonisation, but in those islands where problems of land tenure were most acute it took on the much wider sense of redistributing rights over Melanesian land according to the doctrine of first appearance. Carried to its logical conclusion, such an interpretation would mean that everyone would return to the territory where his clan lived before disturbances from colonial contact.

Almost a century and half of disruption and population movements has upset the ancient distribution of clans and territories. In some islands, almost half the population has lived for several generations on land where, in strict terms of customary filiation, they have no inherent right to be. If land tenure were to be frozen according to a reconstituted model of the past (and on this there is disagreement), the result would be a departure from the spirit of "kastom". Within the territorial units of Melanesian society, every generation renegotiated and redeployed land rights among the different kin groups according to the strength of their claims and needs. Although cultural places refer back to ancestors and specific clan segments, access to land is open to all clan members and subject to flexible control, as long as shifting patterns of food gardens remain the predominant use. In the spirit of Melanesian custom land cannot be conceived of as a legal, let alone an economic, asset. As the Minister for Lands in the first Government

[31] Tonkinson (1982); Lindström (1982).

of Vanuatu has written: 'Land is to the ni-Vanuatu what a mother is to her child. It is in relation to the land that he "situates" himself, and thanks to land that he retains his spiritual strength. Ni-Vanuatu can never divorce themselves from their land'.[32] This means that if land is the mother of identity, access is available to all those who share that identity. · .

Reactivating ancient land rights might also encourage a movement back towards the interiors of islands, today all too often deserted. Bringing these former homelands back into use would make possible a more even distribution of people throughout the available space and, most particularly, result in a coastal belt less densely settled. A repopulated interior would improve the prospect for balanced regional development, but such a policy presupposes building roads into the interiors of islands rather than merely encircling them.

Such cultural renewal makes plain that contemporary Vanuatu society is not searching for its identity but rather rediscovering roots after a colonial interlude. The expression is channelled through land, the mother of identity; at the same time it has to do with both land — regaining one's space — and culture — regaining one's identity, alienated through the intrusion of the colonial era. The resurgence of Melanesian places and the response elicited by the long-awaited words 'return land to "kastom"' have an economic dimension, but, more important, articulate the will to rediscover places significant in Melanesian memory, hence to resume an identity that never quite disappeared and was far from forgotten. In this sense, the memory of places has played its traditional role of maintaining an identity and thereby a whole culture.

Today the identity of the Melanesian peoples emerges not as a break with the past but as a continuity. Yet it is not simply a matter of recapturing the past; mobility, even that which is circular, has widened horizons and multiplied roads. New solidarities have emerged — regional, economic, religious, national — so that island societies are far less grounded on clans articulated around microterritories, but are increasingly village based, penetrated by the international monetary economy, and organised over larger areas of space. The expansion of cash crop plantations allows the evolution of land rights that are predominantly individual in character, tending to replace the ones that were of a basically communal and kinship nature. The quest for places of Melanesian identity, a first gesture towards repossession by a sovereign people, ought therefore to be adapted to this new situation and new ways of using place and land should be pursued. Current debate no longer concerns the resistance of Melanesian society to

[32] Regenwanu (1980): 67.

influences from the West, by which it was once dominated, but rather the choices to be made for socioeconomic development and the forms through which it can enter into international society. Doubtless of greatest surprise to outsiders is the aptitude of this society to rebuild itself in its own image within a context of different conceptual patterns and politicoeconomic realities.

CONCLUSION

Traditional Melanesian identity is essentially an overlay on the semiology of place: grouped into nexuses, these places form territories around which starlike alliance areas are gathered. Although inherited, identity is reproduced and reacquired in each generation through journeying and circulating within the areas of alliance and shared identity. If no true identity exists beyond localisation in the places of memory, neither is the achievement of destiny possible without adventure beyond those places. The canoe concept responded to this dual requirement, providing a framework for mobility while preserving rootedness; admitting the prospect of the journey while preserving the security of territory. The problem nowadays is less to recover a lost identity than to rediscover canoes, which reestablish the connection with venturing on the high seas — to recreate, in other words, social units capable of adapting to the modern world while also preserving the specific values of Melanesian identity.

To some extent, that identity is being demonstrated through the problems of territorially defined mobility and movement to town. Melanesian identity will remain alive as long as the forms of mobility remain dominantly circular, for if one day their movement should become the rural exodus found in many Third World societies, the originality and identity of traditional Melanesian society will have joined the legion of dead cultures. People cannot be bound to their land against their will or prohibited from experiencing the fascination of being in town. Yet, governments can hardly look on with pleasure as islands empty their vital forces into already overgrown urban worlds, a situation that has occurred in several Pacific entities.[33]

It is important to establish reciprocal contact along routeways — which are simultaneously metaphorical and real — and between territorial societies, the modern enclaves of overdeveloped towns, and such new spaces as businesses, plantations, schools, and administrative structures. Traditional Melanesian societies will only survive if they include towns and other modern places within their alliance areas, and if they find cultural and economic niches as well as physical places into which to integrate their group structures and perhaps also their "companies"

[33] For example, Fages (1975).

of migrants. Conversely, new places and enclaves can only keep their oceanic spirit and remain in harmony with the traditional identity of space by accommodating such integration. Could a flexible formula be found, for example, that would encourage urban migrants to retain their cultural life and spaces of relationship? One possibility would be to assist them in organising their own spaces of hospitality rather than imposing a preconceived pattern. Instead of low-cost housing schemes based on individual plots, complexes of communal hospitality could be promoted, consisting of and sponsored by organic groupings of several "companies". Such complexes could include a central space for discussions and encounters, organised around a meeting house that would function as a club, and several houses available for use by people circulating for limited and variable amounts of time as a result of the kind of job obtained in town.

A Melanesian journey was experienced in traditional society as a cultural odyssey, rich in the values of freedom, encounter, new experience, and creativity. The contemporary journey that retains links with identity values and the memory of place avoids the risk of displacement that stalks any potential relocation. This journeying continues to be territorially defined, a matter of circulation and two-way movement, and thus it can reconcile the tree and the canoe.

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