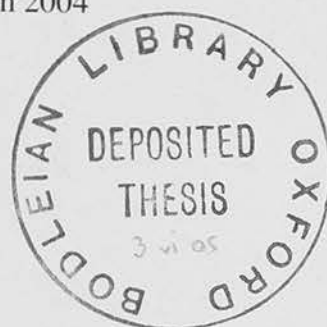


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Through the Vale of Darkness
History in South Malakula, Vanuatu

Thesis submitted for the examination of Doctor in Philosophy,
School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography
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Through the Vale of Darkness: History in South Malakula, Vanuatu

The thesis is a multi-vocal and localized history of the destruction of ancient Malakulan society through depopulation, migration and conversion, of the salvation of some people who gathered around Christian communities, and of the relationship of these people and their descendants to the places they have left and to the communities in which they now live.

The thesis brings a historical perspective to Vanuatu anthropology. Compared to earlier work in anthropological history in the Pacific by Sahlins, Denning and Bronwen Douglas, the main innovation in method is that all historical statements are set in their context, emphasizing the multiplicity of view points and revealing the significance of even minor variations which refer to important local issues, from land disputes to conversion to Christianity. Innovative use is made of funerary inscriptions, local maps and court archives, reflecting local forms of historical literacy.

The research is part of a growing interest in Christianity in Oceania, after a long neglect by anthropologists. This is the first historical anthropology of Vanuatu and perhaps Melanesia to consider the long-term social impact of the dramatic depopulation that accompanied the colonial expansion of Europeans. The abandonment of the interior of the island of Malakula and the weakening of traditional links with other islands have reduced the social space of Malakula to the original zone of contact with Europeans, the coastal areas and nearby small islands. I argue that Christianity allowed the people of Malakula to create a new form of sociality in response to these events.

The new society has its own time and space organized around the nuclear family meal and Sunday service, which were the two cornerstones of the conversion process, symbolizing the abandonment of former ritual activities and of the segregation of cooking fires according to ritual status. This process of cultural adaptation continues with the appropriation by villagers of the historical perspective of official courts favouring material evidence and legalistic principles in land disputes.

Earlier research on Vanuatu was dominated by the themes of '*kastom*', a discourse on tradition opposed to Western ways, and of the rootedness of people in place. This double emphasis is linked to the fact that most fieldwork in the country was done in the 1970s before a fifteen years ban on foreign research after Independence in 1980. In the context of the struggle for Independence and the restitution of alienated land, Vanuatu people needed to emphasize indigenous values and attachment to land. Today, priorities on the ground have changed and new types of discourses have come to the fore emphasizing conversion to Christianity and adopting new concepts reflecting a shift in preoccupation from recovering colonial land to the relation between indigenous Christian migrants and original owners.

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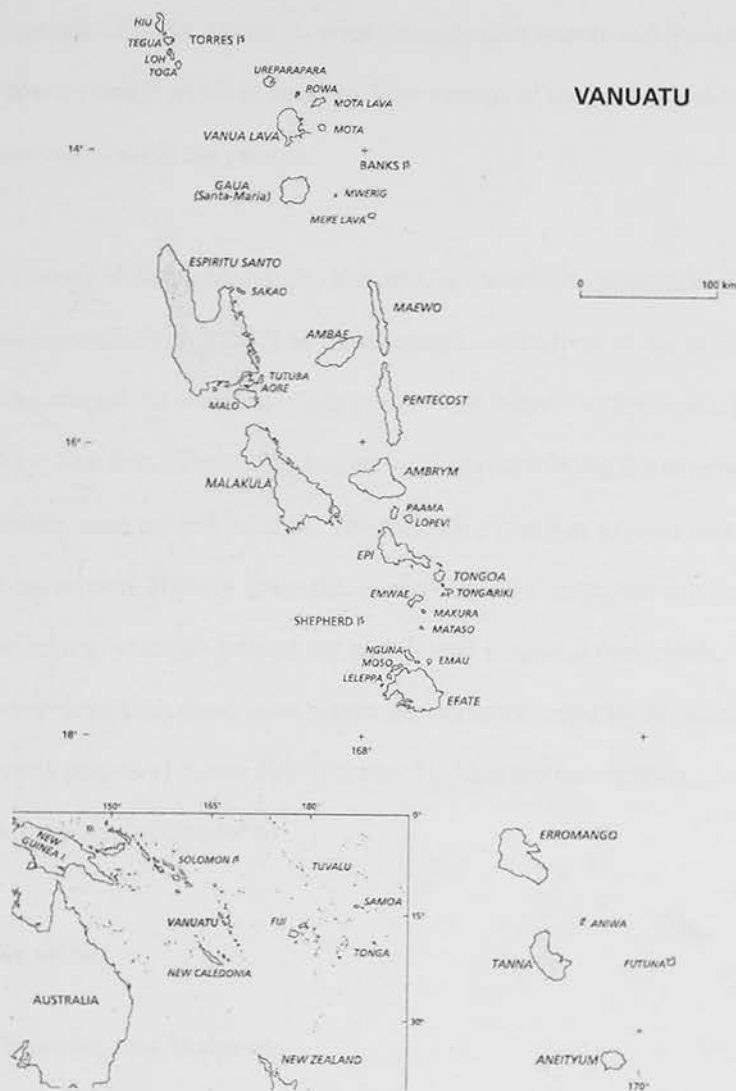
To the people of South Malakula I owe my greatest debt, for their hospitality and their collaboration to this project. Many more people than those who are mentioned in the thesis shared their knowledge with me. I must express my warmest thanks to all of them. Ralph Regenvanu, Director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC), has contributed to make social and cultural research in Vanuatu one of the most dynamic in the world. He accepted my project, assisted with visas and directed my first steps in the country. With Dick Dickenson and Romain Batik, both *filwoka* of the VCC, I had my first discussions about South Malakula. During my stay in the country I was given friendship and hospitality in various homes: in Pelongk, Sethric and Liman; in Lamap, Romain Batik, Aimé Mweleun, Didier; in Farun, Betmak and Lena; in Axamb, Makandre; in Oxai, Elder Ezekiel and John Waso; in Avox, Jaitok and Telaina; and in Blaksan, Jekita. Sethy Luwi William and his family extended Malakulan hospitality to their lively Vila household. It was a pleasure to share Karl Walderback's unequalled 'treetop' house during my last days in Vila. Alicja Dolecka and her son Guillaume Van Win I thank for their continuous friendship in difficult times. Philippe Van Win and Reynold Liu who died tragically in 1998 would have shared even more of their insights with me if I could have presented this thesis to them. Rita Naviti, Jimmy Garae, Jerry Boe and Collin Nicholas assisted in many ways my research in the courts. This side of the world, Mike Morris and Mark Dickerson showed great patience for the number of books I borrowed from the Anthropology libraries of Oxford. The Principal and staff of Linacre College never questioned the time it took me to complete this thesis. My supervisor, Michael O'Hanlon, similarly showed continuous support over the years.

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Introduction

Figure 1 An aerial view of Lamap



VANUATU

Map 1 Vanuatu (Bonnemaïson 1996: 8)

Introduction

Conversion and conquest have affected practically all areas of the world. The way we think about our past and our relation to others bears the mark of such religious, social and linguistic upheavals. The expansion of European peoples similarly affected the lives of others in many parts of the world, with often the added impact of introduced diseases. The people of South Malakula went through such events and lived to tell the tale. The purpose of this thesis is to consider how visions of the past expressed in their historical narratives relate to the present.

The history of South Malakula, Vanuatu, is considered through the origins and uses of historical narratives, as well as their content – narratives of the events that are seen as having shaped the world in which people live today – and people's perception of history. The first chapter thus begins with stories relating the origins of the first ancestors from natural features. The following chapters present histories of migration and conversion. History is the preserve of families, entrusted to a few experts who transmit it to younger generations and defend it against their rivals. Most chapters rely on interviews with these local historians, complemented by missionaries' accounts of the early phases of conversion (chapter 3), funerary inscriptions (chapter 5), and a judicial decision (chapter 6).

1 The setting

1.1 Vanuatu and Malakula

Malakula is an island in the South West Pacific, in the independent country of Vanuatu – known until 1980 as the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides. The hundred or more islands of Vanuatu are located between the French territory of New

Caledonia in the south, the Solomon Islands in the north, Fiji in the east and, far to the west, Australia (map 1). Vanuatu comprises large islands of volcanic origin as well as smaller ones of uplifted coral reefs and mangrove soils. Malakula itself is one of the largest islands, but more than a dozen small islands lie not far from its northeastern and southern coastlines. The volcanic geology is the source of frequent earthquakes and the progressive uplifting of the island and surrounding reefs. The climate is hot and humid with a cyclone season from November to March and a relatively dry season in the southern winter.¹ My fieldwork coincided with the double phenomenon of 'El Niño' – which caused a drought in 1997 – followed by 'La Niña' in 1998/1999 which brought torrential downpours.

Population

The population has grown steadfastly since the 1967 census when there was a little above 70,000 inhabitants in the country, up from a low of 40,000 in the 1940s (MacArthur and Yaxley 1968).² The 1999 National Census of Vanuatu enumerated 186,668 people living in the country (National Statistics Office 2000); Malakula and the adjoining small islands totaled 23,702 inhabitants, of whom I estimate about 3,000 lived in South Malakula. The population is growing fast – 2.6% annually between 1989 and 1999, somewhat less in rural areas such as Malakula (2.2%) than in the nation's two towns (4.2%). This growth is supported by a dramatic decrease in infant mortality rate from 45 per thousand in 1989 to 25.5 and 26 for female and male infants respectively in 1999. In the same period, the fertility rate estimate decreased from an average of 5.3 to 4.5 children per woman. A specific feature of the demography of Vanuatu as of many

¹ See Bonnemaïson (1996) for the most complete introduction to the geography of Vanuatu.

² I could not access this publication, the 1967 census of the New Hebrides, and I am quoting here from Bonnemaïson 1986: 304, 391).



Figure 2
Navsax Co-op, Lamap

other areas of Oceania is the gender imbalance. Census data show that there was a temporary reversal of this imbalance in favour of women at the end of the colonial period but that it is coming back.

It is difficult to estimate the population of the archipelago before colonization –some islands were more affected by introduced diseases than others. The small islands off the coast of Malakula, for example, acted as a refuge for survivors, but recently they have become overcrowded and their inhabitants have begun to move back to the mainland which is no longer as unhealthy as it used to be (see chapters 3, 4 and 6). The latest statistics show that between 1989 and 1999 the population of the islets surrounding Malakula remained relatively stable (growing from 4,166 to 4,428) while that of the mainland grew from 15,985 to 18,984 (National Statistics Office 2000: 52, 193). Still the population remains more dense in the coastal areas than in the interior. Oral histories hardly provide statistics but they indicate a dramatic depopulation, mentioning a great number of extinct families: virtually everyone in South Malakula claims some land through extinct maternal relatives (cf. chapters 1, 2 and 6). The high death rate was generally attributed to witchcraft for which revenge was sought by killing suspected witches, usually senior men. In pre-contact times witchcraft is probably best interpreted as a form of control exercised by these senior men, as it continued to be to some extent in the island of Ambrym until very recently (Tonkinson: 1981: 254ff). The high death rate also affected the new Christian villages (cf. Speiser 1922), perhaps even more than traditional villages in the hills that were less affected by malaria. Soon the leaders of the new Christian communities began to be suspected of killing the people they had convinced to join them. This situation led many to despair, letting themselves die or killing infants and mistreating children, whereas converts experienced Christianity as a Salvation from a doomed pagan world; a few Christian leaders were also shot by some

of the last pagans, in revenge for the death of recent converts (chapter 4).

Much of the current interest of the Malakulans in history is directly linked to these demographic changes. Indeed, land ownership depends on the capacity to prove a historical connection to a place. In small overcrowded islands disputes emerge when people find themselves short of land for gardens and even for house building, opposing those who claim sole ownership of a place and those who they think are migrants. The land of extinct families can be claimed by several of their relatives.

Colonizations

The archaeological coverage of the country is still limited. The current estimate is that the islands were colonized about three thousand years ago by Austronesian speaking people coming from the Solomon Islands and the Bismarck Archipelago in the north-west (cf. Kirch 2000: 135ff) for a recent review of archaeology in Vanuatu and neighbouring countries). In South Malakula itself not much archaeological research has been done beyond site surveys (Galipaud and Kolmas 1993, Roe 1991). By contrast, some local people support their historical claims with their own archaeological interpretation of material remains, residence patterns, and features of the landscape (chapter 6).

From a traditional European perspective, the history of the islands begins with their successive discoveries and rediscoveries. The Spanish explorer Quiros was the first European to land in the archipelago in 1606. He believed he had discovered the mythical Southern Continent and named it after the Austrian origins of the Spanish king



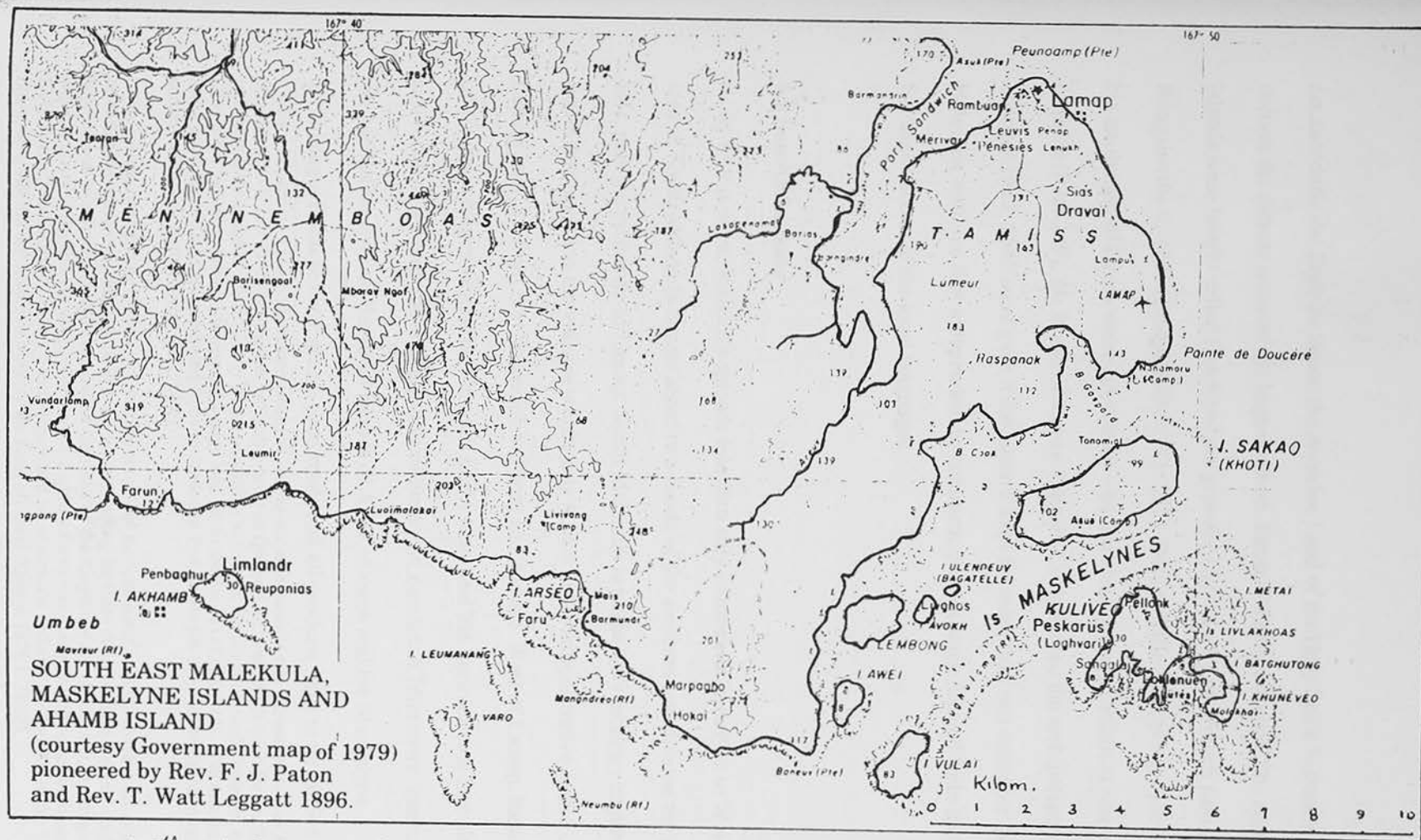
Figure 3

PWMU, meeting of the Maskelyne session in Oxai.
Each village has its own colour.



Figure 4

The youth of Farun performing a 'Salvation' march



La Austrialia del Espiritu Santo, the Austrian Land of the Holy Spirit³ – from which derives the current name of the largest island: Santo or Espiritu Santo.⁴ The northern islands were briefly called *l'archipel des grandes Cyclades* by the French navigator Bougainville in 1766 (Bougainville 1771: 252). Bougainville was not very successful in his attribution of Greek names to islands – he had already named Tahiti *la nouvelle Cythère* (ibid: 209), the island of Venus. Captain Cook, visited the archipelago in 1774 (Forster 1982: 564ff) and gave it the name it kept for more than two centuries: New Hebrides, until the first independent government chose a name derived from the word for 'land' in one of the local languages.

1.2 South Malakula

At its widest point, Malakula spreads less than fifty kilometres from East to West. The area of South Malakula covers about two-thirds of the southern coastline on the eastern side, plus the peninsula of Lamap. South Malakula is a relatively arbitrary region whose limits correspond to the villages within easy access of the administrative centre of Lamap (map 2), from Port Sandwich to Farun and Axamb. West of Lamap, there are only a few villages located on the coast of the mainland but the interior is now deserted, as a result of the migrations that followed European contact. A little more than half of the population lives on the small islands of Avox, Axamb and the Maskelyne

archipelago. Because there are no good roads and all products have to be carried on

³ This was perhaps a pun and became source of confusion, as *Austrialia* was misunderstood as Australia (Quiros 1876 I: 316, II: 201). Another intriguing point in Quiros's account of his quest for the Southern continent is the name of *Manicolo*, by which according to Quiros, the inhabitants of Taumaco, near Santa Cruz in the Solomon Islands, designated a large land far to the South (1876 I: 284). Was this the same name as *Mallicollo* which Cook heard when he landed in Port Sandwich in South Malakula more than a century and a half later (Forster 1982: 564ff)?

⁴ The ceremony staged by Quiros to 'take possession' of the 'continent' was the first but also the most elaborate ever dreamt by Europeans in these islands, lasting for three days, with masses and confessions, appointment of officials and the creation of the order of the *Knights of the Holy Spirit*, lighting of the ships, artillery firing and the erection of a cross. Espiritu Santo was being possessed in the names of the Holy Trinity, the Catholic Church, Saint Francis and his orders, the order of the Knights of the Holy Spirit, and, last but not least, His Majesty the King of Spain (Quiros 1876 I: 310ff).

shoulders, people are prevented from returning inland as they depend on the sale of bulky cash crops to pay for school fees, clothes and other necessities.

The traditional links people had with those outside the area, already weakened by depopulation and migration, are also distorted by the attraction of the facilities at regional centres such as Lamap, boasting air-field, wharf, health centre, post office, and large shops as well as police station, court house and taxis for the main hospital, airport and administrative centre in the north of Malakula (figs 1 and 2; map 5). South Malakula is certainly not an ethnic category and it cannot be defined on linguistic grounds either. It is one of the most diverse linguistic areas in the world: there are six well-established vernacular languages and three or more others have disappeared or are remembered only by a few. Jean-Michel Charpentier (1982: 41) documented the linguistic diversity of the whole southern half of the island (map 3), of which South Malakula only represents the extreme south-east. Occasionally, people may feel a community of interests opposed to those of people in other areas of the country. Mostly, it is an area where modern facilities bring people together and strengthen or renew traditional links. It is, however, a category that people refer to, as a result of a process that could be compared to what Ernst (1999) called 'entification', by which the much stronger pressure of multi-national resource development leads the Onabasulu people of the Great Papuan plateau of Papua New Guinea to define clans and ethnic groups where former categories were not very precise.

The last census (National Statistics Office 2000) gives less detail on the mainland of Malakula than on the smaller surrounding islands because the census units are islands whatever their size. In 1999 the Maskelynes Islands had 944 inhabitants, Axamb 567 and Avox 169 inhabitants. From a comparison between the census data and the number

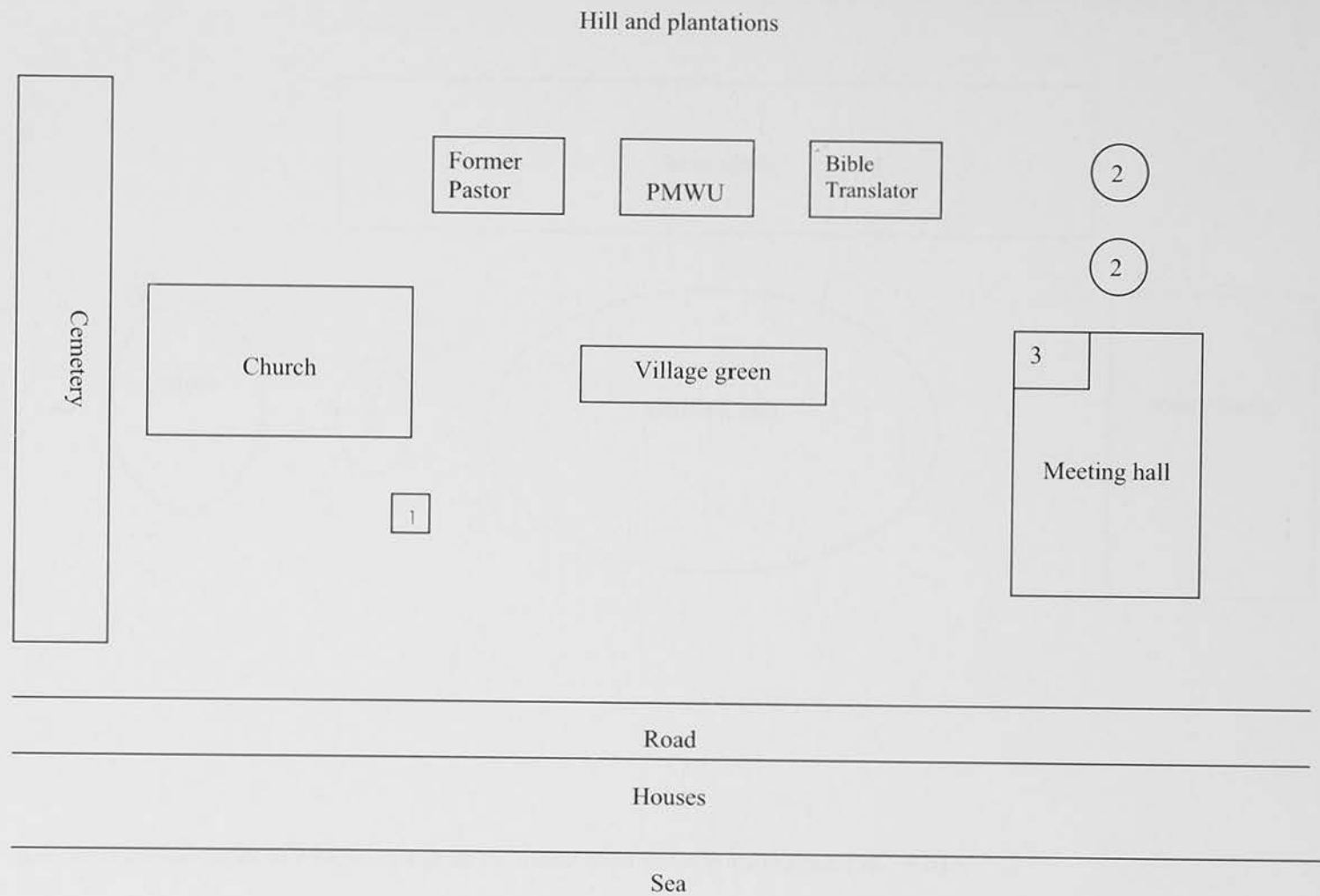


Figure 5a The centre of Pelongk today
Legend: 1 Bell, 2 Water tanks, 3 Telephone

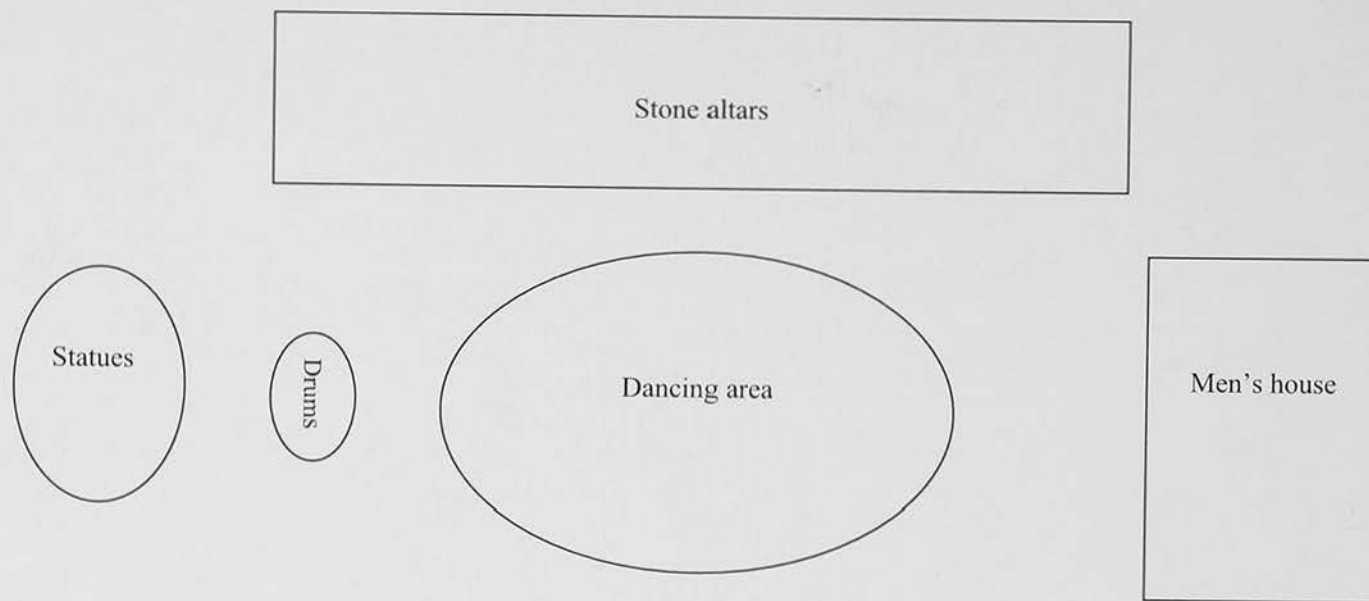


Figure 5b The ritual centre of a pagan village in the Maskelynes (after Watt-Leggatt 1902: 97f)



Figure 6
Church gong in Pelongk



Figure 7
Lamap church

Répartition des parlers du sud de Malakula



Map 3

Linguistic map of southern Malakula (Bonnemaïson
1996: 108, after Charpentier 1982)

of votes cast in the 1998 elections, the population of the villages of the mainland can be estimated as follows: Lamap, 1,000 inhabitants, Raniemb, 100 inhabitants, Farun and Oxai, 200 inhabitants each. The population of the whole area of South Malakula is thus about 3,200 (more than 40% of whom below the age of 15).

The concentration of facilities in Lamap is due to the presence of the harbour of Port Sandwich, named and admired by Cook, and which later attracted traders and a French military outpost (see chapter 3). It is also the seat of a large Catholic mission, whereas the other villages of the area are predominantly Presbyterian (chapters 3 and 4). Lamap, which includes about 8 villages for its 1,000 inhabitants, is thus both at the centre and cut off from the surrounding villages on sectarian grounds – although in the last 20 years such tensions have decreased greatly. The established churches have relaxed their opposition to inter-faith unions, tacitly accepting that the residence of the new couple determines their religious denomination, following a similar principle to that which brought back peace in Europe after the religious wars of the 16th century – *cuius regio eius religio*. At the same time, more combative confessions such as the Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) have gained a foothold. They often have separate hamlets of their own, following disputes after new adherents quit the main church of their village. The Presbyterian villages are grouped into two ‘sessions’, Axamb and Maskelyne, which are supposed to have a pastor each – if they can afford to pay his salary – and organize regular meetings of church elders and other affiliated organizations such as the Presbyterian Women Missionary Union (PWMU) (fig 3). Frequent contacts within the session, reinforced by marriages, develop a feeling of belonging to a community beyond the village or small island, and allow people to understand each other’s vernacular languages, which are used along with Bislama, the national lingua franca which developed from Pidgin English. In their dealings with Lamap people, however, only a

few, often the oldest, are able to do without Bislama. French is the language of education in Lamap, whereas English is taught in the other villages. The two groups traditionally vote for opposed political parties – although here again post- Independence politics have created new divisions that crosscut old rivalries.

Justice

People bring their disputes to a hybrid network of official and unofficial courts, of which gossip could be considered the lowest level (cf. Brison 1992) and the Supreme Court the summit. Officially, at the time of my fieldwork in 1997-1999, the lower courts were the Island Courts, presided over by a professional magistrate (nowadays most likely to be an indigenous citizen of Vanuatu from another island) assisted by local justices and the police. The tendency in recent years has been to informally delegate maximum responsibility to unofficial courts presided over by local chiefs. In 2001 these courts were finally given recognition. However, we will see in chapter 6 that this is not always very efficient in South Malakula as chiefs do not have a very strong influence. Nevertheless, the institution of chiefship, a legacy of the colonial regime, is endowed with a mystique of prestige and power and it flourishes as people have developed a hierarchical series of chiefly courts modelled on official courts. The most common cases to come before them are petty theft, claims for child maintenance or compensation, as well as the damage done to the gardens by trespassing cattle and pigs. Outside Lamap only the more serious offences, severe injuries and incest in the nuclear family are reported to the police. The police and the Island Court have ceased to be of help in several domains, the most serious ones being witchcraft and land disputes. Local chiefs deal with witchcraft accusations which to my knowledge are not brought to the official courts. A belief in the existence of witchcraft is widespread, but there is a reluctance to make accusations openly – unless an unusual series of deaths causes a

This image cannot be made available in ORA at this time

Figure 8

The Ezekiel family at breakfast, Oxai

This image cannot be made available in ORA at this time

Figure 9

Kilya and his family eating laplap at Ps Mark's farewell
dinner, Pelongk

panic in a village.⁵ Normally people live with their doubts, fears and anger and keep more than superficially good relationships with the people they suspect. The same is true for many peccadillos and more serious offences committed by relatives and long term neighbours: they may cause the culprit to lose his or her position in the church, while nevertheless staying on good terms with individual members of the community. Only rarely do the targets of witchcraft accusations have to leave the village. Mostly, new communities break away from the major villages after religious quarrels. People only leave if they are not among the original land owners – which shows that the good relationships between neighbours is linked to the development of the villages as Christian communities (cf. chapters 3 and 4).

Land disputes, unlike witchcraft cases, are often publicly debated. Some cases are famous beyond their island of origin – one national politician lost his seat and retired from politics in part because a community which was aggrieved as a result of a land dispute denied him their crucial votes. But often other offences can hide resentment arising from conflicting land claims. Major land claims are rarely resolved by any courts, official and unofficial alike, as we will see in chapter 6.

Daily spaces and times

True to their missionary origins, the social centre of most recent coastal villages is the church, with the exception of Lamap where the main church serves the whole peninsula. This is also true of the current layout of the village of Pelongk, a village that probably existed on the same location as before conversion. Modern Pelongk is surprisingly close to Watt-Leggatt's (1902: 97f) description of a traditional village in the Maskelynes

⁵ Witchcraft is discussed in chapter 4, where I also explain why I prefer to avoid the distinction between sorcery and witchcraft.

early in the twentieth century (fig 5). At the centre was the *amil* or village square at one end of which stood the men's house and at the other end the sculptures commemorating the ritual status of men (cf. Chapters 4 and 6). Drums stood in the middle of the square where people danced around them; women were only allowed there at the occasion of major feasts. Around the square were stone altars on which pigs were killed. Today a village square is to be found in most villages, including those that were created recently. In Pelongk Christian buildings seem to have replaced the older ones on the same location. The *amil* in the centre of the village has become the rectangular village green, flanked by the community hall, still mostly used by men, and at the opposite side of the church, by a neo-traditional drum in-lieu of bell (fig 6). On the long side of the rectangle, next to the church, are the former house of the pastor, the village guesthouse and the new house of a Bible translator built in 1999. The green is the place for all communal activities, especially dances, communal meals and public celebrations. The concentration of religious activities in one large church in Lamap (fig 7) reflects the tighter control that the predominantly expatriate Catholic clergy still aspire to exercise on their flock, whereas the Presbyterians have long allowed non-ordained locals, once teachers and deacons, now elders, to officiate in the absence of a pastor (cf. chapter 3). In the Presbyterian villages the school nowadays is always separate from the church and at the periphery. In Lamap on the contrary the school is part of the centre, located in the same compound as the church, next to other official and collective buildings (fig 1). Lamap children thus learn from a very young age to come to the centre with their mothers or fathers – to church, hospital, telephone, or shop, before coming alone on errands and going to school with their peers. There is a greater sense of political unity of the whole Lamap area, transcending the old hostility between villages (cf. chapter 3) and diverging party loyalties. By contrast, in Uluveu (Maskelynes), in a much smaller space, a population of a similar size (about a thousand inhabitants) is clearly divided in



Figure 10

Liman and Sethric in their garden, Pelongk



Figure 11

Blessing of the yam harvest, Pelongk

three villages, each with its own centre, while the school is located just off the smallest village. As we will see in chapter 5, Christianity also transformed people's conception of time, based on Sunday observance which determines which other days are allocated for harvesting food and other jobs. Much in people's daily life is connected to the first convert's understanding of Christianity – in particular, changes in eating practices from hierarchical distinctions between cooking fires to family meals cooked on a single hearth and collective meals in community halls or in an open public space (figs 8 and 9) (see chapter 3). These days, the institution of the family meal suffers from drinking kava, the national drink of Vanuatu, which is best drunk on an empty stomach. Many men only come home late at night to eat whatever their women's folk have put aside for them.⁶

The daily and weekly rhythms of meals, garden and plantation work, kava, and religious services are enhanced by Christmas and other church festivals, weddings, baptisms and all kinds of meetings. Not the least frequent of these are visits by various governmental and non-governmental organizations, coming with educational purposes – telling people to respect the environment, dig proper toilets, start small businesses, etc. In a region that always had a high density of missionaries (Philibert 1982: 75) these campaigns are truly the new enterprise of conversion, led by groups of secular missionaries (Barker 2002: 5). More episodic are visits by national politicians and professional magistrates, who come perhaps once a year to hold a session of the Island Court in Lamap.

Livelihood

Gardens provide the main source of food (fig 10). Traditionally the most important crop

⁶ On the topic of kava, Lebot et al. (1992) provides an all-round introduction on botany, chemistry, economics, ethnobotany, and cultural and social significance.

was yam, whose growth cycle provided a way of counting successive months or moons. Today it remains a much appreciated crop whose annual harvest is celebrated with the blessing of the Catholic and Presbyterian churches alike (fig 11). Less demanding in labour as well as for the soil, introduced tubers such as manioc (cassava) are more likely to figure in the daily menu. Other important crops are various species of banana, taro, sweet potato, breadfruit and nut and fruit trees.

Malakula is surrounded by reefs with potentially rich resources everywhere depleted in the proximity of villages. The capture of many species is regulated or forbidden by national law, but an exception is made for the annual hunting of turtles, which coincides with the blessing of the first yam harvest of the year, a church ceremony taking place between February and March according to each village's custom.

The ritual significance of pigs, for which Malakula is famous in anthropological literature, brought missionary opposition to all forms of pig exchange. The colonial authorities equally condemned the physical proximity of people and pigs and insisted on the time consuming enclosure of animals. Even the most prominent converts resisted these restrictions and today pigs have kept much symbolic value, even if there are not many available any more (see chapters 3 and 5). Pigs are more common in Lamap, where they are frequently used in the settlement of minor disputes. Keeping large numbers of pigs would require considerable effort to grow the food they need, which is basically the same kind as humans require. Most families keep only one or two pigs which are fed with leftovers. Cattle have replaced pigs as the main source of meat since they feed at no cost and save people much labour by grazing and weeding coconut plantations. Beef served with rice is the dish expected by guests at virtually all major public and private occasions – weddings, church meetings, community celebration and



Figure 12

Maskelyne people sailing back from the mainland



Figure 13

The mainland seen from Peskarus, Maskelynes

grave building ceremonies. For lesser events, any meat will do: chicken, crab, seafood, tinned meat or fish. Family events and Sunday lunches are ideally accompanied by a traditional pudding – *laplap* in Bislama – of grated tubers or banana layered with meat, fish or vegetables and baked in an earth oven. The daily menu is more likely to consist of tubers and vegetables boiled in an imported saucepan – which have replaced more savoury but more time-consuming techniques of roasting food in bamboo or wrapped in leaves. We will see in chapter 3 that this change in cooking practice, about which Codrington (1891: 320) was already complaining, was fundamental to the conversion process. The loss of flavour is compensated for by coconut cream and chilies or imported additives, sugar, salt, curry powder and monosodium glutamate (*vet-sin*) which can represent an important part of daily expenses and bring with them obesity and diabetes.

The main source of income is copra, made by drying the flesh of coconuts, as well as cocoa and kava. The latter, *piper methysticum*, is a local shrub of the pepper family, whose roots are made into a mild narcotic drink (cf. Lebot et al. 1992). It was not drunk traditionally in South Malakula, but since Independence it has replaced the daily consumption of alcohol and has also become a source of income. Its main market abroad is with pharmaceutical companies. People feel impoverished as the prices of copra and cocoa have endured a long decline relative to imported commodities and the price of kava collapsed after a short boom in 1998 – however, the future of the crop is ensured by a solid local and national consumption.

A source of riches, as Speiser (1923) already observed, plantations are also a problem as the space left for gardening becomes smaller or further from the villages. Throughout the area there are great variations in the quantity and quality of land available for

gardens and plantations. An aerial view of Lamap (fig 1) shows the extent of coconut plantations (in lighter green). The whole peninsula is under cultivation and so are most of the islets. The Maskelyne people are generally worse off in their small archipelago, and they travel several hours by canoe to distant gardens lend by relatives on nearby islands or on the mainland (figs 12 and 13). Elsewhere along the coast cultures do not extend inland more than three kilometres due to the lack of good roads but it is less of a problem due to reduced population densities. The people of Axamb have little land on their islet but claim and cultivate gardens and plantations of a large area approximately between Farun and Oxai.

Past and present

Modern institutions reflect many pre-Christian features (chapters 3 and 4). The Protestant Churches in particular offer men and women possibilities for promoting themselves and gaining successive titles in a spirit comparable to that of the most prominent pre-Christian institution, the grade hierarchies. Much research has been done on grade hierarchies which dominated the ritual life of most areas in central and north Vanuatu (from Deacon 1934 and Layard 1942 to Guiart 1951, Vienne 1984 and Jolly 1991 among others). Grades were obtained through initiation into a society and through successive pig-killing ceremonies accompanied by masked dances, conferring prestige expressed as rights to wear specific decorations, to perform dances, or to have them performed at one's death. In South Malakula, several of these societies existed for men and women, the most famous being *namangki* and *naluan*. Some elements of these rituals have been incorporated in contemporary celebrations – *naluan* songs and dances can be performed at Christmas and at grave-building ceremonies (see chapter 5). Among the privileges and burdens of rank was the obligation of having food cooked on separate fires for people of different status. This was maintained until the last pagans

converted, keeping separate hearths in a hamlet of two or three persons (chapter 4). This eating pattern was so entrenched that conversion to Christianity was essentially understood as an inversion of traditional cooking manners (chapter 3).

The family

It has been curiously difficult for anthropologists of Malakula and neighbouring islands (at least Ambrym) to agree on a term to designate kinship groups. Part of the difficulty was that such groups were in principle also residential units known by words that meant 'place' or 'village'. This led Deacon to ponder about the use of a single word for 'clan' and 'village' (1934: 52ff)⁷ and others to propose the category of 'parish' (Patterson 1976: 23f). A range of Bislama words have been incorporated in the local languages to describe new relationships after conversion, migration and demographic upheavals: *ples* ('place'), *famle* ('family'), *nakamal* ('men's house') and finally, *nasara*. The latter originally meant a dance area but in Malakula has a wide range of meanings, most importantly the group of people who originate from the same place (see chapter 6). In the thesis, I will mostly use the word family (*famle*), with the two meanings of nuclear family and group of agnatic descendants, and *nasara*, to express the unity of people and place.

The kinship system and the rules of land inheritance remain in theory the same as before conversion, although they were not immune from influences linked to demographic changes, migrations, colonial alienation of land and post-independence developments (chapter 6). Family membership and land ownership are normally transmitted in the male line; the theory is that illegitimate children can only inherit the land of their biological father. The kinship terminology is of a type frequent in Vanuatu, akin to

⁷ In his unpublished notes Deacon also refers to mythical ancestors of 'houses' (n.d.: 16006).

Omaha systems. The brothers of the father are called fathers, the sisters of the mother, mothers and their children (or parallel cousins) are all called brothers and sisters, while specific terms apply to the mother's brothers, the father's sisters and their descendants (or cross-cousins). 'Uncle' (*ankel* in Bislama) is a reciprocal term referring to the mother's brother as well as to the sister's son; 'aunt' (*anti*) refers to the father's sisters. I sometimes follow these usages. The descendants of the aunt and uncle – the first generation of cross-cousins – enjoy an informal or 'joking' relationship and a man's preferred marriage is to the daughter of the daughter of his aunt.

Names and spelling

Islands and villages of Vanuatu are often known by different names, some of which have gone out of fashion. Before Independence in 1980, Malakula used to be called Malekula or, especially by the French, Mallicolo. Locally, the name Maskelyne refers only to Uluveu, the main inhabited island of the Maskelyne Archipelago. I have generally attempted a compromise between the accurate phonetic rendering of names, local usage and conventions for the rendering or the writing of vernacular words. Not much distortion will occur if the readers pronounce most consonants as in English and vowels as in Italian, apart from *ü* and *ö* which should be pronounced as in German. In South Malakula as elsewhere in Vanuatu, there is a lot of variation in pronunciation and spelling for the sound that is most often written as *b*, but which could be pronounced as [p], [mb], or [mbr] as in the word *būlbūl*. The consonant *x*, equivalent to German [ch], does not exist in Bislama and poses a problem to local people who write it sometimes with a *k*, or with an *h* and often drop it in initial position. Axamb can be spelt *Akamb* or *Ahamb*, and Oxai can be spelt *Okai*, *Ohai* or *Hokai*. Following the dominant local practice I omit *x* at the beginning of personal or place names, Ailongbel, for example, instead of 'Xailongbel' which would appear very strange to local people. I have usually

kept the original spelling of first names of European or biblical origin, unless the bearers of the names themselves spelled it differently – as Sethric instead of Cédric (re-spelled following the biblical name of Shethrak), or Betniko for Abed-Nego. A last source of variation is the use of vernacular prefixes: *na-* in front of nouns, *A-* in front of first names, *Pen-* and *Man-* in front of family names when the person is a woman or a man respectively.

2 The Argument

2.1 History

History is a growing concern for anthropologists of the Pacific. Nevertheless, as Thomas (1996: 120) observed, it is often difficult to overcome the anti-historical project that characterized the discipline as the study of social or cultural systems 'out of time'. A couple of general histories of Vanuatu (MacClancy 1980, Bonnemaïson 1996), although they do their best to use anthropological sources to provide some kind of indigenous perspective, remain mostly focused on a history of the colonization process and the emergence of national politics. So does Van Trease's (1987) *Politics of Land in Vanuatu* which is a history of colonial land alienation, its contestation by indigenous people of the New Hebrides, and its undoing with the abolition of non-indigenous ownership of land after Independence. The European bias is even stronger in studies on specific historical themes, such as Shineberg's (1967) history of the sandalwood trade in the early nineteenth century, or Rodman's (2001) *Houses Far from Home*, which investigates the private and public values of colonial buildings.

No full-length ethnographic study of history (such as Borofsky's 1987 work on Pukapuka in the Cook Islands) has been published so far on Vanuatu. Most recent ethnographies show a concern for history, at least in an introductory chapter, even

though authors occasionally lapse into timeless descriptions. Particularly interesting are recent papers (Jolly 1999, Curtis 1999, Rio 2003), following the lead of earlier studies (Guiart 1970, Tonkinson 1981, Rodman 1983a), in which the authors show the importance of the context of conversion to Christianity for the understanding of contemporary society. Vienne (1984) studied the historical process of resettlement of depopulated areas in the Banks islands. Much historically informed work has been done on the John Frum millenarian movement on the island of Tanna in the south of the country (Guiart 1956, Brunton 1981, Lindstrom 1982, Bonnemaïson 1986). Elsewhere, research has often been on continuities, if not survivals, rather than change – focusing on the kinship system, grade hierarchies and pockets of resistance to Christianity.

The thesis focuses on the historical significance of conversion. I consider how the event transformed people's lives and how people reflect about it today, showing how Christianity influences understanding of history. Several papers concerning the inhabitants of other Pacific islands have been influential on my research. Without writing directly on history, Christina Toren (1999: part 1) writes insightfully on the presence of history in daily events, such as seating arrangements for kava drinking, or in places and people – through the memory of past marriages in individual genealogies, for example. In several chapters I follow the example of Roger Keesing (1992) and Nicholas Thomas (1991) both of whom have used individual biographies as starting points for studies of events that transformed the lives of their contemporaries, before turning to the perception of these historical figures by people living today. Michel Naepels's (1998) great work on the uses of history in New Caledonia gives many insights into the struggle of Kanak people to gain title over their land. His study, however, shies away from dealing directly with past events. Margaret Rodman's (1983a) paper on the pacification of Ambae is one of very rare essays that refers to

indigenous accounts of the conversion process and of the relation of that process with issues of land ownership over a long period. Similar issues have been considered through the pitiless investigation of European sources by Bronwen Douglas (1998), to whose work I will refer in chapter 3, which is partly based on missionary accounts. In a more theoretical way, Bensa (1990) interprets recurrent themes in Kanak myths as evidence of a shared structure – in particular, the transformation of weak strangers into chiefs through local people's parental nourishment. Such interpretation requires a systematic study of myths across a large area which is not the purpose of this thesis.

In so far as this thesis deals with events, however, the main inspiration comes from Sahlins's revaluation of historical events as a source for anthropological enquiry. Sahlins builds on a similar revaluation of events by historians of Europe from the 1970s onwards. Le Roy Ladurie (1979), Darnton (2001), Ginzburg (1976), Davis (1983, 1995) all scrutinized events that usually appeared trivial to reveal wider social tensions (cf. Burke 2001). Sahlins developed his own theoretical paradigm of 'the structure of conjuncture', meaning that social structure or cultural categories are modified at the same time as people act according to these same categories in answer to dramatic events such as European contact. His prime examples are the death and 'apotheosis' of Captain Cook on Hawaii (1981, 1985), the monopoly of European trade by Hawaiian chiefs (1981), and the Peloponnesian-like war between the states of Rewa and Bau in nineteenth-century Fiji (2000: chapter 11). Like Sahlins, Denning (1995) and Poyer (1993) also based some of their studies on violent events in the early history of the encounters between the indigenous people of the Pacific and Europeans. Few South Malakulan histories involve Europeans but many concern violent events. With the exception of Sahlins's essay on Fijian wars, the tendency in the current literature is to focus on the period of contact, studied through the writings of Europeans, perhaps in

reaction to the writings of an earlier period that tended to ignore the extent to which European contact had actually transformed local cultures. In this thesis, following the perspective of local narratives, Europeans are at best reduced to anecdotal roles,⁸ even in stories regarding the period of 'blackbirding', at the end of the nineteenth century, during which islanders were recruited or kidnapped to work on Australian and Fijian plantations or in New Caledonian mines⁹ (MacClancy 1980: 54ff). The oral narratives of South Malakula justify Thomas's afterthought (in the postface to the second edition of *Out of Time*), that contact was perhaps a non-event (1996: 126) – or, to adopt Sahlins's terminology, perhaps a mere happening. The near absence of Europeans in the narratives is partly explained by their weak presence in rural Vanuatu after Independence, as most planters have left. Administrative buildings and planters' houses have been taken over or lie in ruins; only the trees they planted are still standing. The absence of Europeans in the narratives reminds us that they do not give an impartial account of past events,¹⁰ not even of the original indigenous perception of these events, but are influenced by the modern social context, including disputes. However, they give deeper insight into the transformation of the society than missionary accounts contemporary to the events (chapter 3). Oral traditions can also be accurate, as the archaeologist José Garanger (1976:154) discovered long ago when he was led to excavate the thirteenth-century grave of a legendary chief in central Vanuatu. A sharp distinction between prehistory and history, determined for example by the coming of Captain Cook (Kirch and Sahlins 1992 I: 2) is not useful for studying oral traditions whose depth and reliability are independent of such an event. Similarly, Gosden's

⁸ There are some exceptions such as the history of the Nöbong family from Pelongk in the Maskelynes whose original land on the neighbouring island of Sakau (Xoti) had been entirely occupied by a colonial plantation which they eventually recovered, becoming comparatively affluent.

⁹ One of the stratagems used by the recruiters on the island of Tanna was to seize the men at dusk after they had drunk kava (Hagen and Pineau 1889: 324).

¹⁰ They attribute for example a great number of deaths to witchcraft rather than disease.

(2003: 16) definition of prehistory as 'history with all the words taken out' and his distinction between history and prehistory linked to the arrival of Europeans (ibid: 8, 15, 109) cannot be directly applied to oral histories. A better turning point than contact could be conversion but this is rather a change of era than a shift from prehistory into history.

Because archival research about European contact dominates Sahlins's perspective, he defines 'event' as a disruption of the ongoing order (2000: 301). In this thesis, reflecting debates among the narrators, the events are treated as much as constituting the present order than as disruptions of past orders. This perspective is similar to Poyer's (1993) ethnographic study of the *Ngatik Massacre*, which considers the massacre of the atoll's male population by a group of European-led adventurers as the founding moment of modern local society. The present population descends from the surviving women who married some of these adventurers and men from other islands. In South Malakula, conversion to Christianity in the midst of epidemics attributed to witchcraft plays a similar role in the histories, but it does not eclipse other stories such as the origins and migrations of the ancestors. The histories tell of the separate geneeses of the ancestors and of the migrations of individuals and families. Conversion likewise is an event that crosses several generations, which gives another historical perspective to the third generation of Christians compared to the people who were not born Christians. Similarly, all origin stories can be understood as variations of one plural event, as the narratives connect each family to a territory through the birth of their ancestor, but the significance and the distance in time of such events are a matter of debate. From a present perspective, stories of migrations can be understood as one singular process. Sahlins considers events mostly from the perspective of a political elite in Fiji and Hawaii rather than events concerning primarily the life of ordinary people – what

historians call 'History from Below' (Sharpe 2001). A similar criticism could be addressed to this thesis, but its bias is not so much about rank as about gender as it focuses mostly on the experiences of men. Men control the transmission of historical knowledge; women play an important role when the normal line of transmission through men is interrupted. Women are given a significant space in the analysis of their tombs in chapter 5, as well as in chapter 4 with the biography of Liis. In the other chapters women mostly appear through men's narratives as a link between families – a role which becomes prominent when a patrilineage becomes extinct and its land is claimed by the descendants of the uterine nephews of the last male land owners. During my fieldwork I had conversations with women about a range of issues that are not included in the present thesis, from folk tales to inter-island marriages and domestic violence.

2.2 Themes

The histories dealing with the three themes of origin, migration and conversion explain why people live where they are today, where they come from and where they could go back, as well as their relationships with other residents. They constitute the historical foundations of South Malakulan villages.

Histories are normally only transmitted in the context of patrilineal descent groups, i.e. the people who claim to descend in the male line from a single male ancestor of mythical origin. Instead of calling such groups clans or lineages I prefer to call them 'families', as this concept is less marked by anthropological debates outside of Vanuatu. As we will see in more detail in chapter 6 the local words used to designate families are evolving and cover multiple other meanings. A small number of specialists voice upon request an authorized version of their own family's history; they normally avoid dealing

with other families' histories unless there is a dispute or if the people concerned require it.

Families thus provide the context for the recitation of the histories as well as their subject, while their object is the preservation of each family's identity and means of subsistence. This context makes the family the institution most resolutely constitutive of historical continuity. Another fundamental institution such as the Church only takes its roots in the refoundation of society through conversion. The central character played by families as a subject of the histories, and the continuity of the family as an institution, explain each other. The importance of the family is not independent of successive transformations of the society. The establishment of the society of the first converts was marked by a strong emphasis on the nuclear family. After Independence, the movement towards restitution of lands to the original customary owners contributed to the revaluation of historical and customary knowledge associated with families (chapter 3). The Christian perspective also explains the reduced place given to the defunct grade hierarchies which were once so important. Similarly, the concept of 'place', which appeared central to some anthropologists who did the bulk of their fieldwork in the 1970s (Larcom 1980, Bonnemaïson 1996: chapter 6, 7 and 9) faded as a result of many people living away from their place of origin (but see Bolton 2003: chapter 4). However, as hierarchical concerns continue to be met through careers opened by the church, the relationship between family and place remains the topic of many histories, particularly in the context of land disputes (chapter 6).

2.3 Kastom and skul

'God and custom must be the sail and the steering – paddle of our canoe'.

Father Walter Lini, first Prime Minister of Vanuatu, 'Independence Address to the

Nation' (in Lini 1980: 62).

No study of Vanuatu can avoid a discussion of the concept of *kastom*, a Bislama word derived from the English 'custom'. The original meaning is that of 'pre-Christian traditions', but around the time of Independence the word became a central concept of political discourse (MacClancy 1983) and began to be much discussed locally by Christians as well as traditionalists (Jolly 1992, 1994; Facey 1995). Anthropologists remain fascinated with the wide range of meanings of *kastom* and related concepts throughout the Pacific (Keesing and Tonkinson 1982, Jolly and Thomas 1992, Babadzan 1999). The two most recent books published by anthropologists on Vanuatu focus on the concept (Tabani 2002, Bolton 2003).

My own research does not focus explicitly on *kastom*, since the concept is as yet rarely used in historical narratives. Instead, these narratives refer to the people and their traditions before they converted as 'heathen' (*hiden*), 'the law', 'dancing', or 'bush people' (chapters 3 and 4).¹¹ Rather, *kastom* is used, in opposition to *skul* (from English 'school' meaning 'Christianity' as well as 'education'), to refer to the complementary traditional and Christian dimensions of contemporary life. Indeed, I will argue that the introduction of a discourse on *kastom* coincided with the near completion of the conversion process. *Skul* has attracted considerably less anthropological attention, but it is central to this study as it expresses the various understandings of conversion to Christianity and the revolution in thinking about history as well as in daily life.

Kastom as an ideology is principally expressed in the national media by politicians, religious leaders, civil servants and sometimes businessmen with some ambiguity since

¹¹ One of the few uses of the word *kastom* in a narrative is in the restricted meaning of 'magic spell' (Appendix 4: Life of Longman).

it is their local roots and not their profession that allows them to speak with an authoritative voice on customary matters. At the same time, villagers appropriate this discourse and apply it to local issues. The work of Margaret Jolly (1992, 1994) has ensured that no other author would uncritically project the notion of *kastom* to pre-contact times. Nevertheless, there are few studies on the development of the concept outside the island of Tanna (Brunton 1981, Lindstrom 1982, 1990, Tabani 2002: 77-134). Lissant Bolton describes how she took part in the movement to extend *kastom* to women through a revival of women's traditions on the island of Ambae (2003: 183ff). Unlike her I do not think that the opposition between *kastom* and *skul* is inherited from the missionaries (2003: 11), who would have been more likely to refer to customs they wanted to extirpate, like pig exchanges, dancing and drumming, as 'heathen'. *Kastom* as a way of life implies a more sympathetic approach to local culture. Some open-minded missionaries or other Europeans would have had such a sympathetic approach but I am inclined to attribute to the people of Tanna the invention of the conceptual opposition between *kastom* and *skul*, which they used in the 1950s, two decades before it spread to places like Malakula. Several authors mention that the word was not included in a Bislama dictionary before 1977 (Lindstrom 1982: 317, Tabani 2002: 78, Bolton 2003: 11). But possibly the first printed use of the word is from Tanna, a quotation attributed to the prophetic figure of John Frum: *hold em strong custom belong you, you no hold em belong another man* (Guiart 1956: 165).¹² Guiart quotes another sentence in which *custom* is directly opposed to *school* (ibid.). Before the 1970s, the Christian population would refer to the pre-Christian world as 'darkness' (*ponpon* in the language of Farun, as used on a grave from the 1950s). The widespread adoption of the term *kastom* indicated a revaluation of the pre-Christian past, led by political and religious leaders

¹² 'Keep your own customs and give up those of foreigners'. Guiart wrote before the adoption of a standard spelling for Bislama.

such as Father Lini.¹³ By that time, the majority of the population was converted, and in most areas *kastom* could not be opposed to *skul* as conflicting ways of life, but was instead used as a reference to think about the pre-Christian heritage. Anthropologists, however, concentrated their work on the few areas, such as Tanna, South Pentecost and parts of Santo and Malakula, where people rejected Christianity and where *kastom* and *skul* could be opposed as different ways of life. There has been a tendency to consider *kastom* mostly as a national issue or as a discourse common to an entire island (Jolly 1994: 247ff, Deckker and Kuntz 1998, Tabani 2002). On the contrary, this thesis will focus on the context of conversion that allowed for the easy adoption of the concept of *kastom* shortly before Independence, analyzing the emergence of local forms of Christianity incorporating or rejecting various elements of the pre-Christian way of life.

The subject of Christianity was long neglected in anthropological studies of the Pacific, although it now arouses growing interest, particularly among Papua New Guinea fieldworkers who witness the fast transformation of Highlands societies. John Barker (1992: 152ff) called for an increased focus on the study of Christianity in Melanesia, regretting the ambivalence of anthropologists who were blaming missionaries for the destruction of traditional cultures and wrote ethnographies from which Christian converts and churches were absent, constructing fictions of an untouched traditional life. Another tendency has been to minimize the changes brought by colonization in Melanesia, claiming that 'the core values and reproductive process of the society remain intact' (ibid.: 150). Barker (1992: 154, 155) also criticized studies of conversion that focused on the extensive records of missionaries, at the risk of taking at face value their declarations about their policy and practice. Another risk is in neglecting the

¹³ Father Lini himself (1980: 15) wrote that it was in 1967, at the end of his second year of study in New Zealand, that he began to feel the need for the teaching of Melanesian culture, so that people would 'begin to respect their traditional heritage, culture, songs, dances, legends and stories which [are] fundamental to the future generations of Melanesian people'.

contributions of local Christian leaders – ‘teachers’ as they were called – and of the villagers themselves to the changes.¹⁴ Instead, to give a new orientation to the study of Christianity, Barker (156-161), inspired by Ranger, proposes to study the mixture of Melanesian and Christian religious forms as ‘Melanesian popular religion’. The danger of this model could be to draw a simplistic opposition between official and popular religion and to succumb to a theory of pagan survivals. In Vanuatu, the progressive delegation of authority to local clergy, particularly in the Presbyterian Church, reduces the contrast between official and popular theology. Local Christianity should be described in its own terms rather than as an imperfect adoption of a foreign model (cf. James and Johnson 1988: 12). Barker (*ibid.*: 163) himself is keen to draw a line between official Christian theologies and indigenous religious discourses – the official level providing the symbols that unite large groups and the indigenous one adapting Christian ideas to particular contexts.

3 Structure of the thesis

The arrangement of the chapters is broadly chronological, covering successively accounts of origin histories (chapter 1), migrations (chapter 2), ancient and recent conversions (chapters 3 and 4), funerary inscriptions (chapter 5) and a recent court case (chapter 6). These studies illustrate typical moments constitutive of the identities of the people of South Malakula, except for important aspects of contemporary life, such as business or politics, which are too recent to have led to coherent historical narratives. Each chapter concerns a few closely related families reflecting the variety of histories in the area. However, a focus on Axamb ensures continuity from chapter to chapter.

Chapter 1 deals with the mythical origins of the first inhabitants of the islet; chapter 2 is

¹⁴ Trompf, author of a major synthesis on Melanesian religions (1991), still refers to Christianity with an exotic bias. He dedicates chapters to traditional religions and cargo cults but his treatment of missions endorses missionaries’ views and he only considers Melanesian Christians when they break away from Metropolitan churches.

wholly dedicated to the histories of people who now live there and half of chapters 3 and 4 concern Axamb, through the early conversion of its inhabitants and the later coming of some of the last 'bush' people. The funerary inscriptions of chapter 5 have been chosen from a great number of villages but important examples include the graves of Axamb's first converts. Chapter 6 alone does not concern Axamb directly but has implications for the whole region.

The chronological ordering of the thesis follows the history of South Malakula from the point of view of its inhabitants rather than explorers and colonizers. If the selection and analysis reflect my external point of view, a careful understanding of the context and meaning of historical narratives can recover a local dimension. In particular, variations in detail reveal land interests or the moral standing of the narrators regarding stories of the past.

The fundamental events of origin, migration and conversion shape people's views of history. People living in their ancestral village, near the place of emergence of their ancestors, see history differently from migrants who have perhaps never seen their place of origin. But origin stories are themselves seen from a Christian perspective. The theme of origin is also important as the basis for local understandings of the national ideology of customary ownership of the land, as defined for example in the Constitution. Ancient relationships between families are considered in the light of present issues between neighbours and relatives. The two themes of origin and migration form a complementary opposition which becomes dramatic when the identity of a family is challenged in a dispute about their origins (chapters 1, 3 and 6) In most other chapters, arguments about the historical truth refer to a Christian perspective. The title of the thesis – *Through the Vale of Darkness* – captures the central position that the

conversion to Christianity has in the history of Malakula. It comes from a hymn that was chosen by Vimbong, a man of Farun whose life history is presented in chapter 4, to represent the meaning of his life and the history of his people: their feeling of salvation when the end of epidemics and witchcraft killings coincided with the decisive moment of conversion.

Chapter 1 (The Three Halves of a Shell) begins with the account about a minor dispute, and ultimately embraces the total history of Axamb's founding families. The various interpretations of the origin myth provide a legal charter which structures all the subsequent histories down to the present. The livelihood of most people in Malakula is not grounded in their own origin myth since they descend from migrants from the interior, or rely on the land of extinct relatives. Chapter 2 (Three Families) considers the ancient migrations, prior to the period of conversion, of three families of 'bush' people, from hills in the north west to Axamb over a few generations. The nature of the past and present relationships of these families with one another and with their Axamb hosts is critically examined from various angles. The micro politics of these disputes is analyzed as a process of mutual encompassment, inspired by Sahlins's (2000) and LiPuma's (2000) analyses of culture contact. The societies of South Malakula and their vision of history were thoroughly transformed by their conversion to Christianity. Chapter 3 (The New Life) considers the conversion of two places: of Lamap to Catholicism and of Axamb to the Presbyterian faith, 1880s-1930s. A strong model of continuous missionary presence in the first case leads to confrontations and deaths. In the second case, conversion at a distance is more immediately successful. In both cases, however, there are ambiguities in the relationship between the missionaries and potential converts as they push their respective agendas. Conversion brought a shift from an emphasis on grade hierarchies and sexual segregation to relative democratization around family and

community life. This chapter gives rise to an extension of the theory of encompassment to culture contact and culture change. In Chapter 4 (The Last Converts), I consider three life histories, of one woman and two men among recent converts and now aged about sixty, in order to give an alternative perspective to accounts of early conversions derived from archival sources or semi-legendary narratives. The process was dominated by the disappearance of the pagan world through depopulation and conversion. Conversion was presented as salvation obtained through praying, education, economic endeavours, and marriage. The responsibility for the high death rate was attributed to the evil side of the pagan inheritance, witchcraft. However, there was a fundamental ambiguity as some early Christian leaders were shot as witches, although they were men who believed in the regeneration of their kin through the avenues of the new faith.

The last two chapters consider new supports and arenas for the making of history: funerary inscriptions (chapter 5) and court cases (chapter 6). In these contexts, the use of writing transforms the relation to history, as does the emphasis in the courts on material evidence and coherence of claims. Both graves and court cases have also become topics of history themselves, the former as evidence of ancient occupation of the land, the latter as a decisive moment in the foundation of new communities. Through the development of concrete tombstones and the growing complexity of epitaphs commemorating the dead from the late 30s to the present, chapter 5 illustrates the complete Christianization of the area along with the abandonment of the interior of the island. A revaluation of the pagan past followed, which saw the attribution of an epic character to early church leaders and some of the last pagans. The monuments of ordinary people reveal a fascination with literacy and time-reckoning as well as the new career possibilities offered by church and by education. Ancient inscriptions compared to recently rebuilt graves show changes in Christian thinking about history. By focusing

on a recent dispute on the small island of Avox, chapter 6 (The Judge and the Historians) brings forth the tension between claims of original ownership and their negation. The dispute was transformed by judicial inquiry which encouraged new approaches to history relying on material evidence, leading to wider land claims referring to events at the limit of historical memory. The legal process itself becomes an object of history, in a narration of the foundation of a new village after the dispute, set in biblical terms. The chapter shows that the methodology of the Island Court, similar to a case study in legal anthropology, prevented the magistrate from grasping the multiple dimensions of the dispute. Another difference between local and official courts is that the former tend to favour the status quo and claims based on a sense of place and belonging, while the latter are more open to emerging ideas and principles about history and land ownership. As much as migrations and conversion, the courts have now transformed the way people think about history.

4 Fieldwork

The fieldwork which led to this thesis focused on land disputes and related issues, in South Malakula and in Vanuatu. I spent two periods of about eleven months in the country from July 1997 to May 1998, and from December 1998 to November 1999. Several weeks were spent working in the archives of court houses in the capital Port Vila, the second city Luganville on Espiritu Santo and about a month in the administrative centre of Lakatoro in the north of Malakula, working among others on the Avox court case discussed in chapter 6. In South Malakula itself the amount of time I spent in the various villages is not reflected by the relative importance given to these villages in the thesis. Since I attempted to be as comprehensive as possible in my historical coverage, I spent many months in Lamap and the Maskelynes, although eventually I found case studies from smaller villages more manageable and revealing.

Invitations to weddings and grave building ceremonies gradually allowed me to expand my area of research and develop a network of hosts and friends in each of the groups of villages. As new questions appeared I returned several times to each of these villages for periods of several weeks. From a focus on land issues, the research evolved into a work on the uses of history when it became clear that land claims were mostly about history and, conversely, that most historical narratives had implications for land claims. Only the last chapter is based on a case study of a land dispute and on a critical discussion of studies in legal anthropology and the difficulty to apply their methodology to historical disputes. The first two chapters present histories of origins and migrations, of the kind that would form the basis of land claims, but put in a broader perspective. From a pragmatic point of view, the whole thesis could be seen as a preparation for the understanding of local land disputes.

While most people in South Malakula were interested in my project, it soon appeared that many insisted on having control over the narration of the history of their families. This meant that I could not rely on some knowledgeable informants to work on any other history than that of their own families. This caution often extended to individual members of a family, who would or should not speak about family matters on their own. Eventually, the best method proved to be to hold meetings with the senior representatives of each identified family living in a village. The topics covered in these meetings included genealogies, oral traditions and descriptions of gardens and plantations with estimates of cash-crops production. This provided the basic routine of my work, complemented with interviews and informal discussions on various other issues and occasional visits to the places mentioned in the histories, if they were not too far from the villages (fig 16). The thesis focuses on some rich but still manageable case studies each illustrating some important themes of historical narratives and the main



Figure 14

The hamlet of Ponaigk in Lamap. My fieldwork base in Lamap.

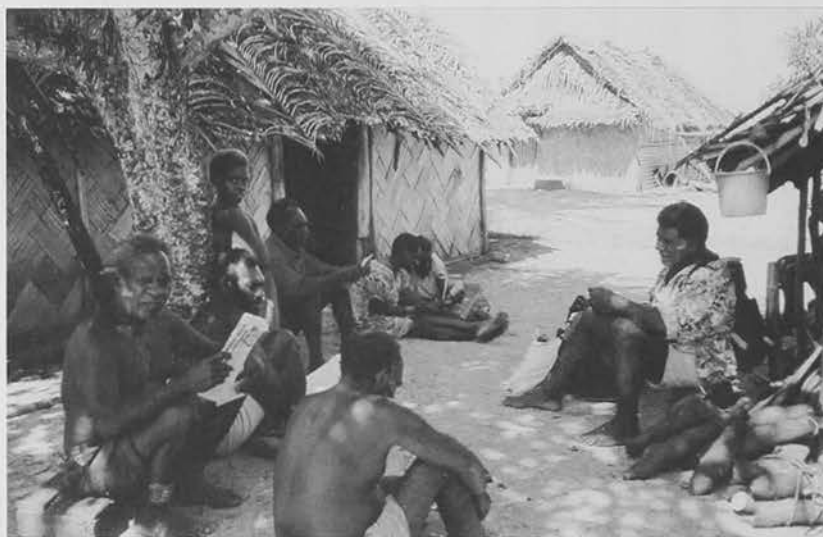


Figure 15

Farun people going through newspapers and pictures

contexts for the recitation or writing of history.

Apart from missionary publications, most sources used in this thesis are local, oral narratives, inscriptions and documents prepared for the courts. A few archaeological or archival references allow limited cross-checking of local narratives. However, the truth of the details of the histories is not an issue in this thesis. My two main concerns were to write a narrative, if fragmentary, history of South Malakula and to investigate people's approaches to history: how histories relate to the present situation of society. This perspective allows us to respect people's presentation of their history with their own beliefs, doubts and disputes. Constantly, people had to be reassured that I was not coming as a judge and would not choose between competitive versions or otherwise find out 'the truth'.

The language of the meetings was Bislama, which was spoken currently by all but a few old women. Having chosen to work in the various villages of the area, in order to be able to grasp significant variations as well as convergences, I only acquired a superficial knowledge of the six vernacular languages. Still, many words and concepts are used differently in Bislama and local languages. I have tried to give an account of these divergences and the significance of the adoption of Bislama concepts in the local languages. Bislama has also become the most commonly written language, as people forget much of their schooling in English or French and are not confident either to write in their own languages. Private letters and memoirs, minutes of meetings and funerary inscriptions are mostly written in Bislama these days. The language makes inroads into the institutions of the state of Vanuatu, certainly when they deal with local matters: the whole judicial process of the Island Court, from the initial filing of cases to the court decision, are all in Bislama. In chapter 6, we will see how this growing use of the

national *lingua franca* is linked to the emergence of new ways of thinking about history.

Many anthropologists have used pseudonyms or have otherwise refrained from naming their informants, or even the area where they worked (e.g. Herdt 1981). This could have been an option when dealing with sensitive topics such as family histories and land disputes. However, the contribution of the thesis as a work on the history of South Malakula requires me to present the identities of the narrators and their ancestors. In any case, even hidden by pseudonyms, specific histories would be identified by people of the area who would only be confused and perhaps disappointed. To resolve this dilemma I have focused on histories which were generally well known in their communities and about which the existence of different versions, indeed disputes, was also public knowledge. I have often omitted details of claims or genealogies, or entire stories that could have exposed sensitive knowledge. In the case of the land dispute in Avox, the court hearing and the following split of the community have brought everybody's contentions in the open. Publicity was certainly a request of the people who told me life histories, especially Vimbong who has long wanted to publish his account (chapters 3 and 4). Similarly, funerary inscriptions were always meant to be read by the public. I took some risks in chapter 2 in presenting different versions of a well-known story but that express a covert tension between related families. In all cases dealing with open or covert disputes, however, I have tried not to give prominence to any version in order to minimize the impact on the evolution of the relationships between the families.

The oral narratives in the following pages of this thesis would be called *histri* ('history') by most of the people of South Malakula, in Bislama as well as in their own languages. The histories of origin, when presented out of context, could also be called in Bislama



Figure 16
Mansip at his ancestral place



Figure 17
Telephone booth in Oxai

kastom stori, a category that includes traditional stories and folk tales. In local languages, folk tales are better distinguished from genuine histories and myths. *Nabol* is a word used in several of the vernaculars meaning 'history of little importance', from *bol*, 'talk'. There are other words for history: *naselvarin* in Farun, which could be derived from words for 'stone' (*var*) or 'road' (*sal*). In the Maskelynes, *nix* ('a vine') can be used by old people for 'history'. In the same language, alternative words for history can be *batxumbol*, meaning 'the most important talk' from *batxu* ('a tree') and *bol* ('talk'), or *batxumndun* (from *ndun*: family), meaning 'genealogy' (*laen* in Bislama). For young generations and especially in the context of land disputes it is the Bislama word *histri* that is now most frequently used: *nahistri limlimbong*, 'this history is false'.

Chapter 1: The Three Halves of a Shell: History and Land Disputes in Axamb

'We may best start with the beginning of things'
(Malinowski 1954:111)

The main wind is from the south, *Nrang Pajaras*, 'the wind that blows from the sea'. The wind that comes from Farun is called *Siv Xoslau*, an old place name named after a bird in the mangrove over there. From Luoimalngai, the wind is called *Siv Loxonbur*, another place. Straight at Lovxu in front of us at the main passage is *Nrang Siv*, that one too is strong. At Farun it is *Siv Piesxai*, near Levor on the other side of Lexumb. At Matlelamb it is *Siv Lamb*, it is strong. Straight from the islet of Lönur is *Naxandru*, it is not strong any more, it already blows in our back. From the open sea beyond the point of Tomman is *Naxandrunglös*.

(The winds of Axamb – Betniko and others)

1 Axamb

The small island of Axamb is divided into two parts, leeward and windward. The southern side facing the open ocean is less hospitable with a wave-battered rocky reef appropriate neither for fishing nor for landing canoes. The peaceful northern side is Axamb's window on the world, where people live, where they bathe, where canoes land and ships anchor. It is close enough from the mainland to see people walking on the beach but too far to recognize them. All houses and most gardens and plantations are on the northern half of the islet, for ease of access as well as protection from the most violent open sea winds. Axamb is too small to provide enough land for people's main gardens and plantations which are all on the big island of Malakula, across the channel. There is but one name for winds blowing from the open sea to Axamb from south-west to south-east, but seven or more winds come from the big island, named after valleys, hills and islets which can all be seen from the northern side of Axamb as a gigantic stage set. From those directions have come the ancestors of the majority of Axamb's inhabitants and their mothers. The true autochthons themselves claim to descend from



Map 4

Axamb and Farun (Government map of 1979)

twins born of a shell on the reef, thanks to the magic intervention of some of the mainland people who caused the shell to split.

This chapter is based on this myth of origin of the Axamb people and on the histories that derive from it. In many ways, the various interpretations of this myth determine the relationship of the Axamb people among themselves, the autochthons as well as those who flocked to the island from all the surrounding areas. The central characters of the myth are the twins, after which each half of the island is named along the division between the peaceful and wilder sides. I will begin the chapter with a description of a dispute about the management of a section of a reef involving three families on the north-east side of the island. Beyond the practical issues of the case, the understanding of the respective positions of each of these families requires knowledge of a range of myths and histories from the times of the emergence of the first ancestors to the present. The origin myth alone provides the ultimate reference of the history of Axamb, one that structures the narration of all later events, as well as the residence and legal status of all inhabitants of Axamb and their relationship with the mainland. 'The story of origin literally contains the legal charter of the community', as Malinowski (1954: 116) said of a similar situation in the Trobriands. While this chapter thus presents a model of the most fundamental histories of a place, in later chapters we will see how this legal charter was made more complex through the historical events of migrations and conversion to Christianity.

The cohesion of the historical corpus of Axamb is unique in South Malakula. One of the main reasons is the compact but substantial size of the islet, just large enough to form a coherent territory, and its clear demarcation from the main island in an isolated position in the middle of a bay. It links other places together while remaining distinct from them

all. On larger sites, or when several islets are near one another, or nearer to the main island, no single overarching myth dominates the histories and lives of the people. In these cases, as we will see in chapter 6, conflicts about ownership rights involve less often variants of the same history but rather distinct histories that have few if any elements in common. Another reason for the continuity of history in Axamb is that the islet was not abandoned during the depopulation period and, on the contrary, served as a refuge for people fleeing from violence or disease on the main island. Axamb was also an early centre for Christianity, sending teachers to other villages and taking in new converts (see chapters 2 to 4). In other places, villages were abandoned and new Christian communities founded on the coast where people did not use to live before – such as Farun just opposite Axamb.

The histories on which land claims are based cover a variety of issues, from marriage to migration overseas, that could be argued to amount to a general ethnography. However, as in the other chapters of the thesis, I have chosen to focus on the perception and transmission of history in the context of families. In later chapters, some histories will be presented that do not deal specifically with the island itself and its ownership. They are the histories of people who migrated to Axamb from the mainland and of the conversion of the islet to Christianity.

While I was on the islet, I had the most intense sessions of my entire time in Malakula with people eager to tell me their histories. As I was spending day after day in special sessions with the historical authorities of each family, I had little time to recall what had been said in other sessions, so that the particular cohesion of the histories did not strike me until I began writing this chapter. Whereas the chapter begins with a presentation of a dispute, the methodology was very different from a case study, but involved

systematic work with representatives of all self-identified Axamb families – including many whose histories are not commented upon in this thesis. Indeed, one of the objectives of this study is to show that a single case study of a dispute cannot do justice to the complexity of the ramifications of conflicts of histories. This would also be true of an extended case study, such as advocated long ago by Victor Turner (1967: chapter 5) (see chapter 6). One of the reasons is that the time-scale of these disputes is often very long and the chance for most of the potential conflicts to arise during a period of fieldwork is small. It can be several years, perhaps a generation, before a specific dispute is voiced again. Another reason is that the histories are often in the background of disputes that appear to be about more limited topics, such as the management of the reef. Only a systematic approach can reveal the multiple dimensions of land disputes, which appear at different times. A new garden clearing can, for example, bring two individuals to court while a third potential claimant remains momentarily outside the dispute.

Another limitation of case studies is to isolate a particular dispute from its context, as authors tend to do when they want to use a dispute to analyse collective representations. Epstein (1969: 165) recognises this limitation and underlines the need to study the relationship between various disputes in order to understand the connection between land litigation and political process. However, his approach remains based on cases that happened during his fieldwork and relies therefore on chance. Epstein's interest in the political process also has more to do with rivalries between influential men rather than the perception of history as such. He shows how experts assert their own personal prestige by orchestrating the defeat of a rival, or how some witnesses blatantly contradict themselves in successive cases, because their support is determined more by their relationship with the parties in disputes than by the transmission of particular

historical tradition (*ibid*: 177ff). The role of witnesses is considered differently in this chapter and in the final chapter on land disputes (chapter 6). The present chapter focuses on the relationship between families or how they oppose or support each other in various cases; the role of the expert historians is seen in the perspective of their family's interest more than their own individual political advancement. In chapter 6, however, the role of expert historians is considered in a dispute that reached the official Island Court, with witnesses coming from other areas and whose motivations were less connected to the affairs of the community where the dispute occurred.

The following analysis will focus on the context of the land disputes by going in depth into the histories supporting the main claims on ownership of land in the islet. I would ask my Axamb readers to recall that it has never been my objective to find out who were the true owners of the land or the most senior families. I hope that the present analysis will help those who try to understand the relationship between the different families and perhaps avoid unilateral decisions if the official courts ever consider Axamb disputes. In Axamb, the island itself determines the limits of the land claims and the interconnected stories refer to each other; on the mainland, a problem could be that these limits overlap and form an unending chain, effectively limiting any attempts at a comprehensive analysis. To some extent this is also true for Axamb families, since all of them claim land on the mainland, at least by secondary matrilineal rights; for this reason this analysis will be limited to claims to aboriginal ownership of Axamb. Former studies of land disputes seem to have shied away from the historical matter of the disputes in favour of the disputing process, i.e. the research of 'truth' in debate (Goldman 1983, Lindstrom 1990) or the process by which claims are made. Borofsky (1987), while not considering land disputes, queries the very possibility of transmission of history, stressing the contradictions between early ethnographical accounts and oral

tradition. Naepels's (1998) study of land claims in New Caledonia is an example of a similar approach, omitting most data about the narrative content of the cases, as Bensa (1999) regretted in his review of that book. On the contrary, a detailed analysis of the genealogies of an entire area, like Guiart's study of the Loyalty Islands, avoids the danger of biasing local disputes by its very completeness and fidelity to the original information (Guiart 1992), but it becomes more difficult to engage with its analysis. The present chapter similarly attempts to keep a balance between the various traditions, even if some versions of the stories have to be published in appendix. The focus is on the divergences between traditions and how they reflect, as much as interests in land, considerations on historical truth and on the morality of the past.

The objective of the present study is not so much theoretical as to make full use of land claims as a form of history, indeed the historical horizon of all other histories discussed in later chapters. The theoretical implications of the chapter will be considered in chapter 6 which equally unfolds a comprehensive history of another small island but through the point of view of an official court. Huntsman and Hooper (1996:127-181) followed a similar approach in their analysis of the myths and narratives that supported the ancient orders of Tokelau. The authors go into the detail of the stories and show the relevance of the variations by linking them to the political perspectives of the inhabitants of the three atolls that constitute the Tokelau archipelago. They do not investigate in detail conflicts and variations within each of the atolls but much of their original information came from inadvertently stumbling on microhistorical claims, while doing a map of a village (Hooper, personal communication).

2 Family Histories

With the exception of Church history, history is normally considered on Axamb, as

elsewhere in South Malakula, to be the reserved domain of families. This is particularly true of the history supporting the land claims which are normally told by the most authoritative person in the family. Family histories do not often relate to each other: in a sense, South Malakula historians are 'autobiographers' as they are mostly concerned with their own history, even more so that it is often acceptable to use the first or second person singular when speaking about remote events.¹⁵ There are only partial histories explaining who people are, and what rights they have on land. Sahlins (1981: 13f) initiated a small academic debate about this use of the pronoun 'I' in historical discourse in Oceania. Elaborating on the examples of Maori and of Fijian history, Sahlins relates the use of 'I' by the narrator to the re-living of mythical events in the present. Another issue is the capacity of the Polynesian chief to represent the whole tribe and speak in its name in the first person (Sahlins 1985: 35f). Rather than elaborating on the Lévi-Straussian aspects of this analysis of the relation between myth, history and present (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962: 313), Mosko (1992) followed by Rumsey (2000: 107) preferred to compare the 'historical I' with Strathern's concept of the 'partible person'. Rumsey (*ibid.*: 112) draws on linguistic analysis to show that in both cases the use of first person pronouns frequently shifts from encompassing 'macro-sociological roles', in which the speaker identifies with a whole group, to 'micro-level patterns' which locate the speaker in a set of intra-group relationships. I will deal in another chapter with a relationship between individual and community, especially in the context of conversion (chapter 3). The concept of partible person would certainly be useful for an analysis of ancient forms of hierarchy, in which powerful men won title and prestige through the production and exchange of pigs; however, the histories on which this thesis is built are mostly silent about these exchanges. In the case of Axamb,

¹⁵ Collingwood (quoted in Finley 1981:38) wrote that there were, paradoxically, no genuine historians in ancient Greece as the history they wrote was an autobiography of a generation. The Greeks wrote about themselves and their time as the Malakulans tell about themselves and their family.

what matters most is not representativeness: the 'I' was usually an expert historian, sitting among the responsible men of his family and whose knowledge did not normally confer him any other authority. The occasional use of the first person, or of the historical present, connects to an analysis of a disagreement between local historians as to the nature of time, rather than personhood. If no Axamb historian would agree to an absolute continuity between myth and present, they would argue for or against the continuity between mythical events, remote history and recent past.

Across Malakula and Vanuatu there is a lot of variation in depth of genealogical knowledge (compare Vienne 1984: 401ff to Layard 1942: tables II, III and X). Often the knowledge of inherited classificatory kin relationships is more important than the knowledge of actual genealogical connection. In South Malakula, most genealogies do not go beyond three generations from the senior men, but Axamb is a major exception. Some Axamb families will also present a genealogy that goes back without break to their original ancestor about six generations ago. Other families, on the contrary, with even longer genealogies know about no such links between their ancestors six times remote, ancient events relating to the separation of two branches of the family, and the origin myth. Axamb is therefore the only place where people's attention to their rivals' claims generates a total history of the islet from origin times to the present. These interconnections are probably due to a long cohabitation of families on Axamb whereas on the mainland the impression of isolation may be due to the greater impact of the depopulation and the disappearance of a great number of families. Axamb historians are also greatly preoccupied by the challenge of the biblical stories of the creation of Adam and Eve and of Noah's ark, which they attempt to reconcile with the stories of their own origins.

Unless there was a hiatus in knowledge transmission, narratives are usually recited by a member of the family or else a maternal relative. However, the people who claim the land of extinct maternal relatives very rarely know these other origin stories. In chapter 6 we will consider the emergence of local theories of history and land ownership in the courts. Land cases require families to prove their roots in a specific place through origin stories, genealogies and a range of information about spirits, places and rituals. As a result, land claims often appear as primarily conflicts of myths, as is the case in Axamb.

3 The Axamb context

Axamb presents an example of several apparently irreconcilable disputes arising from different versions of a single myth of origin shared by all the families claiming aboriginal title to the land. These claims show the central importance of land in the inter-related histories of these families, in defence of their identities and of their means of production. A comparison of these stories taken as a whole would form the 'charter of the land' of Axamb (cf. Peter France 1969, himself echoing Malinowski 1954: 116).

The importance of the population of Axamb relative to the villages dotting the mainland coast testifies to the small island's quality of life (see chapters 2 and 4), which may have attracted people there since the beginning of human colonization; numerous pottery shards as well as Axamb's central location on the coast also suggest an ancient and continuous occupation. The relative proportion of the population density between Axamb and the nearby areas on the mainland were certainly different in the past when the interior was still inhabited. According to Axamb histories, all the original families are closely related as they all descend from the original twin brothers; marriage between the descendants of these twins, which is practised today, was exceptional in the past. Instead, most marriages took place between Axamb people and women and men from

the mainland, which allowed some of these mainland families to take refuge with their maternal relatives on the small island where their descendants still live (see chapter 2). In similar fashion, Axamb people today can often claim land that belonged to some of their extinct maternal relatives. The various claims to residence, use and ownership of land on the islet, on the coast and in the interior are the history of the people, and their disputes about these rights reflect each family's version of its history and that of its neighbours.

The most important historical narratives of Axamb deal mostly with the origins of the families, their divisions, their migrations and their matrimonial alliances. In this chapter I begin with the origin stories, because they involve and oppose the largest group of people, and I follow with historical disagreements between more closely related families about their respective seniority and the reasons for their divisions.

4 A dispute about the reef

Family historians rarely argue with each other for the sake of historical narration as such. Generally, conflicts of histories emerge from more mundane issues, in particular over access to resources. Such conflicts show the importance of arguments over seniority, while they also show that in practice historical arguments are blurred with interpretations of tenure rules and tactical changes of alliances.

While I was working on the histories of Axamb, the main issue that opposed the families of Roponias to those of Lamburbaxur and Merirau was a dispute about the management of a section of the reef. Reef disputes are not exceptional in Malakula, they often centre on honorary rights to place and lift bans on fishing or harvesting during the reproductive season of fish and other marine resources. The reefs are mostly open to the

community; but the owner of the reef can lift the ban first in his own interest and harvest trochus shells and bêtes-de-mer, which are sold for export, before the others. On the grounds of a claim to seniority, the Ropaias people tried to make use of such a right on a whole section of the reef, for which they were taken to court by Lamburbaxur and Merirau who lived in the area over which Ropaias claimed suzerainty. Merirau's argument was that each family controls the reef opposite their hamlet, which would give them the largest section, but is in line with their opinion that everybody should care about their own affairs and history, and not attempt to interfere with other people's. Lamburbaxur, on the other hand, said that the whole reef should be exploited in common and that since Ropaias abused their management rights they should be taken from them and given to Lamburbaxur. Beyond these arguments lay more fundamental disputes about ancient history and myth – the division of Ropaias and the problematic status of Merirau which, as we will see, constitute a challenge to the dominant version of the origin myth. The following analysis will show that none of these historical issues can be understood outside of the whole historical corpus of Axamb's aboriginal families.

5 Twins

The original families of Axamb all claim descent from two twin boys who were born of a clam shell (*naxemb*) and who later married two sisters from a family of the mainland (fig 18). Everybody in Axamb knows the story and agrees that it is the genuine origin story of the Axamb landowners, save for the apparent contradictions with the biblical belief in humanity's common descent from Adam and Eve. Everybody agrees, as well, that each twin had three sons, who in turn fathered numerous descendants leading to the present families. There are, nevertheless, many 'authorised' versions, transmitted within each family. Most of the variations between these versions relate to the divisions

between the descendants of the twins, leading to existing families. There is also a major dispute about the status of one family, as to whether they do descend from one of the twins or instead from the same mainland family as the sisters who married the twins. Important variations occur in the account of past marriages which, as well as being important for land claims, have moral implications, as people's present status can be affected by the alleged actions of their ancestors. The moral tone can also vary greatly between versions. The conflict between Merirau, whose status is contested, and Ropaias and Rotavu has moral implications, as the former descend from Ailongbel, the apostle of Axamb, while the others are the descendants of people who originally opposed conversion (see chapter 3). More recently the conflict extended to the choice of Ailongbel's name for the newly built church (chapter 5). The rich and colourful accounts of the origin story and other ancient stories are rarely presented in full detail when debating practical issues such as land disputes. But we will see that it is necessary to go very much in detail to understand the various aspects of the relationship between the families, as well as their approach to myth and history. We will first consider the version owned by Marvar, a family of recognized aboriginal descent, whose ancestors supported Ailongbel and who themselves favoured the choice of his name for the church.

5.1 Marvar

One of my first organized historical sessions was held in Marvar with representatives of that group of families representing the descendants of one of the original twins. We were sitting on an open place near the site of their original village at the heart of the area they inhabit on the islet. A large *biu* tree mentioned in the myth was in sight and there were many pottery shards on the ground. We were some distance away from the quiet northern shore which is associated with the other group of families. Indeed, this

version of the myth is embedded in the southern half of the island and would normally not be told elsewhere. A couple of hundred metres to the north one would hear the versions of the myth told by the people who are there at home (Appendices 1 and 2).

People were staying in Maxax, in the hills above Oxai. They saw something alight in Lemaröv, the name of that thing was Vartikav, this was located at the point of a reef near the sandbank. That thing stayed lit all night: this is why it was making light, only when it was open, when it wanted to shoot, it closed itself.¹⁶ (The Maxax people) were watching this until they sent one of their *kastom*, a kind of kingfisher, a kind of spirit (*devel*). They sent it to look at that thing that was alight. So, one day they made it look at it and when it came back they asked – How is it? – I saw it was like a giant clam. Now they told the kingfisher: — We will cut a sharp coconut-skinning stick. They gave it (to the bird) which flew with it until it saw that thing lying open. Then it dropped (the stick) straight to the head through to the coral stone: now it was dead. Then two boys came out of it; they went to Maröv point and sat down. We don't know what they were eating, they walked around to look for a good place to live. Each walked on one side of the island and they met again in Penbaxur where they stayed. They chose names for themselves: the one who walked on the side where the sea hits the stones making a lot of noise, they called him Vetbong; alright, the other one who walked on the opposite side, they called him Rörngal. When they had met, one had asked the other: — You went to see that side, how was it? — No, I walked over there, I didn't see a single good place. — No, I passed over here, and I saw the place was good for us to stay.

They were now living in Penbaxur, keeping a fire burning permanently. We cannot explain well to you how they were making fire. They were walking on the long beach; every morning they were striding along. They did not wear clothes, not even penis sheaths. One man was living in Loxorngilau,¹⁷ he was married and had two daughters and pigs. When he looked for one of his sows that had just pigged, she wasn't there; her tracks went towards the sea and he began to follow them. The pig was hiding in Bulvarlëmas, near the house of Aissen,¹⁸ a cave in which it felt comfortable with its children. The man found the pigs had already gone inside the cave; they came outside when he called them, but went back inside when he tried to catch them. He wanted to follow them but

¹⁶ The 'thing' is a giant clam shell, a fossil species. Clams stay open to feed and occasionally shut themselves violently producing a loud noise and projecting a column of water above the surface when they lie in shallow water.

¹⁷ A hill on the main island, visible in the distance.

¹⁸ On the shore opposite Axamb, not far from Farun.

the cave was too long and dark, he couldn't go in because it was too dark. It's a big cave, you can only go this far, but pigs can go further yet. (The man told his wife and daughters): — We cannot go back now. We will stay here and build a house, waiting for these pigs to grow. Then, they saw the fire that was smoking continually on the islet. One day, as they went to the sea they saw two men walking along the beach opposite. — Hey, before there was nobody but now this fire smokes all the time. Perhaps we should go have a look. We will build a boat. This is how they worked: they put four sticks like four corners, cut banana stems, made bundles with them that they fastened to the sticks (as boards). Then they made the bottom with bamboo, you could see through it but the bamboo lifted the boat. The name of the boat is *bangwuj* ('banana skin'). While I talk about this, you should know that this was a magician (*magic man*): talking here he can make the wind push him forward, then he makes Sivlamb (southern sea wind) blow.¹⁹

The two girls had been staying with their father until they were right big and their father wanted to find a man for them. The father told them — There is no man for you here: try look those two on the island. Check if they are men or women; if you are going there to be killed, that will be it; if you stay for two days, if you don't come back after one week we will know that you are dead. But if a man takes you that is his good luck. The wind pushed the two girls to the beach, they walked to a hibiscus grove in which they hid to take a look at the old village (*nasara*) of the two men. They saw that there was no woman: — They are not like our father, they don't wear a penis sheath (...). We should try to talk to them. One of them said: —I'm going first, if they attack me you can go back. Then the older one showed herself. When she came out, the two men saw her and observed that she was not like them, having some bulging shapes (her breasts). — It must be a spirit! And they hid inside their men's house (*nakamal*). The two girls waited and waited and waited but they did not come out. Then they went back to Bulvarlėmas, daddy asked — How was it? — No, I went to see (...) I came out, they got scared and went inside their men's house. We waited a long time and we came back. Daddy answered: —These two men you saw were strange. Alright, I will go with mammy. They went with the *bangwuj* raft; the father came out first, the two men looked at him: — Oh, this man is like us. Now, daddy asked them: —Did you see somebody coming here who was like mammy? I am like you two. Alright, they started talking about marriage, then they moved to teaching: —But how are you making children? Alright, daddy and mammy showed them, they had sex, then the boys' things shook up. Because they were sea people they did not know, then they gave their agreement.

¹⁹ The man uses the North wind to go to the islet and the South wind to push the raft back to the main island.

After, daddy went back and sent the two girls, the first born stayed with the elder brother, the second girl with the younger brother. Indeed, the two brothers had not come out at once: the first arrived dry on the beach but the other came out with the last breath of the clam. After the two girls came, they split: Vetbong came to stay here near this big *biu* tree, Rörngal went over there to Rotavu. They had learnt their lesson already, each of them got three children and the family (*famle*) began to grow. We cannot lie about our first ancestors (*grandpapa blong mifala fastaem*): when they married, the girls of Rörngal took the sons of Vetbong. They made six *nasara*, the first one in Penbaxur, then in Marvar, one for Mrensa and one for Maliabor: the three places that belong to us lay on this side (Betniko, Tomsen, Morver, Pita – told in Maliabor on 29th September 1999).

This long narrative is one of the richest examples of origin story in South Malakula, along with variations on the same story held by other families. Most other narratives are shorter but share similar features: a male child is born of an animal, a plant, a stone or another feature of the landscape which generally gives its name to the family, although in Axamb the shell *naxemb* gave its name to the island itself.²⁰ This original element is usually found in abundance near the place of origin unless it is a very rare species that is only present there. In several stories, like in this one, the birth of the original ancestor is assisted by people from a family that already existed: sometimes people find a new-born baby, take care of him and later tell him of his true origin, but here they actively contribute to the birth. It is rarer that the story tells how the ancestor got married and to whom. Indeed, there are very few women in these stories, unless they explain how the original ancestor met his wife.²¹

This narrative includes three distinct stories: a creation myth, explaining the name of the

²⁰ Only in a few other cases does the ancestor come from the sea, sometimes drifting on a raft, but the birth of the Axamb twins on the reef does not suggest an overseas origin but makes the twins truly autochthonous, as opposed to their wives who arrived on a raft.

²¹ Similar origin stories have been published for other areas of Malakula. Tom Harrison (1937: 20f) presents one from north west Malakula which also features the discovery of sexual difference, as well as some themes such as the division of a family because of a shameful action which we will find in other Axamb histories. This myth also features two moieties and a lower status intermediate family of wife givers. See also the story of Kanbong Rantes (in Vanuatu Kalijoral Senta 1984).

island and the dual origin of the people; the discovery of sex and subsequent marriage alliance with some people of the main land; finally, the division of the descendants of the twins into six families. The first story links the birth of the twins with the people of Maxax, above Oxai, a people who are perhaps extinct today but who appear in other narratives in South Malakula. The second story which stages the colourful Loxorngilau girls and their father shares features with fairy tales – the search for a missing pig, the meeting of lovers, the use of magic. Loxorngilau is located on a hill visible in the distance from Axamb, and Axamb is visible from there. The story explains why there is such a privileged connection with the Loxorngilau, although their territory is quite distant from Axamb. The third story refers to a quasi-original incest of first cousins, classificatory brothers and sisters, but it sets the place for the following marriage exchanges between Axamb and the mainland. Although the three parts of the narrative appear quite distinct, they all concern the establishment of kinship and matrimonial alliances – from the creation of men to the institution of marriage with the mainland and the organization of the islet in two rival groups further subdivided into six sub-groups. We will see that the recent history of marriages between the two groups of families on Axamb reverts the changes in the myth from islet endogamy to exogamy. Indeed it is held more suitable today for the people who claim patrilineal descent from the original twins not to marry among each other. The most proper marriage is thus with a person belonging to a mainland family usually resident on Axamb. However, in the same way as the second generation of Axamb people in the myth married each other, such marriages occasionally happen today. In other areas of South Malakula, there are at most two branches of the same family and this division never seems to be explained in the origin story. The contrast between the simpler origin stories on the mainland and that of Axamb could be a result of the close-knit world of the islet in which continuous contact could have favoured the constitution and transmission of a common history.

Given this common but remote ancestry, it is perhaps not surprising to find various versions of the origin story complemented by explanations of later divisions, whereas on the main island disputes might oppose different origin stories instead of variants of the same story. The story has implications for claims and counterclaims to seniority and to membership in the group of Axamb landowners. This version is that of the descendants of the twin who walked along the rugged southern coast, whom they call Vetbong. In the following sections we will consider the versions held by three other families. The division in two groups of three families for the descendants of each twin works indeed for the descendants of Vetbong better than for the descendants of the other twin. Indeed we will see that this other group are also divided in three but do not link their present divisions to the time of the original myth, neither do they agree on a common vision for the continuity of myth and present.

5.2 Rotavu

The Rotavu family is one of the largest in Axamb. It is a branch of a group of families generally referred to as Rotavu and Ropantias recognising each other as the descendants of the twin Rörngal. However, Rotavu itself is constituted of two branches whose genealogies go back six generations without finding a common ancestor. I only recorded one version of the origin story from the Rotavu family, from Wase and his cousin Elder Wilson, as their expertise seemed to be recognised by the members of the other branch as well, for example, Charlie Frank and Kalmatak. Apparently the members of both branches assumed that they would not be opposed at the level of this myth. This is true even to a large extent for the relationship between Rotavu and Ropantias which is the main other family that claims descent from Rörngal.

The Rotavu version only differs in details from the version of the Marvar men, but these details change in a significant way the style of the narration and reflect another attitude towards history. At first, the most striking difference is the jocular tone of this version, as the characters are all given a strong type, in sharp contrast with one another. Wase delights in the bold description of sexual scenes, which he said were omitted or hidden by old people. The boys are innocent 'because they were like Adam and Eve they did not know sin', in contrast with the strong sexual desires of the girls, 'perhaps because their rings were large?', and with the complacent attitude of the father who repeatedly accepts his daughters' requests to help them getting the men. As the general line of the story remains the same as the Marvar story, I only reproduce it in Appendix 1. It loses also much more of its appeal in translation as it is difficult to render its humorous style.

Beyond its humour, however, this version reflects an interrogation on the meaning and credibility of the origin story. Wase is very careful about not committing anachronisms such as references to imported crops or artefacts; on the contrary, he specifies the archaic weapons used: '(They fought) only with bows and arrows, there were no guns at that time'. Both this version and the first one consider possible objections to the likelihood of the story, generally by raising a question over a problematic point and leaving it unresolved:

(About the birth of the twins): Their body was not strong, perhaps they were babies? I don't know. (Wase)

We don't know what they were eating. (Marvar)

We cannot explain to you how they were making fire. (Marvar)

Alright, they stayed, they stayed, they stayed, they got the idea of making fire, but how? Alright, they made fire. (Wase)

Christianity has a great influence on Wase's rendition of the origin myth. The twins are compared to Adam and Eve for their innocence and fearful ignorance of sex, contrasting

with the lust awoken in them by the mainland family. The reference to Genesis in Wase's version could appear as a paradox, as the biblical story precludes multiple creations. However, this reference to the Bible reveals an attempt to reconcile Genesis and local histories. One way of doing this is by accumulating parallels between the two stories: the nudity of the twins, their innocence and their seduction by the women assisted by their father. As a prologue to the story Wase also presented a kind of fall from grace, or at least a loss, as the ancestral giant clamshell became extinct after the converts to Christianity began to eat the once forbidden food.

We don't find it today anymore. Before, our grandfathers (*bubu*) were forbidden (*tabu*) to eat these shells but today we eat them. Gospel came, as a result we did not retain (the tradition). Our grandfathers were already Christians but still did not eat it. Later, Gospel became stronger and they ate it before they died.²²

The story also suggests, however, that the original clam shell was the cause of the absence of population on the island and therefore had to be killed.

The Marvar version is less preoccupied with time and theology, but rather with an accurate description of places and people. Wase's version is much less precise on these, in particular about the names and location of the mainland families, places on the reef and on the island as well as the location of the cave where the pigs went hiding and the direction of the winds. Even the sexual initiation of the twins is set in spatial terms in Marvar's version: 'because they were sea people, they did not know', reversing the stereotypical opposition between sea people knowledgeable about the resources of the reef, and uncouth bushmen who know about husbandry but nothing about seafood. As a proof of expertise, this type of information carries great weight in land disputes, especially names and location of families, as well as the places they visit.

²² In chapter 3 we will see how food indeed played a central role in the conversion process.

From the point of view of family politics, the most obvious difference between the two versions is the different name given to the ancestor of the Marvar people, Vetbong according to Marvar and Rörmbang according to Wase. Each side pretends there used to be an agreement on these names, but that the others have just changed it. At issue is the recognition of seniority and perhaps ultimate authority over the island, which Wase implicitly claims when his story describes how the ancestor of his family divided the island and even attributed protective spirits to his brother and himself. Wase was giving more coherence to his version by explaining the etymology of the ancestral names, matching them with the two halves of the island: *rör*, as in Rörngal and Rörmbang, means 'swell'; *ngal* means 'peaceful sea' and *nbang* 'noise'. As there are similar issues between lower family branches, Wase linked the story of origin to an account of further divisions, arising from yet another fall: 'Some relatives (*famle*) were angry and shot at other relatives who had caused problems to their daughters'. This refers to the division between two branches of the descendants of Rörngal, Rotavu (Wase's branch) and Ropantias. In the following section we will present the Ropantias version of the origin story which is the most sceptical of all.

5.3 Ropantias

Ropantias is the rival branch of Rotavu among the descendants of Rörngal. Not long before my stay in Axamb they had a setback in a local court as to their relative seniority to Rotavu. They were still resentful of this, particularly for the role Marvar historians played in supporting Rotavu. The skepticism in the following story probably reflects their recent disappointment in conflicts of myth.

How is there man in this place, that is what I don't really know, but how the Good Life brought light. Before, some said that among us before there was no food, they were just eating the leaves and stem of *nalamlandr* (...). The

beginnings of this island, the people who were here first were like that. They stayed until, ... you have already heard, they say that two men came out of the *naxemb* (giant clam), but it isn't true because God made us. On this island it was like Eden, there was no woman, then later God made that woman, he removed the rib to make that woman. This island is nearly the same, because man was there first, after came the woman. The women came from over Libangan Ranur, Aissen's place. They came, then these two men took these two girls. They married and stayed in Penbaxur, the first *nasara* on this island. Alright, they got sons, one moved to Marvar, the other one came here. Their names however we don't know. Alright, the one who came here was the first man, first brother, Terliv; the second born was Matiur. (Skepa, Ropnias).

Skepa expresses all the uneasiness of a faithful Christian who cannot be easily reconciled with a heathen story of origin, which he rhetorically pretends not to know. He denies even the importance of such myth, assuming that the real origin of Axamb starts with its conversion to Christianity: 'How is there man in this place, that is what I don't really know, but how the Good Life brought light.' His version attempts to transform the myth into prehistory. He proposes an alternative story that does not solve the problem of origin: the first inhabitants of the island ignored cultivated plants. This alternative story evokes the state of innocence of the twins who knew neither clothes nor sex, but it seems to associate this original ignorance with the obscurity in which Axamb people were living in heathenism. After finding a metaphor for conversion in an ancient story of Axamb, Skepa finds a parallel between the origin story of Axamb and Genesis: the primacy of man over woman, which he uses to underline the rights of the patrilineal descendants of the twins.

We saw that Wase followed his account of the origin story by an explanation of the subsequent division of the family, following the bad sexual conduct of some of the early inhabitants. This explanation refers to a story according to which the name of Ropnias, Skepa's branch, is said to evoke the bad conduct of their ancestors. This story is based on an etymology of Ropnias as coming from *nias* (Tahitian chestnut) of which the fruit

case could be said to look like a vagina. This story offends the Ropani people who say instead that their name was chosen by the original twins, because they were eating that nut. On the contrary, they say that it was the ancestor of Rotavu who had to run away for his life. The first explanation was supported by the Marvar people in a public meeting, to the great anger of Skepa and his family. This reference to bad conduct also serves to position Rotavu ahead of Ropani, who would be a branch separated from the core of the family. Skepa's anger against that story might also justify his suspicious attitude towards the story of origin. By rejecting such stories as unchristian, he can also defend himself and his family against offensive stories. Instead, as we will see, his strategy relies on genealogy and knowledge of places and names.

5.4 Merirau

Merirau is the third family to claim descent from Rörngal, but their claim is opposed by the other descendants who say that the Merirau people in fact belong to Loxorngilau, the family of the wives of the original twins. The Merirau family preserve a written version of their history in a file containing a copy of a letter and documents sent to the Minister of Lands in June 1980, a month before Independence (Appendix 2). The papers were written in English, with the help of a schoolteacher originating from another island who was posted in Axamb at the time. The family preserves a copy of this document as a proof that they have not altered their history, although the teacher made some mistakes, notably in the spelling of names. They invited me to make my own copy of this document during a family session in their hamlet.

Their version of the origin story is similar but shorter than the Marvar and Rotavu versions and uses some alternative names, such as Haribal, for the children of the twins. The most developed part of the story concerns the coming down of the Loxorngilau

family, but there is no reference to the sexual initiation of the twins. The marriage is arranged in a straightforward manner: the girls meet the men, decide to stay with them, warn their parents who agree and arrange for a 'wedding ceremony'. This sobriety fits with the age of the document, as we saw Wase explain that old people avoided the sexual part of the tale. However, the Merirau family makes a virtue of the absence of these details, as they disapprove of mixing serious talk about history with such embarrassing stories. In particular, they think that the story of the scandalous etymology of Ropnias brings discredit to the people who try to use such a story to take away people's land rights.

Something too that is not right is that when they are following their history they jump here and there to the history of another family (*nasara*), like these people (Maliabor), they are speaking about that thing (vagina). It makes people angry. It is not good for them to try to say that another *nasara* is not indigenous (*manples*), it would be better if they just tried to follow their own. (Nelson)

Like Skepa, the Merirau historians contrast a biblical logic with a mythical logic. These are the main questions they attempt to answer: where do they come from, how do their traditions compare with other traditions and with biblical truth, and which local or outside authority could determine the truth. Skepa likewise uses the same strategy to oppose the claims of Merirau and Rotavu: a combination of Christian scepticism towards old stories and genealogical knowledge.

Old Abwil (of Ropnias) built a fence in Merirau and fed his pigs there, that's what they (the Merirau family) call a *nasara*, but it is just part of Ropnias. He (Nelson of Merirau) says that Haribal gave birth to his ancestor (*abu*) Terliv. That (Haribal) is a reef in the sea. When he speaks like this I answer him: — God the Father made us from his own hands, a man cannot be born on a reef. Later, in the time of Noah, his family alone they walked all over the world until they reached us. (Skepa)

6 Outline of mythological controversy and family relationships on Axamb

The following graph is an attempt to present as fairly as possible the respective interpretations of the origins of Axamb and of the relationship between the main families of the island. Crosses and double lines in the diagram indicate conflicts and contested relationships. The crosses refer to rival claims for seniority, as between the two groups of families descending from each twin and within the group that descend from Rörngal. The double lines relate to the controversy around the Merirau family whose claim to be connected to the autochthonous core, either as an independent branch or as a part of Rotavu, is rejected by the others. Names of families are italicized, names of individuals appear in standard print.

Figure 18 leaves out the moral dimension of the issues, in particular challenges and parallels drawn from the Bible and other Christian teachings. Writing such a graph leads to a more literal interpretation of the myth, whereas the actual origin of the first ancestors becomes a matter of doubt for some Christians. Similarly, the graph conflates myth and genealogy, whereas we will see that some historians such as Wase do not believe in such continuity, while others like the Marvar men present an uninterrupted genealogy from the original twins to the present. However, I believe that Axamb people would recognize in this graph a chart of the main positions regarding the origins of Axamb, making acceptable distinctions between what is generally believed and what is a matter of dispute. The names of Marvar and Ropantias appear twice as both are the name of a family and of a branch of that family. The descendants of Vetbong agree on the collective name of Marvar, but the descendants of Rörngal do not agree on a collective name, and I have left that space blank. Referring to this graph, we can see the potential complexity of the dispute presented at the beginning of the chapter about the management of a reef. Lamburbaxur and Merirau were both contesting the supremacy

of Ropantias on different grounds, the first one as claiming at least equal rights within the Ropantias family, and the latter as potentially a third partner. It would not require much for Ropantias and Lamburbaxur to be united against Merirau or, on the other hand, for Rotavu to be drawn into the dispute if Ropantias extended their claim to a larger section of the reef. We will also see that Marvar can switch their support from Merirau to Rotavu or even Ropantias according to which of their historical loyalties is activated by each dispute. Although abstract, people would understand my presentation, as they have generally adopted the family tree model, either writing in a Biblical fashion 'X begat Y and Y begat Z', or by drawing a complete tree with triangles and circles for men and women, according to anthropological convention.

7 Genealogies, between myth and present

The people of Axamb and of other places of Malakula always considered genealogies very important. It led me to promise to return a printed copy of each genealogical tree, which so far I have been unable to do. Compared to other areas Axamb genealogies include a relatively large number of generations – indeed, some of them connect with the times of origin. They also offered stories about past conflicts and alliances, a change in marriage rules or the extinction of some branches of the family. Always, however, the ultimate horizon of these genealogies remains the division in two groups of families.

7.1 Marvar

The origin story of Marvar, which has been discussed earlier in the chapter, was completed by a genealogy of the three branches of the family, mostly uninterrupted from Vetbong to the present: Marvar, which is also the name of the whole group, Maliabor and Mrensa. Each of these branches is said to descend from one of the sons of Vetbong, although the name of the third son, the ancestor of Mrensa, was forgotten. The

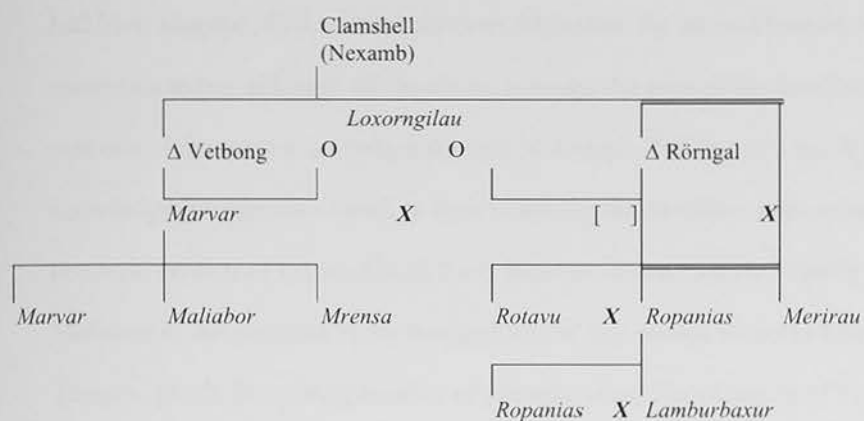


Figure 18 The Families of Axamb

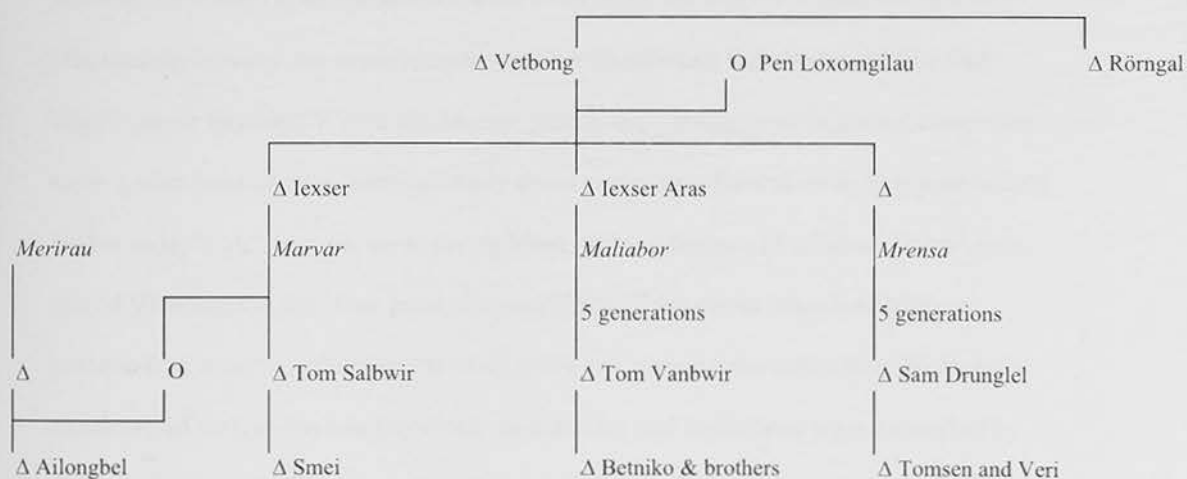


Figure 19 The genealogy of Marvar

eldest branch recently became extinct when the last member, Smei, a disabled man who had been adopted, died without children. Maliabor, the second branch, is the most numerous today, although all the senior men are the sons of the late Tom Vanbwir, who was one of the most knowledgeable men of Axamb. Perhaps as a result of their knowledge inheritance as well as their numbers, the Maliabor men seem to control a common version of history for all three families. It was narrated mostly by Pita Tom of Maliabor in the presence of his brothers and of one cousin from the Mrensa branch, Tomsen, plus a fluctuating number of younger men. The presence of Tomsen and his occasional comments seem to indicate an agreement between the two remaining branches of the group. However, Tomsen's elder half-brother, Veri, refused to come to the meeting but I did not find out why.

Even more than the origin story, the genealogy (fig. 19) reveals, through the morality of marriages and their consequences on land ownership, the Marvar's men vision of the relationship between the three branches of their family and their historical ties with other Axamb families. Within the Marvar group, the genealogy of Maliabor comprises more generations and gives more details about marriage alliances up to four generations before today's old men, i.e. up to the children of the founder of Maliabor, Iexser Aras, son of Vetbong. On the other hand, the genealogy of the eldest branch of Marvar, presented as extinct, is the shortest of all (only two generations down from Vetbong's children), as well as the one for which most doubts and hesitations were expressed by the men in council. The name of the ancestors of the two eldest branches are very similar, Iexser and Iexser Aras (Iexser of the Sea), whereas the name of the first ancestor of the third branch is not known, although the genealogy goes up four generations. When the overall genealogy was first explained to me, I was told that Iexser had only two daughters, who married Loxorngilau men, the ancestors of the

Merirau family. Later, this information was corrected, saying that Iexser had a son by a first marriage, Tom Salbwir, who adopted Smei, the last representative of the branch. Tom Salbwir's sister, Litbois, married to Merirau and was the mother of David Ailongbel, who is said to have brought Christianity to Axamb, with the support of Marvar people (see chapter 3). As we saw in the former section, the Merirau family is considered by most other Axamb people to be a branch of the Loxorngilau family, like the two sisters who married the original twins. The Marvar genealogy reinforces this interpretation by showing the granddaughters of the twins being returned to that family, one of whom gave birth to Ailongbel. Marvar's continuous support for Ailongbel and his descendants is explained by these repeated alliances in ancient history but at the same time these histories oppose the most important claim of the Merirau people, which is to be original Axamb landowners, descendants in male line from the other twin, Rörngal.

Much of the foundations of the modern institutions of Axamb find their roots in the events that took place four or five generations ago, in the time of Tom Salbwir and the mother of Ailongbel, i.e. the grandchildren of the original twins (in Marvar's version). This period corresponds to some important stories in other families as well, such as the story of Ailülbuas and the migration of mainland people to Axamb (see chapter 2) as well as the conversion of Axamb by Ailongbel (chapter 3). It is the generation of those who were kidnapped or who went voluntarily to Australia like Ailongbel (see Introduction). Many alliances between current Axamb families also go back to these times, as in the genealogy of Maliabor, the names, alliances and descendants of three brothers and two sisters who lived four generations ago. Only one of these brothers has descendants alive today, the children of the two other brothers are said to have died in Australia or to have been killed by the infamous recruiters or 'blackbirders'. However,

one child of the second brother has a direct descendant in the male line alive today; this man, Wase, does not belong to Maliabor but to Rotavu, of which, as we have seen, he is actually one of the main historians.

War and the morality of marriage

According to the Marvar men, a big war took place in Axamb that led to the near extermination of the family of Rotavu, descendants of Rörngal. As the very existence of their family was threatened, the Rotavu men required from the Maliabor family the widow of one of their men, who was already pregnant:

A big fight broke out, the Rotavu people were nearly eliminated. When they made peace they said — You must let some of your girls. They purchased the belly of the Penandre woman,²³ who went to Rotavu to give birth to Tomis, grandfather of Wase. (Pita Tom)

From the Maliabor or Marvar point of view, this event explains why Wase uses several garden plots on their land in Axamb and also on the main island,²⁴ (fig. 20) although weakening his claim since his ancestor was detached from the Maliabor family and only given access to land as a favour.

The story of the birth of Tomis is part of a series of comments by the Marvar men about repeated breaches of old marriage rules forbidding alliances between the descendants of the twins. They attribute a large part of the responsibility for these breaches to the behaviour of Rotavu and Ropani people. Although in this case the woman was not

²³ They paid for the bride price of the widow of a Maliabor man, as well as for the child she was bearing to be born in their own family.

²⁴ This discussion of a shared inheritance going back three or four generations ago shows that Axamb people have been using land on the main island for at least as long, probably before the extinction of a great number of families.

actually from Axamb but belonged to a family from the mainland (Andre, now extinct), so that the accusation of irregular endogamous marriage seems to be unfair. After the story, the Marvar men commented on some marriages between women of their families and male descendants of the other twin, saying that they had to agree to these marriages but that they themselves had long preferred to avoid to marry women from the other half of the islet. We saw that moral judgements on past events could be used to degrade a branch of a family and assert the seniority of another one. In this case beyond the desire of the Marvar men to stress their moral superiority, some details of the story support their interests in land. Wase himself, the descendant of Tomis, presents a very different version of the events that led to his ancestor's birth. According to him, Tomis's mother was not transferred from Marvar to Rotavu, but had been married simultaneously to a Marvar man and to a Rotavu man, a polyandrous marriage called *bülbül* (see chapter 2). When she was pregnant her Marvar husband died and she moved definitely to Rotavu, but her son Tomis was the legitimate heir of both husbands. In the following generation it was Tomis himself who, according to Wase, broke the marriage rules after a bad period of fighting and obtained a wife not from Marvar but from the Ropnias family, which belonged to the same group as Rotavu. Rotavu is of course much closer to Ropnias than to Marvar, and Wase's version of the marriage apparently implies a worse breach of the rules. In Wase's version, Tomis is a full member of Maliabor and Rotavu which implicates both families in the moral confusion (fig.21).

Notwithstanding their blame of Rotavu, Marvar men acknowledge a series of similar irregular marriages in their own genealogies, from the very beginning of the island's population history, as indeed they record, with a point of embarrassment, that each twin married his sons to the other's daughters. Also, more recently, Bongnavar, the brother of Tomis's father on the Marvar side, married a woman from his own half of the island and his own daughter married a Rotavu man. They also attribute to Bongnavar the

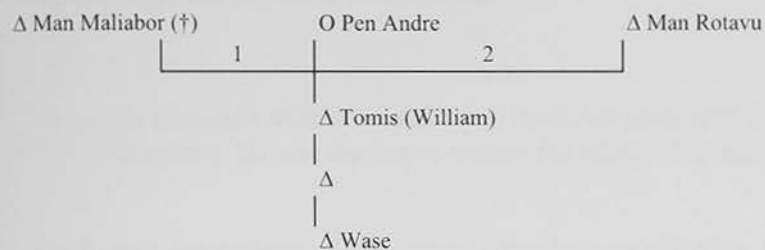


Figure 20 Wase's genealogy according to Marvar. The prefix Pen preceding the family name indicates a woman, the prefix Man indicates a man. Following this version the Maliabor man died when his wife was pregnant and the child was born in the family of her second husband, Rotavu.

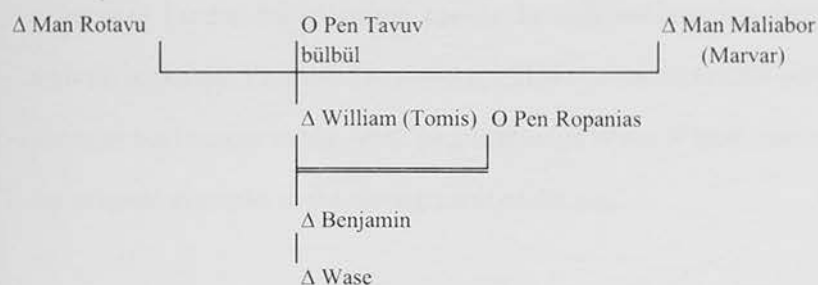


Figure 21 Wase's version of his own genealogy. The *bülbül* marriage means that the descendants have rights in both families. The double line indicates a breach of marriage rules between members of original Axamb families.

rupture of good observance of family rules:

He married a woman from Marvar itself, his small aunt (father's sister's daughter). He was the one to destroy the relationship between the families.

The Rotavu descendants of Bongnavar's daughter are still alive today, and remember their ancestry, and perhaps this partly explains why these embarrassing details of an extinct branch of Marvar are still recalled.

7.2 Rörngal's Descent

Skepa, Wase and other historians of the posterity of Rörngal present a more divided picture of the history of their families than the Marvar men, descendants of the other twin. They certainly do not agree on a common genealogical structure and do not agree either on a continuous line of descent between themselves and Rörngal or on the names of his sons. Further disagreements oppose the different branches about the reasons for their divisions and their relative seniority. These divisions are not only expressed in the histories but become public when people attempt to assert their claims to land or, as in our original example, to the management of the reef.

There are four families claiming descent from Rörngal: Rotavu, Ropantias, Lamburbaxur and Merirau. Their disagreements are many, and according to the point being raised, different groups support one another. Rotavu, Ropantias and Lamburbaxur recognise their common origin and disagree mostly on questions of seniority. Rotavu people, represented by Wase and Wilson, although they present some of the longest genealogies, do not claim to know a continuous line of descent from the original twins to the present. They do not even claim to know the common ancestor of the two existing branches of Rotavu itself, let alone those names that would link them with Ropantias and

Marvar (fig. 22).

Rotavu and Ropantias each claim that their own name is also the umbrella name for all three branches of the descendants of Rörngal. As we have seen, Rotavu received the support of Marvar men in their claim that the name of Ropantias was an insult, bestowed on a breakaway group because of their irregular sexual conduct. In answer, Skepa supports Rotavu's claim to seniority through the display of a continuous genealogy as well as by comparing old village sites, claiming that the presence of stones and of an old *mangtaltal* tree on their own site shows its greater importance. He attempts to undo the Rotavu people by going further back in the genealogy of his family, up to the first generation after the twins. Claiming to descend from the eldest son of Rörngal (or Rörngalngal), he can challenge Rotavu by telling them they descend from the youngest son of Rörngal.

I asked for their root but they did not say. Ours is clear: the first one was Terliv, the second one Matiur. (Skepa)

Skepa thus attempts to corner the Rotavu people, whose genealogies, although they go back for six generations, do not claim to reach the original twins. Lamburbaxur and Ropantias agree on all this and on the fact that Lamburbaxur is a branch that separated from Ropantias after a dispute between the ancestor of Lamburbaxur and a woman of his family. The two families disagree as to the relationship between the man and the woman, the cause and responsibility for the dispute and ultimately the consequences for the relative status of the two families.

A very long time ago, this name of Lamburbaxur, our name, did not exist. But how things were, there was only one family, Ropantias. But the old people from here, now, they were tough minded. Those who came out of the Ropantias

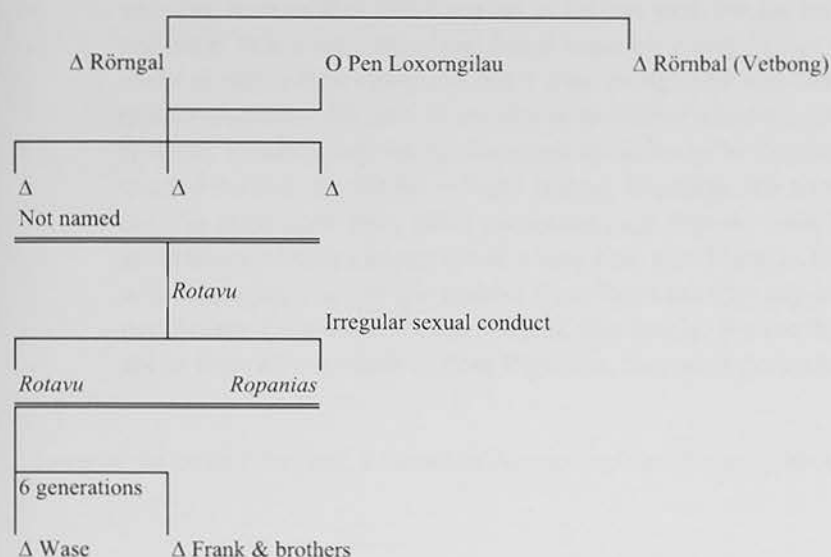


Figure 22 The descendants of Rörngal according to Wase and Wilson (Rotavu). The double lines indicate discontinuities between the three periods of his genealogy. As a Ropantias historian, Skepa would claim that Ropantias instead of Rotavu is the umbrella name for the two families and deny also the accusation of misconduct directed at his ancestors.

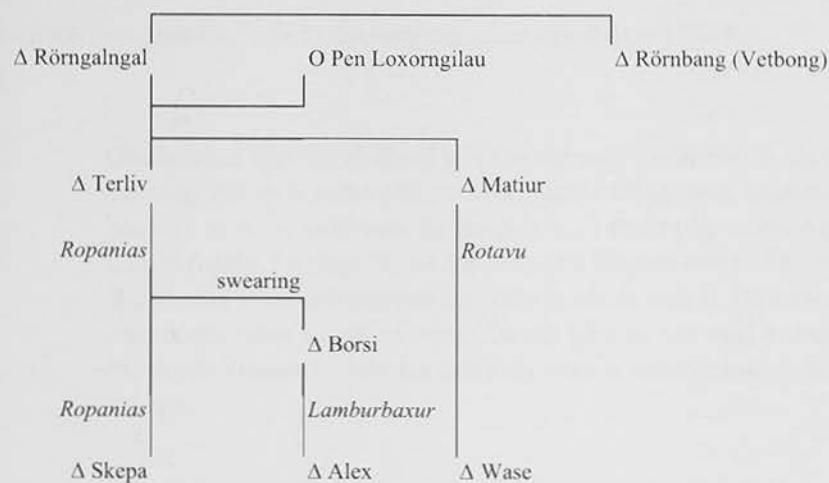


Figure 23 The descendants of Rörngal according to Skepa (Ropantias)

family, the eldest ones, they came once over there and had a dispute about a yam. So, their mother told them not to eat that yam, but the brother did come and eat it. When the mother and father came back they had an argument as a result of which their eldest son felt it was not right; he was ashamed that his mother disputed with him. In his shame he burned a tamanu tree (*baxur*; Bislama: *nambakura*) and put the ashes on his body, he baptised himself in them. After this, he talked: —Don't call me Ropnias, this name is over with me, I'm alone now. How many generations ago already, since how many generations we don't know, it was a long time ago. It makes that on our side, with Ropnias, every single relative from Ropnias they say father (*tata*) to our two fathers. Over there it's like *kastom*, like family. We see that it is we who are above from all our relatives from Ropnias, they were born after. (Alex)

Later in the same interview, a cousin of Alex completed the story about the yam.

These two missed something in the history of the yam: the two boys were roasting it, their mother was angry and swore at them and then broke the yam but she gave the head of the yam to the one who came to Lamburbaxur. (Kalmase)

On the other hand, the old Skepa of Ropnias said that courts had already decided that Lamburbaxur had lost its rights by moving away. His version of the dispute gives a much less dignified role to the ancestor of Lamburbaxur (fig. 23):

One brother was married and went to the men's house with his brother in the evening. His wife came and swore at them calling them *limaxsuon aru* (married couple), as if my wife was my brother. (...) Borsi (the married brother) went to Lamburbaxur, he slept inside the hole of a tamanu tree and then took its fruits and burned them and painted his body in black with it. He stayed like that for one month, after which he went to wash himself and said that he was over with the family (*nasara*). Only for that they persist, otherwise they would come back. (Skepa)

In the Lamburbaxur version, the eldest son takes a radical measure of leaving the family because of the shame brought by the dispute with his mother, for which he was no more responsible than his younger brother who remained in Ropnias. The ancestor appears

to act with the just pride of an offended eldest son. In Skepa's version it is not really a question of an eldest son but of a brother who was married and another who was not. The married brother is humiliated by the shameless conduct of his wife, after which he humbly goes to sleep outside in the recess of a tree and then stays unwashed and blackened for a month before severing himself from his family. Alex from Lamburbaxur insists in his story on the family links for which he uses the word *famle*, suggesting the reality of kinship. Skepa, on the contrary, does not use *famle* but *nasara*, a word with more legal connotations (see chapter 6), to stress the separation of the two groups of relatives and the loss of legal rights incurred by the descendants of the man who cast himself out.

7.3 Merirau

The genealogy of Merirau, like those of Marvar and Ropnias, presents a continuous link from living people to the original ancestors. The Merirau genealogy, however, attempts to encompass the genealogy of Ropnias as it was told by Skepa. Skepa claimed to descend from Rörngal's eldest son, Terliv, but the Merirau history claims that Terliv was the son of Haribal, who was himself the son of Rörngal. The inclusion of supplementary information, in particular the ability to go back one generation further, is an attempt to make rival genealogies appear as partial versions of one's own (fig. 24).

Skepa denies Merirau's claim to descend in male line from Terliv because according to him Aibon, father of Ailongbel was the son of a daughter of Terliv – mother and son cannot belong at the same time to the same family. All versions agree that the mother of Ailongbel came from the eldest branch of Marvar. As we saw above in the discussion of the genealogy of Marvar, Merirau, or rather Loxorngilau, are thus presented as the original wife-givers of Axamb, with particularly strong links to Marvar.

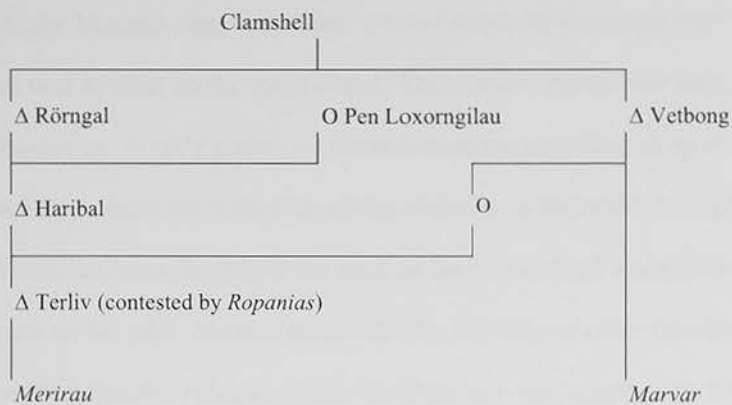


Figure 24 The descendants of Rörngal according to the Merirau family. This genealogy avoids to refer to the other families also claiming descent from Rörngal.

According to the Merirau men, the dispute started about 50 years ago with Wase's father, about land located on the main island. This remark shows how intricate actual land disputes can be: Wase's claims on the mainland have nothing to do with his rights as an original land owner on Axamb as all his claims over there are through female ancestors. Nevertheless, a dispute about land on the main island leads back to the central dispute on the islet. Another reason for the hostility of other families towards Merirau would be that they claim or cultivate plots all over Axamb, which they say causes the jealousy of some people.

We have small plots of land everywhere on the small island. Really a lot: from the point to the house of Henry. They ask — How can you have land all over? They were so angry at us we got tired of it, that's why we have got that paper (...) before, some people did not agree that our ancestor brought religion (*skul*) to this place. (Nelson)

This comment shows what is perhaps the core of the problem: the Merirau family owns land all over but it does not form a distinct territory — a point that is becoming central in the investigations of the official courts, as we will see in chapter 6. The dispute over their status expanded into a dispute about the role of Ailongbel, their ancestor, in the conversion of Axamb.

Some of the traditional opponents of Merirau, Rotavu and their allies, accuse Tom Vanbwir, the father of the Maliabor men, to be at the origin of the dispute with Merirau. According to them, he would have deliberately misled that family in making them believe that they were not Loxorngilau from the mainland, but instead the descendants of Rörngal. The story he dictated would have been written down in a notebook, later destroyed, unbeknown to the Merirau family. Tom Vanbwir, who was one of the most

knowledgeable men of his time, might have done so because he believed the descendants of Ailongbel deserved a full land-owning status, in recognition of their ancestor's role in the conversion of Axamb (chapter 3). This would forever shelter them from threats of eviction. At the same time, Tom Vanbwir might have wanted to embarrass Ropnias and especially Rotavu by making them face a contest based on a continuous genealogy encompassing their own discontinued genealogies. Neither the Marvar men, Tom's own sons, nor the Merirau men, however, acknowledged the mischievous role attributed to their father by Rotavu. On the other hand, the loss of the notebook in which the original story could have been written could also explain why Merirau base their claim on a copy of the text in English sent to the minister of lands.

The various parties make use of similar arguments in their attempts to outdo each other. Skepa outdoes Wase in genealogy by connecting his line to the original myth through reference to remote ancestors such as Terliv. But the Merirau historians contest this reference to Terliv and claim this name in their own genealogy – perhaps following advice from the late Tom Vanbwir. Tom himself belonged to the Marvar group of families which are uncontested original Axamb inhabitants, but who have also maintained a privileged relationship with Merirau. The appearance of their name in disputes between Ropnias and Rotavu or between these two families and Merirau brings us back full-circle to the general view of disputes in Axamb, all derived from the charter constituted by the myth of origin and the stories and genealogies connected to it. In Axamb it is possible to go full-circle in the analysis of claims and counter-claims, but on the mainland there would be more ongoing chains as each family was involved with neighbours all around their territory, not neatly circumscribed on an islet. We will see examples of this in chapters 2 and 6. However, even the histories of Axamb present many links to the mainland. If Merirau accepted to give up their claim on Axamb and

endorse their identification as the mainland family of Loxorngilau, it would lead to negotiations with the branch of Loxorngilau which are still living on the mainland. As classificatory sisters' sons, all the original Axamb people could potentially ask Loxorngilau for land on the mainland, but, interestingly, only Merirau men had yet been to the place and seen the owner who showed them around some of the land. When I met this man, Aisingtax, who lives in the village of Bonvor, west of Farun, he did not know whether Merirau were classificatory uterine nephews or full members of his family.

The history of marriages between the core of Axamb families with mainland families has also led to the former gaining access to a lot of land on the main island from which they depend for their living and to the residence of many mainland families on Axamb itself. The myth of origin set up the conditions for such marriages, defining Axamb original inhabitants as a single exogamous unit. Indeed, we will see in the next chapter that the presence of non-landowning residents is always justified in terms of the family relationship between the first of their ancestors to settle on Axamb and one of the landowning families. However, the multiple claims to land on the big island deriving from these kinship links have led to the involvement of Axamb people into numerous disputes with their neighbours all along the coast, which is a subject that would take too long to describe.

8 Conclusion

The history of the clamshell and its posterity of Axamb is an example of indigenous prehistory, explaining the origin of the people, of sex, of family divisions and ancient marriage alliances. As in the following chapters, a focus on the uses of history allows us to stay close to the original narratives without dismissing them as unreliable. Four points are made that will also appear in later chapters. (1) All histories belong to

families and define the status of these families in the communities where they live and determine their rights to land where their ancestors originated. (2) Histories are interconnected and form onward chains of disputes. The relative cohesion of Axamb allows us to study a discrete group and outline the multiple dimensions and shifting alliances that vary according to the subject matter of each dispute. (3) Histories are objects of moral judgement: some are presented as timeless when they regard marriage and relations between the sexes or between parents and children; others reflect interrogations caused by biblical and rationalizing challenges to traditional narratives. Local historians use moral judgements in at least three different ways: to degrade the status of a rival branch and stress their own seniority (Rotavu against Ropnias; Lamburbaxur and Ropnias); to assume a moral high ground with a view on strengthening land rights (the birth and marriage of Tomis); or to declare rival versions immoral (Merirau, Ropnias). (4) The family histories presented in this chapter reveal tensions between various concepts of time. In chapter 5 we will see how conversion to Christianity transformed the concept of time, which explains to some extent the differences among historians. From our point of view, some versions of history demonstrate a more critical approach, such as Wase's distinction between origin story, ancient historical events and the recent past – close to a Western academic distinction between prehistory and history (Gosden 2003: 14ff; see Introduction). Other histories reflect the power of mythical narratives and the Bible to rearrange historical events.²⁵ In Wase's version, the three sons of Rörngal are not directly related to the existence today of three branches of Rörngal's descendants. Wase's version is thus paradoxically less

²⁵ This approach can be compared to Gow's reinterpretation of structuralism, in the study of some myths of the Piro people of Amazonia (2001). Gow (2001: 11), influenced by the Lévi-Straussian idea that myths are thinking themselves, defines myths as 'historical objects whose purpose is to do history', whose variations from a common original myth reflect historical processes (282, 301) and in the same time aim at obliterating the memory of events that cause traumatic changes (27). New sources of knowledge and economic relation render some myths obsolete and ultimately forgotten, whereas other myths are transformed and continue to make sense of the Piro lived world and their sense of good life, as if nothing had happened, 'obliterating' history (288).

coherent than those versions that match the present with the myth and leave no place in between for ancient events beyond genealogical memory. The influence of the Genesis narrative leads both Skepa and Wase to question the likelihood of details of the origin myth or the flagrant contradiction between the biblical view of a common origin of all mankind, and the belief in the emergence of people from their own land.

This analysis of the histories of Axamb's original families was conceived as the reverse of a typical case study of a land dispute. The dispute about management rights on the reef is used only as an example. Instead of going deeper only in the stories of families involved in that dispute, I attempted to describe what constitutes the background of all land claims, indeed, of the whole land tenure system of Axamb. These histories, however, are rarely debated for themselves – the usual disputes are not about the ownership of the whole island but about particular places. Regular disputes also involve a whole range of considerations, such as the application of management rights, which tends to obscure the basic historical questions. Another aspect of the complexity of actual disputes is that they involve multiple genealogical references: families can be in dispute about land which they have inherited from a female ancestor, while still referring to their main claims in the male line.

The daily practice of history begins thus with conflicts about reefs, garden boundaries or runaway pigs, and goes on to the history of specific trees and other physical features and to discussions of genealogies and family histories. The case study of the reef dispute given in the introduction to the chapter now appears to be a combination of several distinct disputes all related to the original myth. A general characteristic of disputing in South Malakula is that old grudges will be brought to the surface in a variety of issues, some of which may be at the root of the dispute while others can seem

to bring confusion as to an understanding of what is at stake. Land claims, however, become more complex in another way, as when a single ambitious claim conflicts with those of many different persons. All the rival claimants might not always be present at the court hearing, since they do not feel concerned by the original object of the dispute, but their histories might be in conflict with the histories about to be considered by the court (cf. chapter 6). In this way formal courts might miss the relationship between different family histories that can only be shown by a systematic study. The consideration of one family's history and land claims leads to comparisons with several other families, in turn leading to further comparisons involving families in more and more distant villages, following a chain of disputes more dense than the chain linking the languages of central and north Vanuatu (see Introduction).

The history of Axamb is plural because it is based on the traditions of various families that will never agree on everything. Any family tradition should not be presented in isolation because it is loaded with references more or less explicit to other families' histories. In the course of writing this chapter I frequently had to rewrite a paragraph because of a previously unnoticed detail in a genealogy that changed the meaning of a story.

There are also multiple dimensions to the relationship between the families as they can be successively in agreement or in conflict with each other according to the issue considered. The descendants of Vetbong, the men of Marvar, spoke to me in agreement with each other, but their unity reflects their smaller numbers: they were one group of brothers accompanied by just one of their cousins. Indeed, out of the three original branches, the elder line is extinct and the other two are only represented each by one group of brothers and their descendants. We considered some disagreements held

between these Marvar men and the descendants of the other twin, Rörngal, in particular with Wase, although they often side with Wase in the disputes that oppose him to other descendants of Rörngal. The ambiguity in the attitude of Marvar towards Wase could be the fruit of their common origin, as they recognise him to be the descendant of a Marvar man. Generally, they will support him but would not do so if he were to try to claim full membership of their family. They are also unhappy about Wase's opinion that their ancestor was not called Vetbong but Rörnbang, and the connected claim that one twin rather than the other had the authority. The relationship of the Marvar men to the Merirau family can be analysed in similar terms: they supported their ancestor in establishing Christianity in Axamb and will continue to support them in all matters apart from their claim to be original Axamb landowners. Instead, they would attribute them the privileged status of being the descendants of the original marriage partners of Axamb, an alliance since then repeated many times.

The descendants of Rörngal are much more divided than those of Vetbong and do not agree on a common name for all the branches. There is a general agreement that each of the twins had three sons but in the case of the descendants of Rörngal it is not clear at all whether the existing families descend from all three of Rörngal's sons, or of only two or even one of them. The divisions of the island are sharper on the peaceful beaches on the northern side than along the rougher southern coastline, as if family politics replicated the geography of winds – and the relative value of land for residence and gardening.

The descendants of Rörngal clearly attempt to encompass rival histories by the clever use of details in the stories and genealogies, taking the opponent short by going back one generation further, or saying that an ancestor in the male line was in fact an ancestor

in the female line. In the next chapter, we will consider more explicitly the strategies of encompassment of family historians towards one another. The debate about the status of Merirau / Loxorngilau suggests that in the past migrants could have obtained full membership on Axamb by attaching their history to the origin myth; this would explain the cohesion of the core history of Axamb. Harrison (1990: chapter 8) and especially Epstein (1969: 193) have interpreted in this way long term historical trends in other areas of Melanesia, which saw the integration of migrant families or the rise in power of junior branches through manipulation of history.

As we will see in chapters 3 and 4, the importance of families may have been reinforced by changes in Axamb society in the twentieth century – the end of grade societies, the focus on the nuclear family and the postcolonial return of the land to the traditional owners. These events took place outside the stories considered here. Christianity, however, has changed the way people think about their history in more direct ways: through the challenge of biblical histories to local traditions. Some Axamb people have tried to attenuate the conflicts between the two by finding parallels between them; others, on the contrary, arm themselves with a scepticism and rationalism backed by the Scriptures to dismiss rival claims.

Chapter 2: Three Families

1 Introduction

This chapter is about a decisive transformation of the societies of Malakula and indeed of Vanuatu: the migration of the people of the interior of the large islands to the coast. Unlike migrations to Australia and other places during the nineteenth century labour trade and more recent migrations to the country's two cities, migrations from the interior to the coast were irreversible. To a large extent, this process went hand in hand with conversion to Christianity, as 'bushmen' joined the new Christian communities established directly on the coast, with easy access to ships and thus to the bearers of the new faiths and also to traders. However, copra and Christianity, missionaries and traders are not even named in the stories at the core of this chapter. Guns are here the only decisive European import. Conflict over women or pigs, with guns, through witchcraft or mere quarrelling, is what is said to have driven people down to the small island of Axamb, safe from enemies and where gales sweep mosquitoes away. As we saw, Axamb is now one of the largest population centres.

The previous chapter dealt with the primordial stories that define people's identity, linking them to the place they own, out of which their ancestors emerged. The families presented in this chapter do have such histories telling of their origins in distant places, but they are not discussed here. The focus is instead on the process through which migrant families acquired new rights of residence based on marriage and other family links. This process is as important as the myths of emergence of ancestors from the ground: in the past it opened up places of refuge; today it allows people to claim the land of extinct maternal relatives. As elsewhere in Vanuatu, the criss-crossing of migration roads and of multiple claims to uninhabited land ensures that practically no

area of land is unclaimed. The movements and marriages of ancestors, and the extinction of many families mean that histories in male and female lines overlap and often conflict. Chapter 1 presented histories of native people living on their own land near to the ideal type envisaged by the ideology of *kastom* embedded in the constitution (see Introduction and chapter 6). This chapter explains why and how it is rarely so.

These stories are an essential part of the information that would be submitted to a land court. Migration narratives are land claims in reverse compared to origin stories: instead of strengthening people's position where they reside they project people's claims over long distances. Chapters 1 and 6 give examples of land disputes in which one party opposes the other's claim to land by denying their origin story and replacing it with a story of migration. To a large extent indeed, the struggle for the control of historical knowledge is a struggle for the control of land.

In the conclusion to the chapter, consideration of the multiple dimensions of the relationships between the families as they appear through their histories will lead to the development of a theoretical model based on Sahlins's understanding of culture contact.

2 Individual families

All the stories used in this chapter were told by people living on Axamb today, mostly by three men who acted as representatives of their respective families. These traditions range from myths to present events, expressing the continuous relationship of these three families to each other and with their hosts on the island of Axamb.

These stories tell of events that happened to the ancestors of the narrators three or four generations ago, or before that in an unspecified time between the creation of the first

ancestors and the limits of genealogical memory. The three families considered fled fighting in the West of the island, moved first to the coast and later to Axamb. Throughout that time, they were neighbours, marrying and sometimes ambushing each other, and migrated in the same direction; their various versions of a shared past must therefore be considered in the context of this continuous interaction. In particular, the long-term relationships between the families are revealed in three accounts of a polyandrous marriage ending in murder.

Migrations like these are one of the causes of the present complex pattern of land claims: the descendants of the original owners of these areas may live in Axamb but also in other places of refuge such as the islet of Tomman in the south-west corner of Malakula. Indirect descendants through various degrees of matrilineal kinship may appear from unexpected places. If the inhabitants of Axamb claim lands over a large area, these same lands have many other claimants, dispersed in villages along the entire coast. It would extend the core material too far, however, to consider the histories of former mainland neighbours of the families considered in this chapter. The continuous relationship between these families makes the variations more meaningful. Only one example will be given at the end of the chapter to show how other people can be concerned with some details of their neighbours' histories.

3 Migrations and the absent colonists: an ethnography of history

The 'pacification' of South Malakula was mostly an indigenous process, in contrast with some historical accounts of pacification of other parts of insular Melanesia (Rodman and Cooper 1983), probably as a result of the weakness of the Condominium government (Miles 1998: 37, cf. W. Rodman 1985). For another island of Vanuatu, Ambae, Margaret Rodman (1983a: 150ff) has shown that pacification also followed an

indigenous impulse, in this case the desire to limit the power of fighting leaders. In South Malakula, unlike Ambae, 'pacification' did not consist in a shift in power from village leaders to Condominium authorities, but mostly in the migrations of refugees to Christian communities on the coast. This process happened away from European eyes, with the exception of Lamap, where colonization involved an alliance of the missionaries themselves with traders and soldiers (cf. chapter three). As a result of this progressive transformation of indigenous society, there is no need to divide the history in periods defined as pre-contact and post-contact, with matching transformations of models of social organization, as in Ambae or other Melanesian areas (e.g. Tuzin 2001: 38ff). Tuzin bases this contrast on the discovery by the Ilahita Arapesh in the first decade of this century that 'we are not alone in the universe' (38f).²⁶ On the contrary, Harrison (1993: chapter 3) relativizes the significance of contact from a local perspective, describing how the violence of the first encounter of Europeans with Avatip people in Papua New Guinea is presented today as having been orchestrated by Avatip's traditional enemies. Captain Cook's 1774 'discovery' of Malakula, and his landing at Lamap (Forster 1982: 564ff) do not appear in local histories. Instead, the shock of contact, formulated in indigenous terms, was spread over two centuries – introduced diseases being attributed to witchcraft, migration operating along kinship lines and conversion being spread by local converts using a local symbolism (cf. chapter 3). Eventually the very last unconverted people died or came down to coastal villages in the 1990s (cf. chapter 5). The distinction made between pre-contact and post-contact pasts is thus not appropriate to the historiography of South Malakula, as the 'event' of contact is so stretched as to fade away from local histories. In the next chapter we will see that oral accounts of conversion to Christianity eclipse the agency of missionaries.

²⁶ Tuzin (1999: 56) actually develops pre-contact Ilahita history, but this ancient history also goes back to an original contact with the Abelam which forced the transformation of Ilahita society.

European presence was not very intense in most of the area and never took hold of the interior.²⁷ It is therefore important to focus on oral traditions to get some distance from established European colonial history. Reliance on missionary sources for example can easily lead to an endorsement of mission views of history. In a recent article, Donham (2001) criticized the Comaroffs for taking for granted the opposition between Tswana ways (*setswana*) and white people's ways (*segkoa*), although the Comaroffs (1992: 160) explicitly say this opposition is a result of a historical process. Perhaps a more justifiable criticism of the Comaroffs would be that their general reliance on missionary sources leads them to construct their history essentially in terms of a simple opposition. This would have been difficult to avoid since the writings of the missionaries reflect their programme of conversion which is based *a priori* on the opposition between their faith and local traditions.²⁸ Even if today such an opposition is used by the Tswana themselves, it does not mean that their whole history should be limited to its establishment. Unfortunately, the Comaroffs did not find many useful Tswana historical narratives (2001: 158).

A similar critique can be directed at those authors who build their analyses of Vanuatu societies around simple oppositions. A recent book on Vanuatu by a political scientist (Miles 1998) is entirely built on what he calls *mental boundaries*, dividing pairs of opposed concepts such as protestant versus catholic, English versus French etc. (ibid: 156f). Most of these pairs are derived either from the basic opposition of tradition to modernity or linked to the nature of the Condominium regime (for which Miles coins

²⁷ The colonial administration never seems to have attempted to punish killings of alleged witches in the coastal areas by people from the interior (see chapter 4), although for the killings of Europeans (as well as for a Vietnamese shopkeeper), the police ventured sometimes in the hills.

²⁸ The examples provided by the Comaroffs (2001: 153; 1992: 210f), like the dialogue between Livingstone and a rain doctor, show this very well. In the eyes of Livingstone and the Comaroffs, the impasse of the dialogue reflects the opposition of their worldviews, but an alternative reading suggests that the rain doctor rather pointed at similarities between their understandings.

the term *condocolonialism*). However, the oppositions Miles attributes to the indigenous societies of Vanuatu partly reflect European biases. Thus, Miles develops the opposition between hill people (*manbus*) and coastal people (*mansolwora*) that was made by Bonnemaïson (1996: 223ff) into a feature of the *longue durée* of the archipelago's history. It has been said that the sea united people more than it divided them (Huffman 1996). On the contrary, within each island there was intermittent war between neighbouring villages and scholars like Bonnemaïson insisted on a radical separation of the inhabitants of the coast and of the interior. Although this opposition is related to indigenous categories, the analysis of South Malakulan histories will show that it did not really play an important role as the analysis will focus on the intensity of relationship between inland and coastal dwellers. The linguistic model of language chains (cf. Introduction) is perhaps more appropriate to account for the mobile histories of Malakula. However, the image of a chain still implies the existence of stable rings, whereas the actual situation is more intertwined.²⁹ Certainly language boundaries seem to have hardly limited people's movements. It seems more fruitful to exploit the apparent contradiction between this long-term process and the contrast that is drawn between contemporary Christian peace and the violence of the pagan past. Although the present situation is explained partly by a series of customary answers to violence, such as taking refuge with relatives, this continuity is erased when past and present are objectified and their differences maximised (cf. Thomas 1997: 186ff).

Greg Denning (1991: 356ff) tried to define a common ground between a historically minded anthropology and an anthropology of history. For the purpose, he redefined

²⁹ Perhaps this is also true of the languages: I once observed to Darrell Tryon who published a classification of the languages of Vanuatu (Tryon 1976) that people told me several separate languages exist, or had existed before, in places that he classified as belonging to a single language area. Tryon answered that some of these languages could be considered as dialects of a larger language since there is not much evidence that they differed greatly from other dialects. This shows a limitation of the chain model: it could be expanded to finer levels of dialectal variation blurring distinctions between languages.

'ethnohistory' as the study of historical consciousness and in particular of the two-way relationship between the present social context and knowledge of the past: how 'the past constitutes the present in being known' (356). The past always survives, but only as fragments or 'relics'; these are 'marked with the meanings of the occasions of their origins' but are 'always translated into something else for the moment they survive' (359). Likewise, the stories in this chapter and in the rest of the thesis reveal as much about the present relationships of the narrators with one another as about the evolution of similar relationships between their respective ancestors. Christina Toren (1988: 696) completes Denning's views on the mutual constitution of past and present with a notion of continuous tradition: 'in the act of constructing the present, people may also be constructing a past with which it is continuous and in whose terms it is explicable'. Or, as White (1991: 130) writes, 'local understandings of the "old" and "new" are mutually constitutive'. Indeed we will see that only the continuous interaction of the families can explain the variations between relations of the same events.

4 The coming down of Loxornbuas

The first stories focus on the Loxornbuas family, which keep the memory of their origin in the hills of the interior, where they separated from two related families (Loxorngrai and Loxornmarit) that moved in opposite directions and now live in South West Malakula, in Tomman and Melip respectively. These three families keep the memory of their common origin in the hills above Malfaxal, half way between Tomman and Axamb.³⁰ One Loxornmarit man was visiting Axamb, staying with his relative Philip Obed of Loxornbuas when I interviewed him. That day, Philip Obed told me the following story about the original dispute that led to the division of the Loxor families and the beginning of their migrations. Whereas violence caused later migrations, these

³⁰ *Loor-* or *Lokh-* are indeed frequent prefixes for 'clan' or 'village' names in South West Malakula (Deacon 1934: 60).

early movements came out of a dispute about ill-mannered pigs and people moved to land that already belonged to them instead of being given refuge by relatives.

When they were staying in Imluxor [the original village], one of the old men had a black pig; another had a white pig. They were feeding them and they were cleaning in front of their doors. But in the night the pigs too came to defecate, the white pig on the door of the owner of the black pig and the black pig on the door of the owner of the white pig. In the morning both men would look at the mess and shout at each other. They had a dispute and said: 'It is not good we stay together. We have land, all right, you stay and I go'. They moved to a place above Malfaxal. They stayed there until they got into a dispute again. One said: 'Oh, I have a small piece of land over there in Rembwe. Now they went to stay in the place called Lenalu (on the shore). They went there now, all right, my grandfather was born there, his own father was born in the hills (*antap*)'. (Philip Obed)

Like a myth of origin, the beginning of this story involves unnamed ancestors (*olfala*) whose genealogical distance from the narrator is not known. Through his grandfather and great-grandfather, the narrator, Philip Obed, is abruptly linked in the last sentence to his more remote ancestors. The main event, a dispute about pigs, is closer to a myth than to the events of the last three generations. Instead of their origin, however, the myth explains the long story of migration through the rupture of the original unity of the families. The social world of the myth is typically simplified: the ancestors here seem to have disputes only among themselves, they never fight and they move easily into land that does not belong to anybody else. Instead, narratives about a more recent past mention women and witchcraft as causes of disputes leading to shootings between neighbours, distant kin, as well as strangers. The former neighbours of Loxornbuas contradict the peacefulness of their history.

When (the Loxornbuas people) were living in the hills (*antap*) they were disputing, fighting and eating people. We had to run away all the way to Lönur. Now, when we stayed there it was still too close so we went to stay with the family of John Eddie (Manwus). (The Loxornbuas people) had to stay under Manwus; they had to

be quiet. Now they worked everywhere (on the same land); they joined, they took the name (they claimed ownership). Now Manwus stays here (on Axamb), but they only came seeking refuge. (Songi)

According to this story, former enemies eventually came to live together as the guests of coastal people, before moving to Axamb. Songi clearly constructs a Christian inspired opposition between Loxornbuas (disputing, fighting and cannibals) and their fleeing victims. Eventually the new hosts tamed their violent guests ('they had to stay under Manwus, they had to be quiet'). Songi's story would be used against Philip Obed in land disputes, arguing that all the lands Philip's family claim outside of Imluxor they hold from conquest and not from origin rights.

By contrast, the construction of Philip Obed's story as a myth could silence rival versions, denying conquest and gifts of land, and displacing the question of ownership to primordial times. The myth attempts to encompass rival stories, leaving them virtually no place. On the contrary, some of the land presently cultivated by Philip Obed belonged, according to Songi, to some of his extinct maternal relatives. Songi claims three land areas through such links, the most important is the land nearer Farun, just opposite Axamb, where Songi and his family have their gardens. According to Songi this is the land of the *nasara* Xelau, the land of 'the uncles of their uncles' (FaMoMoBr) (*graon ia i go long ol ankel tu taem*) (fig 25), who died bewitched and childless.

These uncles did not bear children because poison was too strong; they passed (the land) to our fathers who were safe on the island.

Indeed, land would normally be inherited by the direct patrilineal descendants of the owner or his patrilineal relatives, although land could also be given to other relatives, in particular daughters, sisters and their children. A direct genealogical presentation of

Songi's claim can make them appear quite distant in a patrilineal logic; however, Songi reduces this distance by reporting all to his father's uncles, who had themselves inherited the land from their uncles and from their great uncles (Figure 25).

This dispute is actually more complex since some people of Farun also have their own claims on these disputed areas, often through extinct families. This aspect, however, was not mentioned by Songi, who focused instead on the potential conflict with Loxornbuas. However, after two generations on the islets the neighbours have developed new links (or renewed old ones).

I don't want to meddle with this (*pleple insaed*) because my daughter married into Loxornbuas -What would they eat? I am only thinking about the management of the land (*long bihaf blong manajem graon*). You should not plant too many coconuts; it is not to take land from you, because you are using it already. (Songi)

The caution about causing a dispute with his relatives is expressed here as personal generosity for the family in which the daughter has married.

The recent population growth brought a multiplication of marriage alliances and for people for whom the inheritance of the maternal uncles is so important, it may be embarrassing to oppose the claims of a son-in-law. This short quotation from Songi also exemplifies several conflicting principles of land tenure (cf. Malinowski 1935, II: 335ff): a father's love for his daughter and her children; patrilineal moral authority and management rights over the land; user's rights; economic necessity and duty to assist neighbours in need.

As far as the Loxornbuas are concerned, it is only for their last migration, to Axamb,

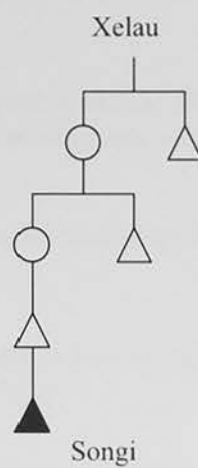


Fig. 25 Songi's genealogy.

that kinship and violence began to play a central role.

The sister of my grandfather was married in Marvar. When there was still fighting, he followed his sister and came there with my father and the family. (Philip Obed)

At the same time this final migration is also the beginning of a peaceful period:

The relationship we have with the people of Marvar, they say it is like a shell: one here, one there, but they are just one (ibid.).

After moving to Axamb, Ailulbuas continued to work on his gardens on the mainland where he met a tragic end:

There was fighting on the big island. They came to this place on the big island; they put their canoes on the white beach of Linovux. The enemy came through, they were not talking angrily, they were not carrying guns. Grandfather could fight, he had a gun and cartridges. The enemy helped my grandfather to pull the canoe and saw the gun inside. He said: —Take care that it does not fire at us, it would be better to put it away while we are pulling the canoe. But where? The enemy held the gun, grandfather fell. Our father stayed on the main island, he grew up there. When the enemy fled, they send a nangaria to make peace. When men came with the will to fight, they were stopped by this (*Oli bru gud long samting ia i stap*). (Philip Obed)

The last two stories imply a perception of the mainland as a place of danger due to widespread fighting. However, when the nature of fighting is specified, it is an ambush rather than organized fighting between communities. In the last story, the victim was on his guard, because the gun was loaded and ready, pointing outwards from the canoe, but he did not suspect the man who came unarmed towards him. They were probably relatives, or at least neighbours working gardens near each other, since they found it normal to meet each other at that place. It seems likely that the man who was killed had a feud with a third party, perhaps also related to the killer. Deacon also reported several

ambushes of this type (1934: 217-223). Although 'warfare' is discussed in his book in terms suggesting conflicting groups, all the examples given are of individual ambushes. Similarly, most of the war stories I heard were about ambushes, at the exception of some ancient and particularly impressive events. Deacon, or perhaps in this case his editor, Wedgwood, noticing a far greater number of stories referring to ambushes supposed that real warfare had been abandoned or was confined to the people of the interior (1934: 44).

The narrative of the murder of Philip Obed's grandfather contrasts with the relation of the original dispute about the messy pigs. In the latter story, the absence of any reference to enemies and relatives excludes potential rivals. In the former story, on the contrary, Philip Obed stresses the harmony of the relationship between his family and his hosts in Axamb as well as with their other guests, not naming the former enemies, not to go too much in the details of old conflicts. Instead he insisted on the peace ceremony held between his father and the unnamed enemy, establishing their good relationship in Axamb.

Harmony and dominance

The unnamed enemy who killed Ailülbuas was probably a pagan like Ailülbuas himself. By contrast, the peace ceremony on Axamb involves Ailülbuas's Christened son, Obed (Philip Obed's father) and the enemy on Axamb. The customary planting of the nangaria plant contributes to the consecration of Axamb as a Christian island of peace. Nangaria is a collective name for a series of plants of the cordyline family which are widely used in Vanuatu and throughout Melanesia for decorative or ritual purposes. Their long leaves are coloured in different shades of green, yellow and red, sometimes suggesting geometric patterns. In New Caledonia, after many efforts Leenhardt and his

disciple Bwesou Eurijisi found that the Christian concept of redemption could only be translated by the name of a small tree planted on land cursed by blood shed in fighting (Clifford 1992: 84; cf. Guiart 1998: 30ff.). In the same way we will see in the next chapter how the coming of Christianity to Axamb was also expressed in local symbolism.

The descendants of Ailülbuas, the Loxornbuas family, prospered in their new home; while keeping their gardens on the mainland, they have become one of the largest families of Axamb. They did well also in the new avenues opened by education: one of Philip Obed's brothers, Aissen, was among the first Axamb men to be sent to boarding school and he subsequently became an MP in the first independent parliament. His own children studied and married abroad, becoming the most cosmopolitan family of the area. Obed and his brother also fostered Tamaki (cf. chapter 4) and paid for his education; they also took care of the last scion of Manwus, a related coastal family. Today, the Manwus family as well as Tamaki and his dependants all live under the wing of the Loxornbuas in Axamb.

Relative to these smaller families, Loxornbuas thus appear to be in very favourable circumstances; it is not surprising then, that Philip Obed expresses views supporting harmony and consensus, in the past as well as now. However, we have already seen a dissonant voice in Songi's version of the migration of Loxornbuas. Far from moving for familial reasons between their different properties they would have expelled other people or began to make gardens on the land of their Manwus hosts – precisely the people who now are minor partner of Loxornbuas in Axamb. As the respective fortunes of Manwus and Loxornbuas changed, the former developed their own version of history, subversive of the present order.

5 Bülbül

The next stories are three separate accounts of the tragic end of a polyandrous marriage involving a woman from Axamb and her two husbands belonging to families from the mainland, Loxornbuas and Manwus. Each account was told on a separate occasion by three different narrators related to either of the protagonists: Wase, a man from Axamb, Philip Obed, who is also the narrator of the stories we considered earlier, and John Eddie, a man from the Manwus family, closely related to Philip Obed's. The discussion of the variations between their accounts of the incident will allow for the development of a theoretical model of the continuous reinterpretation of the actions and movements of their ancestors. This attempt is based on ideas borrowed from a few writers on the anthropology and history of the Pacific. In some recent articles about culture contact (*Cosmologies of Capitalism, Goodbye to Tristes Tropes*), Sahlins (2000) presents a pessimistic model of an impossible dialogue between cultures – the Chinese and the Europeans, the colonizers and the colonized – showing how each partner's attempts to impose a certain type of relationship are bound to fail: we understand other people's actions according to what we already know, and they do the same. So if the cultural distance is big enough, there can be total misunderstanding. This model can be adapted to reflect the parallel transmission of conflicting historical truths in South Malakula. After LiPuma (2000), I want to call 'encompassment' the process by which each perspective requires a reduction of the complexity of the other. However, we will see that such process requires a minimum mutual collaboration and concessions to rivals' histories.

My meeting with Philip Obed was not a formal one, as I came to see him unexpectedly at the beginning of my time in Axamb, but it took place openly with several relatives

and neighbours attending at different times. At some point, John Eddie, of Manwus, joined us and sat silently with the others and at the end of the interview he invited me to his house, where, in front of his sons, he told me his own version of a particularly entangled episode of their common history. The Manwus do not have a long story of migration. Their single most important move was from the mainland coast to Axamb, where John Eddie's father, the only family member left, was looked after by the father of Philip Obed. Before moving to Axamb, the families of Loxornbuas and Manwus lived together for a while on the mainland. One episode of their relationship, involving Philip Obed and John Eddie's grandfathers, is the key event around which the histories of these two families revolves. Each of three versions of the story reveals through some critical variations the political purposes of the respective narrators, as well as the processes by which each story is made to encompass and discredit the others. The history of the ambiguous but close relationship of the two families stages reciprocal adoption in alternate generations as well as murder. Due to the high death rate, infants were frequently in care of their relatives and there was place for manipulations of history or at least for the imposition of a hegemonic version. However, these processes also involve third parties, relatives of the orphans and their foster parents who can provide alternate sources of knowledge.

Polyandrous marriages or *bülbül* ('mixed-up') were exceptional in South Malakula, much less frequent than polygynous and monogamous marriages. One example was discussed in the genealogy of Wase in chapter 1; during genealogical enquiries such marriages were mentioned about half a dozen times, in Farun and Axamb.³¹ For

³¹ In Lamap and the Maskelynes people were not aware that such marriages had ever taken place in South Malakula. The *bülbül* marriages could be further complicated by the marriage of two men and two women. I heard of only one such case, from Mansip in Farun about his grandfathers, but that marriage was dissolved into two monogamous marriages. Deacon (1934: 141f) reports a similar marriage: one man was already married and helped his friend to marry by sharing the bride price (and the bride). The first wife was said to be unhappy about the arrangement and obtained rights to the second husband as well.

example:

Iavlül entered in a *bülbül* marriage with [a] Manxornbus. They took a woman Urkon who gave birth to Aibidiaw and Sungari. After, he married [alone] Limbwele (Manvarilu, Axamb).

The reason for such marriages may have been the Melanesian gender imbalance, often reported and complained about by expatriates and local people alike and which still appears in the 1999 census (National Statistics Office 2000). There are very few reported cases of true polyandrous marriages in the world. The most famous case is that of the Tibetans among whom brothers can marry a single woman to avoid dividing the land (Levine 1988). Another case is that of the 'village wife' of the Lele of Kasai described by Mary Douglas (quoted in Heusch 1971: 47ff), but in that case the polyandrous union is clearly distinguished from genuine marriage, to which all men aspire when they can afford it. In the ancient society of the Marquesas women of high rank could have many secondary husbands, of much lower status than the main aristocratic husband – although there were exceptions when two chiefs married the same woman (Thomas 1990: 39-42). In Vanuatu itself the marriage problems caused by the gender imbalance usually led to great age differences between spouses (see Introduction and chapter 4). There were also some cases for example in Malo where men of low status could work for polygamous men in return for sleeping with one of their lesser wives. In Malo as in the Marquesas however, friends of high rank could share a wife (Rubinstein 1978: 79f). A similar custom of wife sharing might have been behind what Europeans thought to be widespread prostitution in Ambae (Hagen and Pineau 1889: 331). In South Malakula, however, *bülbül* were genuine marriages, for which both men contributed to the bride price and were said not to experience feelings of jealousy, jointly impregnating the woman. For the descendants of such marriages

today, the most important practical consequence is a double inheritance. In this story, however, what is at stake is not so much land ownership as the respective moral status of the descendants of the original actors and their continuing harmonious or conflicting relationships.

The first version I heard by chance as I was sitting with Wase, talking about his own history. Wase, an original land owner in Axamb as we saw in chapter 1, is not related to the two men of the story and he would normally not have told me that story. As we saw in the Introduction, direct descendants are supposed to be experts on the history of their ancestors and I normally avoided relying too much on 'experts'. In this case, Betniko, another genuine (*truman*) Axamb man, came to complain to Wase that a young man, through his mother a descendant of Ailülbuas, pretended to have learned from Wase that Ailülbuas was born of a woman Loxorngrai. Wase protested and suggested that the mistake originated from a misunderstanding of the *bülbü* union, as well as a confusion between Loxornbuas and Loxorngrai, and he went on telling his own version. Wase and Betniko suspected that the youth had views on some land, but confusion could arise from the kinship links inherited from Ailülbuas, who, apart from being born from two fathers, was cared for by a foster mother after the death of his parents. The ancient practice of *bülbü* itself may not be familiar to many young apprentice historians struggling with what can appear as contradictory versions of the same story.

The intervention of Wase and Betniko shows the interest of keeping control over the history of one's relatives, in order to forbid the spread of heterodox versions conflicting with one's own interests. Indeed, the stories of the genuine landowners of Axamb have become entangled to the histories of their guests: Axamb people often advance rival claims on mainland areas through their extinct maternal relatives. Extensive historical

knowledge could be used to forward one's own claims at the expense of rival claims. But in this case, it was only the identity of the polyandrous wife that mattered for Wase and Betniko: the circumstances of the marriage and murder were of minor interest from their perspective. Rather than encompassing a rival story, the purpose was to contain possible applications of that story.

I

Ailülbuas's father was born from a *bülbül* marriage, between a man of Loxornbuas, a man Manwus and a woman Maliabor. The woman however did not want the Manwus anymore, or something of this sort, as normally in a *bülbül* union men cannot be jealous. Then he called the other men Manwus and they went to shoot this man. He was talking with that woman. They shot but the gun caught both of them. They waited for the woman to come running but she did not arrive and they thought that perhaps this woman was dead. They went to see and they found the two of them. They turned the woman up and saw that the baby was alive, he had drunk a lot of his mother's blood. They shook him, they made him throw up his mother's blood and they saved his life. (Wase)

Philip Obed, a direct descendant of Ailülbuas, later told me his version of the same story, minimizing the ruptures of marriage and kinship: in this version there is no polyandrous union, or *bülbül*, and the Manwus did not intend to kill Loxornbuas. After the wife was killed in revenge by the Manwus, the baby was nevertheless breast fed by a sister of the man who killed his mother.

II

It is like this because the mother of Ailülbuas was shot. (-JdL: By whom?) - These enemies... I don't know. Manwus with Manxor were married *bülbül* to a woman Maliabor. When this woman missed her periods, Manwus was angry because Manxor made her pregnant. They made a plan, waiting for the woman to walk alone. It took time because, you know, a bushman always walks with his wife. They shot her, they thought the baby was dead but he was alive; a woman Penwus gave breast to him. (Philip Obed)

A third and more elaborated version was given by John Eddie, a grandson of the

Manwus men who killed the woman. In intended contrast to Philip Obed's version, it stresses the original violence: the Loxornbuas were guilty of witchcraft not adultery and the Manwus wanted to take their revenge by killing both the man and the woman. After the killing good relations are restored: the affectionate links between the baby Ailülbuas and the Manwus men are underlined. Indeed, it was agreed that the baby would belong to the two families. The story ends with the fostering of John Eddie's father by Ailülbuas's sons. It is implicitly suggested that this was not a real fostering because, as a result of *bülbül*, they were actually all descendants of the Manwus.

III

They ran away from the place where they were staying above, then they came to stay on the sea at Xormaru [pass of Limbanan, on the other side of Lipangpang]. They stayed there until one man of the nasara Loxornbuas started poisoning them. They wanted to kill him but there was a woman. Manwus had married this woman and they were staying together until this man came now they *bxavu* (= *bülbül*) this man. They came now they wanted to kill this woman, whom they had made pregnant together; she had given birth already and was carrying the baby with her. They wanted to kill the old Loxornbuas but they couldn't get the better of him (*oli kantwin long hem*). The old Manwus took his gun and fired. He thought: 'Perhaps my baby is already dead'. But these two had already agreed: 'If that woman gets pregnant it will be from both of us'. Then he ran up to see that his baby was still alive and took care of him until he grew up, that baby was old Ailülbuas.

Sometime later, my old men were all dead, then the two sons of Ailülbuas, Daniel and Obed, Obed came here, my father came with him then the old Obed found a wife for him who gave birth to me here. When my mother died he took another woman who gave birth to Claude. To me, my father did not speak, but Kersom's father told me the story. (John Eddie Thomas)

Variations

Philip Obed's version supports present harmonious family relations. Past episodes of violence are presented as having been limited to individuals and of no importance for

the following generations. Immediately after the killing, the baby was breast fed by a relative of the killer of his mother. Although the identities are clear enough from the stories, Philip was reluctant to name the killers whose descendants are his allies. The importance of these historical events is linked with the tendency of the speakers to identify with their ancestors, or at least to blur the distinction between individual and family in the past and in the present – a variation on Sahlins's 'historical I' that we discussed in chapter 1. The superiority of Loxornbuas on Manwus is based on two factors: their sheer number and especially their seniority on the island of Axamb. Although they belonged to the mainland, their presence there is justified by their alliance with Axamb families. The members of the smaller families around them (Tamaki and John Eddie) are there as 'guests of guests', as both Tamaki and John Eddie's father arrived as orphans fostered by Obed and Daniel.

John Eddie's story conveys a meaning subversive to the present relationship. The most important point is the legitimacy of the marriage and the birth of Ailülbuas. This means that Ailülbuas belonged to the families of his two fathers: Loxornbuas and Manwus, which seems contrary to John Eddie's interests as he would have to share his land with the numerous descendants of Ailülbuas. Otherwise John Eddie and his childless brother are currently sole owners of this land. In an enlarged Manwus family, however, John Eddie appears as senior, or at least equal, to Philip Obed. John Eddie insists on the fostering of Ailülbuas by the Manwus, in reverse of the similar help John Eddie's father received from Philip's father. The two fosterings balance the debts of each family towards one another. The subversive message is strengthened by a certain hostility towards Loxornbuas.

Loxornbuas lies above Melip. Two of them ran away to Malfaxal. One then came all the way to stay with the people of Manwus. One showed himself (for what he really was): they expelled him because of witchcraft. The man Manwus

	I	II	III
Cause of dispute	The woman did not want the Manwus man She broke the <i>bülbül</i> contract	Manwus was jealous, breaking the rules of <i>bülbül</i>	Loxornbuas started poisoning the Manwus The marriage was regular
Target	The Manwus killed the man and the woman They did not want to kill the woman	They ambushed the woman They did not want to kill the man	They wanted to kill both of them Loxornbuas escaped
The baby	They shook the baby and saved his life	They thought they had killed the baby	They were afraid of killing the baby
Fostering		A woman Penwus gave breast to him	The man Manwus took care of the baby
Nasara/ Family membership		Ailülbuas is a Loxornbuas not a Manwus	They had agreed that the baby belonged to both husbands
Second fostering			Ailülbuas's sons took care of the last young Manwus

Table 1: *Bülbül*. The birth of 'Ailülbuas in three versions

now looked after him. They *bülbül*, they said that the child would get two names.

This story doubles the debt of Loxornbuas who were exiled because of their witchcraft activities towards Manwus who gave them hospitality and were badly paid in return.

Table 1 shows the main variants between the three versions; we have already seen the effect of these variants for a moral construction of the past. The importance of these variants is shown by the specific inversions in key points of each of these three stories: the origin of the dispute, the target of the killers and their attitude towards the baby. We have seen that Philip Obed's version downplays the conflicting elements in the story. On the contrary, John Eddie's version opposes the violence of the allied families to the affection shown by the killers for the baby. Their care for Ailülbuas when a baby is reciprocated a generation later by the fostering of the Manwus's last descendant by the sons of Ailülbuas. These variations need not be the result of conscious manipulations: John Eddie for example constituted his version of the events by questioning older relatives. This type of enquiry is the only legitimate way of modifying one's history; the only way to rebuild a respectable claim after accepting defeat in a land court (cf. chapter 6). On the contrary, people are often accused of lying if they appear to change their versions of history without justifying the acquisition of their new knowledge. Even old men whose knowledge is widely respected are suspected of abusing their authority to favour friends or relatives (cf. chapter 1).

The first version, told by Wase, is the shortest but its details suggest ruthless violence – such as the baby being made to throw up his mother's blood, probably to add to the atmosphere of moral confusion that the *bülbül* story has for a modern audience. Wase is not interested in the details of the relationship of Loxornbuas and Manwus but in the

general line of their history, especially their marriage alliances, so that no unchecked claims can be advanced against his own interest. The details of this version reveal Wase's desire to remain in good terms with the two other families: he does not want to keep grudges about the murder of the woman, who was one of his relatives. He minimizes the guilt of the killers by holding the women responsible for the breaking up of her double marriage and by admitting that she was killed by accident. Philip Obed on his side is also wary of maintaining harmonious relations with the Manwus people who now live under the protection of his family. In his version (version II), the Manwus only wanted to kill the woman, taking great pain to spare the Loxornbuas man, waiting for his wife to walk alone. Finally, if we follow John Eddie (version III), both the man and the woman were targeted but the man managed to escape. This last version underlines historical tensions between the families, beyond their present friendship.

A similar set of variations appears in the different versions of the origin of the dispute. According to Wase (version I), the anger of Manwus was caused by a rupture of the rules of *bülbül* marriage; for Philip Obed (version II) the dispute resulted from the jealousy of the Manwus man; finally, following John Eddie Manwus (version III), witchcraft, not marital infidelity, caused his grandfather's anger. Wase's version represents perhaps a typical Christian account of bushmen, objectivating their difference from the point of view of modern Malakulans. Murder is a crime today, a polyandrous marriage would be a scandal, and the general representation of the violence is shocking. Wase, however, expresses no judgement as to the relationship between the two families. John Eddie accentuates the violence, the responsibility of the Loxornbuas family, and the balance of responsibility and support between the two families. Philip Obed's aims are to attenuate possible past tensions and the affectionate relationship of the Manwus men to the baby: they thought that it would die with its mother but as it was still alive

they brought it to one of their sisters. Unlike Wase, the other two narrators speak about their own ancestors and are not concerned with a contrast between coastal people and bushmen. Their histories are positioned politically towards one another, essentially through the description of the respective feelings of friendship and hatred that they attribute to their ancestors.

6 Emerging traditions: the conditions of knowledge transmission

The histories of the three families have not come to the present day in simple parallel transmission. At the occasion of disputes, conflicting stories may be publicly voiced and the divergences may be reinforced in these circumstances. Moreover, for most of the period covered these people had a very high mortality rate and many men died before their sons grew up, which caused gaps in the transmission of knowledge and a periodical shift in the balance of authority between the families. Men in a position of authority may have tried to exploit transmission gaps. On the other hand, orphans could attempt to bypass these obstacles with the help of more distant relatives.

Frederik Barth (1975; 1987: 78) characterized the transmission of knowledge in Papua New Guinea societies as based on secrecy and control by a small group of old men. This would result in uncertain transmission, extreme division and limited extension of any given knowledge system. In a later article (1990), he expands (perhaps erroneously) his analysis of Ok people to New Guinea in general, whose model of knowledge transmission -the initiator as a 'conjurer'- is opposed to the 'guru' model of most of South and South East Asia. In this later article he introduces the idea that knowledge is 'copyrighted and linked to a particular initiator. This initiator can only spread his knowledge to a limited number of people in his own group or among neighbours. This would explain why knowledge is so divided, contradictory and localised in New Guinea

(and sometimes also why it can be lost) whereas in Asia the guru model favours the largest possible audience and brings therefore an homogenisation of the field of knowledge over continental distances³² (1990: 647f). The fragmented and contradictory character of knowledge is common to many areas of Melanesia, including South Malakula. However, in South Malakula, historical knowledge is associated with families, not with rituals of initiation, circumcision, or religious confirmation. Only the latter confers some important knowledge these days but there is no element of secrecy in it. A strong sense of ownership of particular histories and of various rights to perform songs or display decorations (cf. Geismar n.d.) can be compared to Barth's 'conjurer' model, but only to a certain point. It is important to distinguish between various kinds of knowledge: the Guru-conjurer model cannot be applied to any society as a whole. In another Papua New Guinean society, the Wahgi, the transmission of the knowledge of witchcraft suspicions follows a model not unlike the transmission of historical knowledge in South Malakula: the contentious aspects are transmitted with caution over many years and can be suddenly revealed during an open confrontation (O'Hanlon 1989: chapter 3). In South Malakula the importance of knowledge in land disputes enhances the status of older men versed in the ways of custom and ensures that there is always a young man in each family who takes on the task to learn, or even research, history. Men of knowledge are divided between the desire to spread their own version of history and the fear of seeing rivals usurping or distorting events and genealogies. They are also keen to have it transmitted, or even better written down in order to protect the land rights of their descendants. There is still an element of secrecy, as people can be apprehensive that information such as the names of distant ancestors could be usurped by their opponents. As a precautionary measure, some men pretend to keep some information secret, only to be revealed in the ultimate court hearings, for example

³² It should be noted that spread of Christianity and millennial faiths in Melanesia does not fit either model.

a story telling the 'true' origins of their opponents. In practice, however, people rarely can describe in an articulate way their opponents' arguments and stories, perhaps because in the heat of debate they do not want to listen, and also because they do not consider it their business. As the example of Wase shows it is not necessary to know all of the history of one's neighbours but just to be informed of the details that are relevant for land claims. This attitude makes disputes about history very hard to solve and ensures the perpetuation of rival claims transmitted from generation to generation in an atmosphere of secrecy and uncertainty about rival claims.

The variations between stories also reflect the objectification of pagan violence (Wase), of harmonious relationships (Philip Obed), or of a desire for a different balance of power (John Eddie) (cf. Thomas 1997: 15, 202, *passim*). Some events such as the actual shooting of the person or adoption and marriage relationships were probably once undisputed facts. Other events may have been understood differently from the beginning, such as suspicions of witchcraft, adultery, personal feelings or conflicting land claims. The resulting differences reflect the histories of these families over four generations. The most straightforward process of differentiation would have been oral transmission within a family, explaining the progressive emergence of rival traditions. Awareness of rival knowledge, however, is necessary to build a case against it; the presentation of one's own history has to overlap with rival histories in order to encompass them (cf. chapters 1 and 3). Changing perspectives of the past also derive from the influence of newly adopted traditions such as Christianity or as the result of changes in the balance of power between families.

Changes within a family tradition are made easier by the relative monopoly on knowledge exercised by expert historians, generally old men. These experts are often

uncontested authorities within their own families who are dependent on them. The high death rates of past generations altered the normal transmission of knowledge, often resting on a single male heir. The process continues today as many families are still small in numbers. The disappearance of their world may also have discouraged many people to transmit their knowledge. The importance of historical knowledge today is also linked to the re-evaluation of traditions and to the policy of returning all land to indigenous owners (see Introduction and chapter 6). Some experts, including a few women, are reputed for their customary knowledge because they grew up in a traditional environment. Younger men on the other hand acquire their knowledge at the expense of their involvement with the modern world.

Because I was the youngest, my old man was talking to me all the time, because he was old, every morning he would come to warm himself up to the fire, every time I was questioning him. My father did not let me go. My brothers went to the *Communale* [Lamap French governmental primary school] and when they got a bit older they worked for the Chinese on a ship. The three of us only are the big men of *kastom*: me, Skepa and old Jona (Songi).

This is a picture of ideal conditions of transmission, maybe somewhat idealised to legitimise the narrator's claim to be an authority on *kastom*.

Among the family historians quoted here, John Eddie is technically a knowledge orphan. His father was an orphan who probably never got to learn much about his own history: John Eddie says that his father 'did not speak' to him. This is confirmed by the avowed ignorance and absence of interest for history of John Eddie's elder brother. John Eddie's obvious alternative knowledge source would have been Philip Obed's family, as he was living with them and as their history had much in common. Precisely for these reasons perhaps, he went instead on a knowledge pilgrimage, interrogating

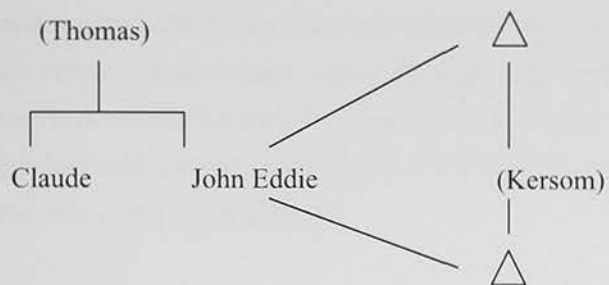


Fig. 26 John Eddie as a link in the transmission of knowledge in Kersom's family.

experts from mainland families.³³

We sat down with old Hades, Sala John taped it and said he would make it good (write it down). Another time I went to Blaksan, I just went there for the names. We got them here already but I tried to check up with Mansiplül. Sumbles, however, said that he knew. Like the name of the old man who bore old Aiwujwuj, his name was Aisandr. (John Eddie Thomas)

John Eddie also learned much from another man born 'in the bush', Kersom's father. Kersom himself died in 1998, leaving two small boys,³⁴ so that John Eddie may have to teach the grandchildren of the man who taught him the history of their families (Figure 26). In other cases, transmission gaps may have been caused by lack of interest of the young generations for things of the past.

Do you see this old man? He does not know anything because when he was young they were drunk all the time. (Romain Batik)³⁵

7 Coda: the identity of the woman

A few days after speaking with Philip Obed and John Eddie, I received the visit of

³³ In some cases, but apparently not for land claims, people can dream the missing information, e.g. the steps of a dance or the plant to cure a disease. However, even in these cases, the information revealed in a dream may be viewed with suspicion. It was revealing that one dance leader admitted to learning from dreams only to his followers but not to me.

³⁴ See chapter 5 for an analysis of the funerary inscription on Kersom's tomb and the circumstances of his death and of the building of his grave.

³⁵ The man who thus complained, Romain Batik, is a member of a family from Dravai in Lamap who returned after an absence of two generations. Romain's grandfather was one of the first catechists and was sent to evangelise north-west Santo. Romain's father, Pierre, was himself born in Santo and became the first catholic catechist to the island of Tanna in the south of the country in the early 1930s. As a result Romain benefited from a good education but he was acutely aware of a culture loss, for himself but also for the whole community of Lamap. When he returned to Lamap, although he did not know the language, he undertook to learn as much as he could from the last knowledgeable old men, particularly Donatien, his relative, and Damien, who were also the chief informants of the linguist Charpentier (1979). Now that these men are dead Romain assumes a position of authority, delivering speeches on *kastom* in court cases and other occasions such as marriages and dances.

Johnlam, Nikelsen, Daniel and Makandre, who had had echoes of my earlier sessions. Makandre, my host on Axamb, had actually introduced me to Philip Obed, who lived in a neighbouring compound. The four men disagreed with Philip Obed about the identity of the mother of Ailülbuas, which was one of the few points for which the three versions of the *bülbül* marriage concurred.

There is one thing about which old Philip was wrong. About Rembwe, Philip tells that a woman Imbor (Maliabor) gave birth to Ailülbuas's father, that's wrong. There were two Maliabor women: one married to Lönvat where she bore the mother of old Titex's father; the other one married to Renbwe to bear the mother of Ailülbuas's father. Ailülbuas's father was the one who took a woman of the *nasara* of old Japiu, Landrurxamb. We have all seen the drums from this *nasara*. It was Ailülbuas who took a woman Imbor who gave birth to Daniel and Obed.

Now, the two of them wanted to visit their uncles at Imbor, they went for a *namanki* ceremony. They slept in Lembüs with Longlel, Masinglenandr, Aplön and Masinglembüs. Old Ailülbuas took his two sons to sleep there. The others (the Landrurxamb men who lived in Lembüs) were glad to see them, this is what they did. They said: — You cannot go now. You must first stay for a while, we are going to the reef. They went to the pass at Barxuvaillelung. They shot some fish and found two large octopuses. They came back to make *laplap* (pudding), they ate and only left the following morning.

It is like this: old Japiu was there before, Ailülbuas came afterwards. Old Japiu's blood is hotter than ours. Our fathers disputed for so long, in the end we found out that we come out of Japiu's *nasara*. Indeed Japiu said that: — Me, I don't have a boy, I have a small girl but I give her up. Then he gave the rights to the four of us: he told his daughter that she could inherit his possessions but that we would take the land. We held the last court over there (in Farun) when old Japiu's brother, Sael gave evidence as a witness of the agreement of the old man to give the right to the four of us, the sons of Johnsen. So, our nephew Saiken asked: — How about his daughter? But old Sael said that no, to the four of us. Philip does not know, he went to his garden he did not come to that court. Philip is wrong when he says that the land belong to Loxornbuas, because the *nasara* of old Japiu is over there. (Johnlam, Nikelsen, Daniel and Makandre)

The purpose of the four men was to weaken Philip Obed's claim on a piece of land on the coast which, according to him, already belonged to his ancestors before they settled

there. Instead, they said the land belonged to the *nasara* of Landruxamb, whose last male member bequeathed it on them. They claim that Philip occupies this land because his father Obed got it from his own father's maternal uncles who were from Landruxamb (it is to underline this point that this last story gives so much detail on the visit of Ailulbuas to his uncles). This discussion brings us back to the first incident that led Wase to tell me the story and shows the importance of the identity of Ailulbuas's mother, even though the three versions analyzed in this chapter agreed on that point. In fact, for these other families, it is very important that this woman belonged to a family of original Axamb land owners. Indeed, as we saw in the beginning of the chapter, the right of John Eddie and Philip Obed to reside in Axamb is ultimately based on that alliance: Obed's grandfather fled to Axamb because his sister was married there and Obed himself is keen to refer to the good relationship of his family with Marvar – 'they say it is like a shell'.

However, Makandre's intervention connects these histories to land claims on the main island and to the histories of people who never lived on Axamb, showing how difficult it is to isolate a single issue from the endless chain of historical claims and counterclaims. Wase knew that conflicting claims about the identity of Ailulbuas's mother would lead to land claims on the mainland.

8 Conclusion and theoretical developments

The original concern of this chapter, as well as chapters 3 and 4, was to write fragments of the history of the transformation of South Malakulan society, based on the narratives of the people and reflecting their agency. One concern was the absence of Europeans from local narratives. We can see now that the progress of colonization is eclipsed by events that affected people's lives more directly, centred around inter-family

relationships, including violence and witchcraft, leading to the abandonment of the interior of the island. European introduced germs and weapons certainly played a major role in these events, as did the attraction of new religious, educational and economic possibilities on the coast. Europeans, however, were never explicitly held responsible for the destruction of the population caused by introduced diseases and weapons; rather, local violence and witchcraft were always blamed. As we will see in chapters 3 and 4, histories written by the missionaries and the converts themselves or their descendants also diverge in their focus, although local historians sometimes attempt to find common ground between their own traditions and the Bible (cf. chapter 3). A local historical perspective allows us to avoid exaggerating the importance of such oppositions as between sea people (*mansolwora*) and bush people (*manbus*) which Bonnemaison (1996: chapter IX) proposed as a fundamental category of the societies of north central Vanuatu – a structural opposition in the *longue durée*. This opposition was emphasized and rigidified from a European perspective as coastal people adopted Christianity and cash cropping, and had access to European education, earlier than their relatives in the interior. However, in South Malakula all the hill people (Bislama: *manbus*; vernacular (Lamap): *mweraur*) have now come down to the sea, so that this opposition has become void,³⁶ limited to imaginary bushmen set as counter-examples to naughty children. The histories of migrants to Axamb show the relative significance of this opposition between bush and sea people, as it can only be traced in the contrast between the islet of Axamb as a safe haven and the mainland as a place of danger. The people themselves are all relatives and no fundamental distinction is made between them other than place of residence, family membership and marriage alliances. The fact that many of these people spoke different languages is not even mentioned. The Loxornbuas of Axamb and

³⁶ In one of his letters, Deacon already reported that there had been such a movement of migration from bush to sea and between coastal groups that he expected differences between bush and coast to progressively get obliterated (Deacon n.d.: 16001).

the other Loxor groups of Melip and Tomman speak today the same languages as their respective hosts and not the language of their place of origin. Even the languages of origin are usually not mentioned in historical narratives, unless the narrator originates from an unfamiliar area. This lack of interest contrasts with a strong identification of the people with their present place of residence and its language (*Man-Axamb*, *Man-Maskelyne*, *Man-Lamap*, etc.). This identification with residents intersects with an internal division between landowners and outsiders, and there can be bitter disputes regarding land ownership. However, it is probably the existence of this division between host and guest that explains how people have always been able to move easily from one village to another. Since in theory at least people never cease to belong to their original place, they could be welcomed any time by their relatives in other places.

The opposition between rough hill men and more sophisticated islet dwellers is only apparent in the version given by Wase, himself a genuine 'sea person'. However, it is recast as a contrast between pagan times and the present. The versions told by Philip Obed and John Eddie, the descendants of the two protagonists, reflect on the contrary the continuing relationship between the families involved. This is particularly true of John Eddie whose version seems to reveal a long-term balance of violence and adoption between Manwus and Loxornbuas. Philip Obed on his side is always careful to stress the continuing good relationships between both families and their hosts on Axamb. The variations between the three versions reflect the interests of their narrators and the shifts in the fortunes of their respective families. These interests are transmitted along family lines, usually from father to son, at the same time as the historical knowledge that supports them – thus giving rise in the long term to irreconcilable rival traditions.

The rivalry between families of Axamb can be related to the competitive ethos often

described in Melanesia (cf. Young 1971, A. Strathern 1971). Harrison (1990: 169ff, 199ff) draws a similar equivalence between competitive exchanges of food or other valuables and disputes over historical matters such as the ownership of names, in Avatip in the Sepik area of Papua New Guinea. In particular, Harrison minimizes the differences between the symbolic exchange of knowledge in a historical dispute and exchanges of material goods, as the prestige successful debaters bring to their sub-clan, induces other sub-clans to give daughters in marriage. Women are thus represented as the ultimate resource allowing the reproduction and expansion of a prestigious clan (Harrison 1990: 171f, 199f). South Malakula illustrates Harrison's point: fighting with words is as much about material rewards in terms of land ownership than status and political prestige. Much of the talk is about marriages and their outcomes. However, Harrison's equivalence between symbolic and material exchanges does not work perfectly, since the parties in disputes only offer each other challenges; the real exchanges – past marriages, adoptions and other family relationships, are all historical events. These past exchanges are now the object of the debates – as probably happens in other Melanesian areas when people argue about past presentations of gifts.

The historical character of Ailülbuas is also an illustration of that other theme of Melanesianist research, the dividual person (Leenhardt 1971, M. Strathern 1988). The contested nature of the *bülbül* marriage of his parents has implications not only for his own identity but also for that of his descendants and the descendants of the killers of his mother. The historical conflict opposes people who would like to eclipse some aspects of these relationships, or emphasize other aspects. However, it is more than the status of individuals that is at stake, but the relationship between entire families in the light of the episodes of their shared histories.

Towards a theory of encompassment

Beyond the description of historical exchanges or the divided status of some individuals, a theoretical contribution needs to focus on the process of historical thinking. We can start from Marshall Sahlins's (1985: xiv) definition of an event as 'a *relation* between a happening and a structure (or structures)', or as he specified afterwards (2000: 301) a *disruption*: 'what makes an act or incident an event is precisely its contrast to the going order of things, its disruption of that order'. In this chapter the 'structure' or 'order' is the changing relationship between the families. The diverging accounts of the events, assumed to derive from a single set of 'happenings', reveal at the same time as they modify the structure. The obliteration or emphasis of some events present an ideal vision of how things should be from the perspective of the narrator or his family, and 'rethinking' not only the nature of the events but also the status of the people and families involved.³⁷ In a similar way LiPuma (2000: 28) describes 'encompassing' processes by which the Maring of New Guinea are incorporated in the Western world, and to a lesser degree expatriate Western agents are transformed in contact with the Maring. Encompassment is a more practical concept, reflecting conscious strategies, even if in LiPuma's use of the concept there is little place for the rethinking of Western agents by indigenous people. This aspect of the relationship between converts and missionaries will be considered in the next chapter. The concept of encompassment is also interesting for an analysis of the relationship between South Malakulan historians themselves. Encompassment at a local level is a multi-lateral process, reflecting each historian's attempts to tell a story more convincing than his rivals. However, encompassment requires accepting parts of the rival model. Indeed, histories have to follow a similar sequence of events to be able to reject more efficiently

³⁷ 'Rethinking' is used by Gow (2001: ch. 9 'The *Gringos* Rethought') in the context of narratives about contacts between Amazonian Indians and Western others such as missionaries, rubber bosses and anthropologists.

the other versions. If the histories did not overlap, there would be no common space for the play of rival interpretations. On the other hand, the very recognition of rival histories as partly true precludes easy solutions to disputes and encourages the constitution of rival but entangled traditions. Each story's coherent sequence of events is in systematic contradiction with the other two. Internal coherence is of course essential to make a story convincing in itself, but it also gives it a purchase at the other stories; indeed, if one of the stories proved less coherent, it would be completely undone by a systematic denial of all its key points.

Not the content alone but also the control of knowledge is an important aspect of encompassment. Close kinship links and a high death rate set the context of educational strategies: orphans in the care of relatives who could seek to impose their own version of history can frequently find other relatives to help them recover an independent version.

The variations themselves show the divergences resulting from a hundred years of cohabitation; they only make sense in the perspective of shifts in the respective positions of the families over many generations. The Loxornbuas are said to have been once 'under' Manwus while they were living on the coast of the mainland; Ailülbuas, the ancestor of all Loxornbuas people living today, was an orphan fostered by members of the same family as those who killed his father. There may not be a stronger contrast with the positions of the two families two generations later, as the children of the orphan took the last descendant of the other family as a dependent on Axamb. Today, the leader of the Manwus family seeks to restore a symbolic equivalence between the two families. The only way open to him is to constitute an independent history. For the third family, represented by Wase, what was at stake was very different: their interests

as landowners and ultimate hosts of everybody else living on their half of Axamb was never contested, certainly not by Philip Obed and John Eddie. What Wase and Betniko were concerned about is a variant in the history of Ailülbuas proposed by yet another group of people. That variant, an alternative identity for Ailülbuas's mother, concerns the history of extinct mainland families whose inheritance is claimed by various Axamb people.

The question of the responsibility for past violence is of secondary importance as the entire pagan past is objectified in a Christian perspective as an abolished era of violence. However, the moral responsibility for violence can still be raised to contest land claims and also to establish moral claims. This is particularly true of John Eddie's story that builds up a moral symmetry between the violence of Loxornbuas, involving witchcraft, and the gun violence of the Manwus.

All the histories presented in this paper refer to the movements (or the stability) of the narrators' ancestors, paying particular attention to the kinship links on which people's land claims are based. The analysis shows how much the histories are oriented towards the present context and aim to enforce the point of view of the narrators over rival perspectives. All these historians were born in Axamb and they have not learnt the languages of their ancestors; some have never seen their places of origin. The weight of present relationships eclipses the radical transformation involved in the migrations: the change of languages is not mentioned, the impact of colonial presence practically disappears as neither the depopulation nor local plantations, traders, missionaries or even conversion to Christianity are mentioned. Sometimes, as in Philip Obed's version the old conflicts themselves are downplayed.

The main contrast between past and present concerns the end of the violence, but even this is not so much to underline the consequence of the migration but the expression of moral judgements that have implications on present relationships. Wase reminds us of the status of outsiders of the two families, presenting their ancestors as uncouth bushmen. John Eddie challenges the present status quo by emphasizing former violence and the moral responsibility of his neighbour's ancestors.

To borrow from Sahlins's terminology, the migration histories are not about 'happenings' – what 'really' happened, in real places – but about 'events' which exist in multiple versions and whose time-scale and geography relate to the moral and social universe of the narrators.

Chapter 3 The New Life

or

Saints and Tricksters: Two Aspects of Conversion

1 Introduction

One of the most important features of the societies of South Malakula is that they are entirely Christian. This transformation has affected all areas of social life and, above all, people's understanding of history. We will see that even some land disputes cannot be understood without referring to the events that led to the religious changes. This chapter therefore considers the circumstances of conversion in Lamap and Axamb, two areas which were among the first places visited by the missionaries, Catholic and Presbyterian respectively. Beyond sectarian differences, however, the significance of the two case studies lies in the relative intensity of expatriate missionary presence, leading in the Lamap case to a situation of conflict and a greater distance between the Church and the people, and in the case of Axamb to a more immediately successful conversion to a local form of Christianity. The history of this confrontation and its aftermath is read between the lines of the accounts of the missionaries themselves, to bring out as much as possible what could have been the point of view of the Lamap people. The conversion of Axamb occurred more at a distance, with generally no permanent missionary presence; it relied essentially on returnees from the labour trade and early converts to pursue the mission work. The people of Axamb preserve the memory of these early evangelists and their narratives can be compared with missionary accounts.

The study is mainly an attempt at a historical deconstruction of missionary sources, highlighting the ambiguities and indeed the violence of the process. The impossibility for missionaries and converts alike to impose their own agendas on each other, and

subsequently to control the production of history, links this chapter with the first two chapters which analyzed in similar terms the practice of local historians. The chapter's approach is inspired by Richard Price's *Alabi's World* (1990) in which he alternates quotations from oral narratives and various colonial sources. I also try to emulate Bronwen Douglas's (1998: part 3) analysis 'against the grain' of missionary texts relating to southern Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Each case study focuses on a local man, Namal in Lamap and David Ailongbel in Axamb. The Catholic missionaries gave a huge importance to Namal, speaking about him in their reports more than about anybody else apart from themselves. Ailongbel on the other hand has become the hero of an epic of conversion in Axamb. The chapter does not attempt to link these accounts with the general Christian conquest of souls elsewhere in Vanuatu. On the contrary, the emphasis of the study is on the meaning given by local people to conversion and, in particular in the case of Axamb, on the legacy of the old system of beliefs to Christianity in South Malakula. This legacy does not necessarily take forms that would be opposed by official theologians. So, new religious hierarchies reflect the old grade hierarchies, and a Christian emphasis on communal eating and the sharing of food are conceived as a reversal of former cooking practices. In some cases, aspects strongly opposed by earlier missionaries are now widely accepted by church officials as re-evaluated *kastom*. Dances are performed at Church celebrations in Lamap. Some deeply entrenched practices such as circumcision and bride price were maintained in the face of criticism in Catholic and Presbyterian areas alike. From the beginning, Melanesian Christianity was expressed in its own terms.

Like Barker (1992) a decade earlier, Robbins (2001: 902) challenges certain anthropologists (Englund and Leach 2000) for believing that 'nothing much has changed from what went on before'. Englund and Leach were themselves reacting

against exactly the opposite view, which they saw as prevalent among anthropologists, that modernity produced a uniform effect throughout the world. Their contradictions show that these authors take a somewhat simplified view of the practice of anthropologists at large. One can argue that it is all a question of scale, although some anthropologists tend to over-emphasize either the rupture (LiPuma 2000), or on the contrary the continuity (Foster 1995) between old and new. On a regional level, as in the Melanesian area, colonialism, epidemics and conversion led to similar processes of population decline and recovery, pacification, conversion and adoption of cash cropping. However these processes always took place in specific contexts and led to infinite variants of Melanesian modernities that reflect the original diversity. On the other hand, the wide range of these changes makes clear why Englund and Leach would be wrong to advance the view that cultures remain relatively unaffected. Still, they are right to reject assumptions of uniformity at a local level, where the combination of events was never exactly the same and where people reinvented in practice the global institutions they adopted. The present case study attempts to explain how, notwithstanding the revolution brought about by conversion, there is still an important sense of continuity in local cultures, even if this continuity can be found sometimes in the inversion of old practices as well as in parallel institutions.

Circumstances of conversion

Conversion was also a process of colonial occupation and pacification, as new converts were giving up warfare and coming to live among planters and traders. In Lamap however, pacification was enforced before religious conversion. Elsewhere on the coast and small islands, European presence was much less intense (cf. chapter 2), as the Presbyterian missionaries and the district agents only visited the villages when on tour from their respective bases located on the east coast of Malakula and in Lamap. As a

result, the conversion and pacification of these areas was mostly a local issue.

Indigenous Christians negotiated the 'coming down' of their relatives. Conversion to Christianity, beyond a change of residence from up in the hills to down on the coast, involved also the abandonment of revenge killings and the grade hierarchies, while customs that found European parallels, such as celebration of first harvest, remained part of the new community life.

The contrast between a strong model of colonization in Lamap and a weaker one on the rest of the coast has parallels elsewhere in Melanesia. In some places, punitive expeditions or full blown wars preceded acceptance of the colonial order (Keesing 1982, Douglas 1998: 23), although the violence exerted by the colonists seems always disproportionate to the actual threat. It was often a reaction to unproven indigenous plots to exterminate the European population (e.g. Douglas 1998: 193-221, Guiart 1999: 28, 30). Outside of New Caledonia such expeditions were fortunately rare and what is usually more striking is the ease with which most people in Melanesia gave up warfare. Often, people gave the appearance of enthusiastically welcoming colonial peace and order enforced by a limited European presence. Zelenietz, White and Rodman, in their contributions to a book on the pacification of Melanesia (Rodman and Cooper 1983), all attribute eagerness for peace to an increase in the intensity and mortality of traditional fighting, which had been transformed by the use of guns. Zelenietz (1983: 104f) speaks of spontaneous indigenous efforts, motivated by economic reasons, to stop headhunting as war impeded the production of copra. For White (1983: 134), Christianity was sought for the protection it provided against enemy raids. Whatever the strength of these reasons, these two authors do not address the reorganization of society that accompanied pacification and conversion. Rodman (1983a) in her essay in the same volume provides a more complex picture, through her interest in land ownership and residency patterns. The Longanan people of Ambae in Vanuatu, about whom she is

writing, responded to an increase in warfare by gathering together in larger villages under the protection of war leaders, who themselves tended to grab the land of some of their followers. That system led to a spiral of violence, as powerful leaders were more prone to go to war and to despoil their followers (*ibid.*: 148). Eventually, in the 1930s, people sought the protection of the colonial government, which also provided them with new economic possibilities such as plantation work and copra making and allowed them to preserve the land rights of their children (150ff.). Rodman stresses the transformation in society brought about by these changes: people resettled along the coast in small hamlets, deserted leaders could no longer support large numbers of wives and warriors and they lost their ability to seize land. New tensions appeared as the patrilineal assumptions of the colonial administration conflicted with the practice of matrilineal transmission of property (152-155). Rodman brilliantly shows that the consequences of pacification are not simply a question of acculturation or survival of some fundamental features of traditional society: Longanan society changed radically but it did so to a large extent on its own terms. The balance of power between people and leaders did not reflect the choices of the colonizers, neither did the abandonment of the large villages in favour of small hamlets; on the contrary, colonial policy often favoured chiefs and large settlements (they certainly did so in Malakula). These changes produced a society that was radically different from the old one, although Rodman herself might not agree on the fundamental character of this transformation as she tends to underline continuities (*cf.* chapter 2). Her understanding of economic transformations, however, contrasts with her neglect of the religious element. She does mention the efforts of the Anglican missionaries alongside those of the colonial government to undermine the power of the Ambae leaders (151), but she limits the description of the consequences of conversion, seeing the mission as a source of health and educational facilities, 'in addition to salvation'. On the other hand, she stresses that the mission did not require Longanans to

abandon traditional activities other than warfare and cannibalism (151f). This may have been the official policy but it is likely that conversion to the Anglican Church must have had a wide impact on many aspects of society. This was certainly the case in a neighbouring area of Ambae, converted to the Church of Christ rather than the Anglican Church, where people told me³⁸ that after conversion leadership was assumed by church elders. This also happened in the Anglican villages of Santa Isabel, Solomon Islands (White 1983: 134). Anglicanism would bring other radical changes, as people rebuilt their society along Christian lines, with prayer, hymns and holy communion replacing pagan rituals, and the pagan ideal of the strong man being reversed to the virtues of a docile Christian person (White 1983: 135-137).

My own analysis will combine aspects of Rodman's and White's approaches. I will show the contribution of Malakula people to the formation of a new Christian society. Christianity was understood in line with local categories, which could sometimes mean an emphasis on the inversion of traditional institutions in the new organization of Christian rituals and daily life. The constitution of Christian villages also transformed the principles and practices of land tenure, an aspect that will be treated in chapter 4 and especially in chapter 6. The impact of two centuries of European contact on the declining demography, in the wake of Cook's visit to Lamap in his 1774 voyage, has been neglected perhaps more than any other factor in the analysis of the transformation of societies in the Pacific. The importance of this phenomenon is shown in this chapter through the population figures given by the missionaries at Lamap. The missionaries themselves did not imagine that this demographic decline could have explained the gestures of despair and enthusiasm that puzzled them so much in the attitude of Lamap

³⁸ I was invited to do a short field trip in north Ambae by a lawyer, Reynold Liu, who had been advising a reformed village land court in his native village. I did not continue this line of research partly due to the tragic death of my friend Reynold in a plane crash.



Map 5
Lamap (Government map of 1979)

people. In the oral account of the conversion of Axamb there is no mention of disease and depopulation probably because the narrative emphasis is on the positive action of the hero of the story rather than a context of doubt and despair. This contrasts with the personal accounts of some of the last converts which will be discussed in chapter 4.

2 Namal: The establishment of the Catholic Church in Lamap

Why Lamap?

It was a strategic choice for the budding Catholic mission to concentrate much of its early efforts on the Lamap area. The site commands Port Sandwich, already identified by Cook as the best anchorage in the archipelago (Forster 1982: 564ff). It is also much more central than Efate, which eventually became the main centre of colonization and which hosts the present capital, Port Vila. It was one of the three first sites militarily occupied by the French (cf. Hagen and Pineau 1889: 350), although its importance declined when the French decided to join the English in the new centre of Port Vila on the island of Efate. Nevertheless, Lamap-Port Sandwich remained a centre of French influence until Independence.

The first Catholic establishment was actually founded further north on the east coast, in Banam Bay in 1887, as the Marist fathers, wary of Presbyterian campaigns attacking the coalition of Catholic missionaries with the French army, attempted to put some physical distance between the mission and the French officials. Banam Bay was quickly abandoned, however, and the Fathers settled near the administrative centre in Lamap in 1889 (Monnier 1991: 3). The Presbyterian missionaries for their part always resented and opposed everything French, priests,³⁹ traders and officials alike, with the exception

³⁹ Many authors, particularly the French (e.g. Bonnemaïson 1986: 92), enjoy quoting a passage from the diaries of the Presbyterian minister John Geddie, for the Latter Day tone of his description of a sighting of Catholic priests on the beach of an island where he was about to land: 'In this we recognised at once the mark of the beast (...)' (Harrison 1937: 156; MacClancy 1981: 73).

of a few French Protestant missionaries (Miller 1989: 202, 204, 244, *passim*). The Presbyterians did not therefore focus their effort on Lamap itself because of the French presence there (*ibid*: 245), but maintained up to three missions around Lamap (Aulua on the east coast, Maskelynes and Axamb). The Catholic Fathers on the other hand clung to their position in Lamap, even though they endured a period of disaffection from the people for more than twenty years. In the meantime, the plantation of the mission had become one of the main sources of income for the whole diocese (M65), and it is still more than self-financing today.

Clearings

The beginnings of the mission were difficult. The early missionaries did not seem to have been able to engage in a dialogue with the people of Lamap, relying instead on converts from other areas in Melanesia and dedicating much effort to the improvement of the station as a plantation (M10ff, 16ff, 24, 36, 59, 65).⁴⁰

Unlike the Presbyterian policy of recruiting Melanesian returnees from Queensland plantations to convert local populations (see below), the first Catholic missionaries at Lamap wanted returnees to form the nucleus of a Christian community and to contribute to the economic development of the mission (D 16 – 21). Relations were often tense between all groups present: French officials, planters, missionaries and the inhabitants of the various villages. There were thefts, shootings, complaints about the misbehaviour of mission aids and runaway plantation workers (M16, 18, 21, 26 *passim*).

⁴⁰ The two main sources for the history of the Catholic missionaries in Lamap are the publications of Father Monnier. The first one is a selection from the letters and diaries of Father Doucère (Doucère 1993), referred to as D in this chapter; the second one is the history of the Lamap mission written by Monnier (Monnier 1991), referred to as M.

A temporary breakthrough was made by the future bishop, Douceré, who arrived in 1889, and departed in 1893. His writings show more sympathy for the people around him than those of his predecessors, who called them treacherous and cannibals (M7, 9). In Douceré's view, evil is not inherent in the people but transferred to the public displays of traditional religion (dances, sculptures, mortuary displays) and the institutions and practices he associated with them (grade ceremonies and witchcraft) (M28, 33, 34; D26, 41). He pitied the people, calling them victims of their own customs:

On the 22nd [October 1891], Lamap people killed a young man from Dravai accused of witchcraft. (...) I thought that in the circumstances of all these crimes I should try to convince our poor natives that their fate was not absolutely happy and that their mores are not absolutely beyond reproach (D:26).

These charitable views did not imply a crystal-clear understanding of the 'poor natives'. Although Douceré learned the language of Lamap, the enthusiasms and resistances the mission encountered remained a mystery for him and his successors up to the final conversion in the late twenties.

From the time of Douceré the tortuous process of conversion centred on a Lamap man of the highest rank, Namal, whose fate continued to cast a shadow over the relationship between the priests and their potential flock for at least twenty years after his death. The importance of Namal is even more striking in that it emerges through missionary writings which normally focus on the role of the male white missionaries. Melanesian assistants and catechists appear only in the margins, often as troublemakers or relegated to the legends of photographs (M 71, 75, 96; D 9). The activities of sisters and lay brothers are barely mentioned and local women are at best kept in the background (e.g. D 41). Male chauvinism was not a preserve of the Catholic missionaries, however: we

will see that the Presbyterian missionaries too were just as much at a loss to explain spectacular upheavals of their fortunes. When their enterprises meet with success, missionaries of all denominations tend to treat their main supporters as troublesome children (cf. MacClancy 1983: 184). Through the exceptional focus on the personality and actions of Namal, the relationship between him and the missionary comes to reflect in the latter's notes the overall progress of the mission.

However, the missionaries at least understood that Namal was a title as much as a name, corresponding to the highest rank a man could reach in the *namanki* society (see Introduction). French missionaries always put an article in front of such titles (*the* Namal), but local practice, since there are no articles in the local language or in Bislama, treats them as personal names. In Lamap people have even adopted the most prestigious titles of their ancestors as family names, Jean Namal for example. In this chapter and elsewhere I occasionally keep the article when I follow a missionary source but drop it if the reference is indigenous. As we saw in the Introduction the grade societies were central to the social and ritual life of men and women in South Malakula as well as in neighbouring areas and islands. We will see below the particular significance of the abandonment of these societies had for the establishment of Christianity.

The appearance of Namal in Douceré's letters breaks the long initial period of isolation of the mission. He is the first Malakulan to be named apart from a returnee from New Caledonia and a young boy from the west coast who had escaped from a French

plantation.⁴¹ Otherwise, in so far as the mission had any lasting contacts, it was with children, all of them of course unnamed:

And now, Monseigneur, some information about the running of our house. For the spiritual, always, alas, the same situation, always these unfortunate *pagan feasts*. (...) However, all is not lost: last Sunday for example, we had eight children and two adults for mass. As soon as possible I will try to start school again, even if it is for two pupils only. (D9)

Even in its lowest moments, the mission seems to have always kept in touch with children and its eventual expansion began through the classroom (M26, 68, 70; D26f).

The Good Old Fellow or the History of a Friendship

Apart from a few attacks on Europeans usually sanctioned by punitive expeditions from the colonial navies (M16, 27), there was regular fighting between neighbouring villages, a few hundred metres apart from each other. The proximity of enemy villages is confirmed by oral traditions mentioning fighting between villages lying within hearing distance of each other. Former enemy villages in the Lamap area are separated by only a few minutes walk.

It was such a conflict between the villages of Penap and Bangarere,⁴² on either side of the Catholic mission, that accounts for the first meeting between Father Douceré and

Namal. This particular episode of violence between these two intermarrying villages

⁴¹ Douceré named this boy Onésime, after a slave who had taken refuge with the apostle Paul (D10, M21). The name means 'useful': 'he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and me' (Epistle of Paul to Philemon: 10-12). Indeed, at a time when the only way to build a Christian community in Lamap seemed to bring Christian returnees from Fiji, Douceré put great hope in Onésime, who also donated land to the Church. The name has been given to following generations of Lamap men and is currently worn by the leader of a group who left the Catholic Church to join the Assemblies Of God.

⁴² Bangarere is a hamlet within the village of Lamap, to be distinguished from Lamap as an area in the same way as Holland as a county should be distinguished from Holland as a country. Namal seems to have had some kind of authority over the various hamlets of Lamap as Douceré called him the 'great chief of Lamap'.

lasted for about a year, skirmishes must have long been a pattern of their relationship. An ancient story speaks of a canoe of Penap men who landed by mistake in Bangarere and were all killed. As the women from Bangarere went to the gardens to gather food to celebrate the victory, one of them who was originally from Penap ran to that village to inform her relatives of the massacre. This allowed the Penap men to take their revenge by killing the Bangarere women whom they could find in the gardens (story told by Augustino of Bangarere⁴³ 1998).

The actual conflicts reported by Douceré might have involved more than a simple opposition between the two villages. At some point the son of the Namal of Bangarere, the Rovaro, shot a man of his own village. Matters got worse when the same Rovaro soon afterwards wounded a young man from Penap. A few months later the Penap men in revenge killed a man from a third village, Penombr (M25, D22). This further episode contributes to confuse our perception of local alliances:

War seems to be calming down but there is still an atmosphere of suspicion. Indeed, another assassination has occurred in Dravai. The women of Bangarere seized the corpse and sent it floating to Penap. At the Father's request, the Penap women pulled it out of the water.

Everybody is tired of the war. Unfortunately, the Rovaro, the son of Namal, could not keep still. He took to shooting again at a young man from his village but he was coldly murdered by his own brother on December 12, 1891, probably on order of the old Namal (M28).

However, we never learn anything about the motives of the disputes, but for the fact that conflicts cannot stop unless the number of casualties is equal on each side. Even the repeated references to Namal in the letters, diaries and histories of the missionaries blur more than enlighten our image of him, as he appears successively as an ally, a trickster,

⁴³ This story actually refers to the former village of Pnoamb, on the site occupied by Bangarere. According to Augustino the population of that village died out after all the women had been killed.

an enemy and finally a scapegoat. These metamorphoses mirror the attitudes of the priests towards him and the other Lamap people and show how little they understood them.

After wailing for four months in his letters about 'pagan feasts' and the lack of success of the mission (D5, 9), Douceré's progress in the Lamap language enabled him to report friendly relations with 'a few natives' and to attempt a mediation in the conflict opposing the villages of Penap and Lamap (M25, D14). Namal himself seems to have looked forward to knowing the missionary and to have accepted the role of proud but generous savage that Douceré attributed to him:

We are on truly friendly terms with a few serious and influential natives, among others the chiefs of the Penap and Lamap. Peace has been made with the old one from Bangarere. He wanted peace but he was too proud to ask for it. On my side I wanted to make him feel his guilt, to make him see that all the missionaries are as one man. (...) Last Sunday, the old man was stalking around our house waiting to be spoken to. I called him, quickly he laid down his machete and came up. I made him sit down and began (as I had to) to remind him of the offence and its possible consequences for him. This first part of the sermon did not seem to be greatly to his taste; he tried to distract me by commenting on the greatness and beauty of our house. He said as an excuse that 'his soul was on fire'. We passed to the second point: 'the missionary wants to show kindness even to those who commit evil; he forgets everything if one promises not to do it again'. The second point pleased him very much and we agreed on the conclusion. '*Enouk, enouk*'. 'Enough, enough'. (10 April 1891)

This budding friendship did not yield many conversions and in the following three months Douceré continued to beg for Catholic converts to be sent to Lamap and other stations from Fiji and New Caledonia to balance the successes of Presbyterian indigenous teachers (D16-21). However, Douceré's trust in the Namal continued to grow. He emphasized his peacemaking role, attributing the responsibility for the tensions to his son, the Rovaro (M25, D22). Namal now comes to be referred to as 'the

great chief of Bangarere', on the occasion of a peace brokered by the mission through the intervention of the captain of a British gunboat:

We went with the captain into the villages and everybody obviously said that they did not want war. The great chief of Bangarere said to the captain that it was over. The formalities of the conclusion of peace have not taken place yet but since then we haven't heard shootings. (D, 4 August 1891)

There was a new outbreak of fighting soon after, however, leading to the killing of a Penap man, the Roxvaro (not to be confused with the Rovaro, the son of Namal). The death toll in fighting does not seem to have been high, as it took at least two ambushes to kill one man (M26). Still, the relationship of the missionaries with the villagers was good enough to allow them to preach notwithstanding the fighting:

All this is very sad, Monseigneur: but the Lord can make good out of evil and we found occasions to place a few good sermons (*ibid.*).

After a last resurgence of the conflict between the two villages in August 1891 the friendly relationship with the Namal reached its peak in the following September when he attended mass:

Every Sunday there are always a few children at mass. Last Sunday, the good old chief from Lamap came and brought his two young sons. (D 27 September 1891)

In the following months, from October to December, the mission experienced a first period of intense interest as more villages required schools and a greater number of children followed religious instruction. However, it was also a time of growing

tensions: one of the reasons the villages asked for schools which they built themselves, was that people no longer dared to go to the mission through unfriendly villages (D26, M26). So it appears that Namal led a movement of conversion that was not exactly in the spirit imagined by Douceré: at the same time as he sent his two young sons to the missionary, the people from other villages were kept away from his new friend. To the mission's temporary benefit, potential converts suddenly had to compete for the priest's attention, trying to bring him to their respective villages. Douceré himself guessed something was amiss and thought that 'all this might melt like snow in the Sun' (D27).

Simultaneously, troubles were brewing between the expatriate planters and the villagers. A French planter and a Malagasy foreman were shot (D26, M26). The other planters became obsessed with the idea of a native plot to attack the white community and they started planning a preventive massacre (D30). Douceré managed to direct the punitive expeditions away from the people of Lamap to the people living on the other side of Port Sandwich.⁴⁴ However, his relationship with the Namal suffered a blow: the latter promised to surrender but he did not present himself, 'the old joker' (*'le gros farceur'*) (D30, 31).

In contrast with his son, the Namal attracted the sympathy of Douceré, half-condescending and half-admiring. The Namal and his son are the two villagers whose names appear frequently in the missionary's narrative; most are named only when they are the victims of shooting. What is more, the name of the Namal rarely appears in isolation, but is usually qualified, reflecting the feelings he inspired in the missionary:

⁴⁴ The consequences of that expedition are still felt today. The area was totally deserted and appears as a blank in Charpentier's linguistic map (1982) (map 3). Today the whole area is the object of a dispute between one group of recent converts who built a village there after they came down and some families in Lamap who say their ancestors moved across the bay – perhaps following the military expedition, which is supported by Douceré's (1934: 146) impression that Lamap people hid their relatives from across the bay.

The old man from Bangarere (10 April 1891)
The great chief of Bangarere (31 July 1891)
The good old chief of Lamap (21 September 1891)
The old joker (28 November 1891)
The great chief Namal (29 December 1891)
The chief of Lamap, you will remember this good old man (2 February 1892)
The chief of Lamap, whose good manners you noticed (3 March 1892)

Over less than a year these frequent markers of appreciation changed every month or two, from a neutral tone (old man) to admiration (great chief) and naive sympathy (good old chief), then to the unusual 'old joker' both paternalistic and suggesting a forgiven offence, before turning finally to invocations of good memories of the man in a context where Douceré's disappointment appears. They are even more meaningful, considering that a few years later Douceré's successor would rejoice in the killing of the Namal by French marines.

In February 1892, the first phase of their relationship reached its height when the people of the village of Merivar in Port Sandwich readily agreed to the destruction of 'awful idols' – to the missionary's great surprise, since he thought they were not sincere in their interest in Christianity.

As was natural, I spoke against the devils and asked when one would finally hack down these awful idols erected on public beaches. 'Today' was the answer. I was taken aback by this answer, I could not believe my ears (...). I showed the ugliest of the devils and asked the chief: 'Do you agree?' 'Yes' he said, 'cut it down' (...) Young people followed the example and it was a true carnage (D, 20 February 1892).

It is hard, however, to understand the significance of that event for the villagers: two months later, Douceré noted that 'the massacre of the Ramats did not produce a

revolution' and that conversions would probably take a long time. The destruction of the sculptures certainly reflects more than a temporary concession from the villagers to the missionaries as these sculptures, if they were indeed sculptures connected to the grade societies, were the embodiment of men's lifelong investment in ceremonies. Nor did it show a lasting messianic enthusiasm for Christianity because almost at once Douceré was disappointed. The definitive conversion only occurred thirty years later. The event has parallels with the absence of reaction from the people of various villages, when later missionaries occasionally destroyed 'idols' in their rage at hearing the beating of pagan drums through the night (M28, 33f, 46).

These were days of hardship for many Melanesians and for the people of Lamap in particular as they were exposed to a more intense European presence. The population declined fast: in 1891-2, Father Pionnier, Douceré's replacement, considered it a modest success to count about a hundred pupils, mostly children; five years later Pionnier's successors reported with enthusiasm that they were teaching more than four hundred persons (M 47). A French doctor estimated the population to have been about six hundred people in 1894 and three hundred ten years later, noting that in twelve months there had been thirty deaths for five births (Joly 1904: 354). In 1915 a full census reported 312 inhabitants which might have included Europeans and their employees (M 65). In 1927 when the conversion of Lamap was completed there were 217 people who had been baptised. The population was reduced by about two-thirds in less than forty years and the process must have begun soon after the arrival of the first Europeans more than a century before. At the worst stage, the mission considered relocating Christians from Ambrym and South West Malakula to repopulate Lamap (M65). The commitment of the missionaries was more to God than to the people; what mattered most was to win a place for the cause even if the original inhabitants had to be replaced.

The destruction of the sculptures without a following conversion shows that people were looking for new ways but no models offered to them at the time really convinced them. These uncertainties were shown by several contradictory movements of interest and disaffection for the mission which were incomprehensible to the missionaries. Some of these oscillations were of small scale, such as that which followed the death of the Namal's youngest son. The child was thought to have been bewitched by the inhabitants of Ponaik, the mission's neighbours, but in fact the child died only after being baptized *in extremis* by Douceré (D 45), so that people might have been confused as to the actual cause of death, witchcraft or baptism. The result was that for a week nobody from the village dared come to the mission. Eventually, after six months, in July 1892, the mission experienced its first abandonment by the population.

Nobody comes to religious instruction anymore. One hears drums everywhere, it is a resurgence of pagan feasts (M 28).

The context of land alienation, disease, witchcraft and fighting suggests that people were in a state of disarray and willing to abandon the old religion and social organization that did not protect them any more. This aspect is unlikely to appear in archival material, although it is possible, as Bronwen Douglas (1998: 223-318) has shown to reconstitute indigenous attitudes by contrasting various accounts of early missionary encounters (see chapter 4). In the following chapter we will see how conditions prevailing in the interior of Malakula up to the early 1960s gave a messianic character to some individual conversions, whereas other people died in a state of despair, having abandoned the old institutions without adopting the new ones.

The following period in the official history of the mission, under Father Pionnier, was marked by the volatile behaviour of the mission's flock: sometimes they came in great numbers, up to 400, and then disappeared 'like sparrows' at the call of pagan drums (M 34). The catechumens (baptismal candidates) went on symbolic strikes at least twice showing their ambiguous feelings at the most appropriate time, leaving the missionaries alone on Christmas day two years in a row (M 34, 38). Simultaneously, the missionaries became more authoritarian; Pionnier treated the children as the mission workforce (M 51, 53, 59) and his colleague Busson forbade people to walk 'naked' (i.e. with penis sheath or skirt) in front of the mission. Pionnier and Busson confronted the Namal and began to consider him as their main enemy. While Douceré had linked his successes to his good relationship with the Namal, Pionnier attributed all backsliding to the same Namal and was convinced that he was forbidding people to come to religious instruction. For that reason, he went so far as to 'threaten him with the gunboat' (M 37). The Namal defied the clothing rule and, when confronted by Busson, he replied that Lamap was his place and that the two missionaries should leave (M 39).

The missionaries were not alone in thinking badly of the Namal; the planters and traders focalized their fears of violence on him, holding him responsible for all the attacks against planters, their employees and their properties. As a result of their complaints, the French administration decided to banish him to New Caledonia. When the soldiers came to arrest him, although apparently he did not resist, they shot him dead (M 42-44).

The Dead Namal: Black Legend and Posthumous Revenge

'This morning justice was done', wrote Pionnier (M 44), indeed, the missionaries rejoiced greatly, believing their main obstacle to be removed. But suspicions seem to have arisen against the missionaries, who had actually helped the soldiers by keeping

the mission's lights on late at night to act as a lighthouse, in order to allow the warship to enter Port Sandwich under the cover of darkness for a surprise attack at dawn. The shooting was also the beginning of the dark legend of the Namal, that still runs today, as a tyrant and cannibal, a belief based on the discovery of many human skulls, probably ancestral remains, in his *nakamal* (men's house) (M 44). From this point on, the historical figure of Namal would epitomize the ambiguous relationship of the Lamap Christian towards *kastom*: awe and pride for the ancient powers and splendours but with a belief that they were tainted by evil.

After the death of Namal the villagers were frightened and ran to the mission for shelter; the momentary panic seemed to strengthen the grasp of the priests on their flock and confirm their judgement that the Namal was their main obstacle. It is at this time that the mission counted its greatest number of followers (M 46), but soon an important cycle of ceremonies began. Paradoxically, after a period during which the Lamap people seemed unwilling to choose between old and new institutions, the emotions raised by the killing of the Namal led them simultaneously to their most intense involvement with the mission and to the staging of spectacular funerary ceremonies that outraged the missionaries. Pionnier and Busson allowed the ceremonies to proceed at first but then grew more and more obsessed with the beating of the drums and, failing to halt them, eventually broke up drums and sculptures again (M 46). In the aftermath of the growing violence of the measures taken by the mission against ceremonies and drums, from the end of 1896, rumours began to circulate of a plot to kill Pionnier (Busson had left already). He refused to leave, but was sufficiently frightened to ask for the help of other missionaries in Northern Malakula and Ambrym at the beginning of 1897. These promptly converged on Lamap with launches full of armed disciples. The forces of religion joined with those of the neighbouring plantations and Pionnier

required a fine in pigs from the suspected villages as well as the surrender of all guns in the peninsula, a hundred of which were delivered; three men were also arrested (M 47, 50).

After these events, the mission continued to prosper, as far as schools were concerned, although on a fragile basis; a new church was built but only with the help of the children as the adults now shunned the missionaries. It was a mistake to think that Christianity could rely on children alone without genuine support from the parents and without understanding the motivations of parents in continuing to send their children to 'school'. Eventually, in 1899 even the children left. The abandoned Pionnier was disciplined by his superiors and removed from the New Hebridean mission, never to come back (M 51-54). From then on, it took more than twenty years, during which the mission stagnated in the general indifference, before the population of Lamap suddenly embraced Christianity with enthusiasm: the near totality of the population received baptism between 1921 and 1924 (M 68, 69). In the meantime, the Presbyterians had tried in 1901, during the period of hostility towards the Catholic mission, to take advantage of the unpopularity of Catholics in Lamap in order to gain a new foothold, but they had to retreat in the face of the same hostility (Miller 1989: 245). The Presbyterian misunderstanding of Catholic failures shows that the people at the time were opposed to conversion rather than to a specific church, and favoured a status quo with the current missionaries.

Again we do not learn much from mission history about the causes of these apparent changes of mind. According to Monnier, author of the history of the Lamap mission, in 1921 there was a miracle in the person of a new missionary, Jamond, who suddenly turned Lamap people's hearts away from paganism and made them seek baptism single-

mindedly. Monnier faithfully reflects earlier missionaries' opinions about their roles and their successes and failures (including the scepticism of an experienced missionary towards the 'Jamond miracle'); he does not try to discover the point of view of the converts (M 67, 70). Monnier attributes the villagers' moves towards the Church mostly to fear of military repression in 1891 (M 26) and after the killing of the Namal in 1896 (M 44), to fear of rival villages which led to the construction of 'schools' in each village (D 26), and opposed it to the fear of Namal that was keeping people away from church (M 37). The young people are said to be very happy to escape from the old order (M 45), however, the eventual abandonment of Pionnier by the children is not explained, neither is their very volatile attachment to Pionnier's successor (M 58). Only the Namal is credited with a genuine personality although his attributes have mostly to do with the changing states of mind of the successive missionaries. He is successively a great child to be scolded, a generous friend of the mission, a trickster, an enemy, a murderer responsible for all the killing of white men and finally, after his death, a cannibal tyrant. It is particularly revealing that successive missionaries ignore or reject their predecessors' appreciation of the man. Obviously the great chief, friend of the mission and the murderous cannibal have nothing in common. The missionaries were thinking in terms of a limited range of stereotypes available to them in their relationship with local people. This was also the case of the Presbyterian missionaries as we will see below.

The legacy of Namal

Today some of the missionaries' conflicting visions of the Namal are endorsed by the Lamap people. The descendants of Namal not surprisingly attempt to exploit the image of 'the greatest traditional chief of South East Malakula' (M 43). Alain Tiano showed me a selection of quotes on Namal extracted from missionary booklets and translated into Bislama in preparation for future land cases. The passages selected all emphasize

the power of the Namal as well as his ritual importance, as in the description of his burial. The Bislama translation makes him even more of a powerful chief than the original French does, rendering *influence* as *powa* (power) and *homme fort* as *bigman* – not the anthropological concept of big man, conspicuously not a chief, but its Bislama cognate which refers to important leaders, often politicians. The purpose of Tiano's selection is to argue that as an important chief, the Namal must also have been an important landowner. Opponents to that claim say on the contrary that the grade hierarchy was not based on land ownership and that a newcomer could very well be integrated in the local *namanki*. Some go so far as suggesting that the Namal might have been such a landless 'foreigner'. Romain Batik even advanced that to this day some of the Namal debts have not been paid back, and suggested that his descendants should look into that matter before claiming any of his legacy. These recent discussions about Namal's status reflect several conflicting principles. The Tiano family emphasize his rank and power as a base for their land claims while their opponents stress the openness of the rank hierarchy, the membership rights given by residence and the interdependence of *namanki* leaders linked by their debts.

The missionaries' fascination with Namal, projecting on him their own fears and desires, contributed to making him the central figure of the history of the reception of Christianity in Lamap and in Malakula. This history is in turn reappropriated by the Lamap people, again according to their own specific agendas of supporting one family against another in land disputes. Some of the Catholic missionaries seem to have shared the French tendency of those years to rely on 'gunboat politics', which in the next decades caused fears of repression to rise easily among islanders. In the next chapter we will see a late case of such a rumour transposed into an American menace against defiant bushmen at the end of the Second World War. Still the conversion of the Lamap

people was their own choice: the Fathers could not understand how it finally and suddenly took place, after many years of indifference or hostility. On the one hand Lamap was encompassed by force into the European world, on the other hand the Lamap people embraced this world enthusiastically.

3 David Ailongbel: A Life of Cultural Translation

In the previous section we saw how missionaries made, in spite of themselves, an historical figure of Namal. This allowed his descendants to exploit missionary sources for their own historiographic purposes. Elsewhere in South Malakula most villages joined the Presbyterian Church, which managed to rally returnees from the labour trade who formed beachheads on their home islands. The Presbyterians were much more successful than the Catholics in enrolling Melanesian assistants. Until the 1880s, they relied mostly on converts from their oldest and most successful bases, such as the southern island of Aneityum which served as a *de facto* Presbyterian capital in the early days (Miller 1995: 150). Later, they benefited more than the Catholics from the return of Melanesians converted on plantations abroad during the period of the labour trade (see Introduction) as they had a mission among the Queensland *kanakas* and they were also more willing to delegate some authority to local teachers. As we saw, the Catholic missionaries also placed great hopes in returnees sent back from the Catholic mission to the New Hebridean plantation workers in Fiji, and in converts from other islands who were promoted to the rank of catechists. However, they did not believe in giving them independence so that missions were abandoned when the expatriate missionaries could not visit them.⁴⁵ This attitude explains the absence of references to the work of

Melanesian preachers in Lamap.

⁴⁵ The extent to which lay preachers' abilities and determination could be overlooked by the priests is shown by the example of a Catholic mission in south west Malakula, which was rediscovered, after thirty years of neglect, by a Catholic priest. The people had remained nominally attached to the Catholic church (Monnier 1991: 94f).

Neither did the Presbyterians treat Melanesian teachers as their equals. Returnees appear in the literature as troublesome auxiliaries in need of constant supervision. This contrasts with the heroic role attributed to early Christian leaders in oral histories. The following pages are devoted to a history of one of these teachers, a returnee from Queensland, David Ailongbel, who played a determining role in the conversion of his native island, Axamb. In Lamap, the Namal has come to embody *kastom*, the customs of the pre-Christian past in its two aspects of evil (violence, witchcraft and cannibalism) and cultural pride (including grade hierarchy and indigenous land ownership), but an elaborate legend of the Namal never developed. David Ailongbel, on the other hand, is the hero of the conversion of Axamb, at least in the version of his story discussed here, which was told by his own descendants. The key points of the story are confirmed and dated by the official history of the mission, although the two sources diverge in the depiction of David's character and his martyrdom. The very existence of a vivid local account of the conversion reflects the situation of the Presbyterian missions, where the expatriate missionaries officially in control had to cover an extensive area, which left room for indigenous interpretations of the Christian message. In Lamap on the other hand the conversion followed a strong model with the continuous presence of several Europeans, up to three priests plus lay brothers and nuns assisted by Melanesian labourers from other islands. Namal did not become the mediator that he could have been and consequently his descendants developed no narrative of his contribution to the evangelization process. Some Presbyterian areas such as Aulua in East Malakula, a few kilometres north of Lamap, followed a similar model. The Presbyterian mission there had much a heavier presence, culminating in the creation of a school that moulded generations of teachers from all over the archipelago, before being merged with the current teaching training institute in Tangoa, off the northern island of Santo (Miller

1985: part 3).

In the official history of the Presbyterian mission, the section devoted to the conversion of South Malakula contains frequent references to Ailongbel, under his Christian name of David. Overall, that history confirms the importance of Ailongbel in the first period of conversion but he is only mentioned among other teachers and missionaries.

Eventually, he was dismissed from his position as a teacher.

Paul and the merchants in the temple

The evangelization of the south coast of Malakula from the Maskelynes to Axamb began a few years later than Lamap. The original Presbyterian base was in Aulua from 1886; as in Lamap the beginnings in Aulua were difficult. The situation did not improve until 1891 when a man who was on the point of performing the ceremonies that would have enabled him to reach the rank of Namal gave up the title system and changed from bitter opposition to enthusiastic support for Christianity. The reverend Leggatt recognized his role and gave him the name of Paul (Miller 1989:228), reflecting his change of attitude, from opponent to champion of the new faith like Paul of Tarsis in the New Testament, apostle of the Gentiles.⁴⁶ Once their base was established on the east coast, with Paul and other high ranked men taking charge of the work of conversion, the Presbyterians sought to extend their area of influence to the south coast. There they were surprised by the enthusiasm of the people:

They called at Kuliviu (Uleveu in the Maskelynes) where 'the people were extra hearty and *eager* for a missionary (...) we have not seen the like before' (1900) (Miller 1989:239).

⁴⁶ The reasons given for the choice of baptismal names (taken from the New Testament) for grown-up converts such as Paul or Onésime shows that the missionaries also were re-enacting their own myths.

This enthusiasm contrasted with the new resistance encountered on the east coast (239) soon to be followed by period of hostility after Paul was drowned in mission service in 1902 (247). Though his heathen relatives plotted to kill Leggatt in revenge (275), this did not happen but the mission was slow to recover (276).

It proved impossible however, to send a missionary to the south coast and Leggatt continued to visit from Aulua. From there he sent four teachers in 1899, two to Axamb and two into the Maskelynes (241). A year later, in November 1900, lacking ordained pastors, the mission let a group of trader-missionaries under the direction of Houlton Forlong establish themselves on the south coast. Forlong moved throughout the area between Axamb, the Maskelynes, Faru and villages on the mainland. He built his own churches and taught his own brand of Christianity which brought tensions with Leggatt. The matters in dispute included the proper age for baptism and questions of religious terminology (249). Moreover, the work of these trader-missionaries did not fit the model of Christian society that the Presbyterians had in mind. They opposed the development of Western trade as much as the continuation of traditional exchanges and they resented the example of Forlong's own brand of Weberian Protestantism which encouraged the new converts to devote themselves to trade (256). Forlong quickly left after his wife fell ill in 1905. The rest of his team left little trace in Presbyterian archives (272).

The remoteness of the Presbyterian pastor and the presence of these trader-missionaries gave a different character to the conversion of the south coast compared with Lamap and Aulua. These last two places were important missionary bases with continuous expatriate presence, where priests and pastors dealt directly with the men at the summit of the local hierarchies. For some time this intense presence generated hostility against

the missionaries, whereas in the more isolated villages of South Malakula, disease was attributed to witchcraft attacks by local men rather than to expatriate missionaries who were not present (see chapter 4).

Forlong and his team relied largely on a network of teachers who themselves moved from station to station (253). Originally the most important of these teachers were converts from Aulua such as Paul. Another was John Toro, who became the first ordained elder for South Malakula in 1905 (249). Ailongbel, aka David, came below Leggatt, Forlong and Toro in the Presbyterian hierarchy although he played an important role from the beginning as the main teacher with local roots and was the first teacher to be based on the mainland opposite Axamb. A change in Presbyterian policies allowed Toro and Ailongbel to assume roles of historical importance. The Presbyterians originally relied on teachers from the southern islands of the New Hebrides where conversions had begun sixty years before, but these southerners became reluctant to be sent to the north and went on strike in 1901, refusing to work in heathen areas for low salaries (203). This transformation led to the rapid rise of Christian leaders in South Malakula.

Story of Ailongbel

In contrast to the modest role conceded to Ailongbel in missionary records, the people of Axamb recognize him as the apostle of their island.

In the old days they chose him as a dance leader. As they saw he was well built, they wanted 'you go dance first', that was the meaning of his name Gamnelang. When he was a heathen man he was good to the bushmen. While he was acting like that, they liked him very much. He stayed in the island until white people took him to Queensland. He was staying there for a while, then began to go to Sunday school. He was there with Frank's father but Frank's father was going to boxing matches and shooting birds in his free time. The two of them came back

and returned to heathenism; they went dancing again. They were dancing until the missionary came and asked for Ailongbel – they had changed his name to David. They took him again from the bush and brought him to Aulua. They came back wanting to build a church (house of prayer). (...) They first came to buy land (...). They bought two places here (in Axamb) and a third one on the mainland, from the people of Maliabor. After they had bought land they went back to Aulua. There he took a woman from Aulua and he brought her back to Axamb with the missionary and two children, Sailas and Philemon. When the people saw Ailongbel they saw that 'hey, he is bringing a woman'. He was holding a branch of this tree, *naxai narmar*, with a Bible. He gave the branch to the old man of Wase and Wilson, as a sign of peace: – 'Don't be angry'. Okay, this done, he took a coconut, broke it, drank from it and then passed it to his wife. People started shouting: – 'Hey, you see Limgammelang (David), they are drinking from the same coconut, he is breaking the law'. They seized their weapons, clubs (*nalnal*), axes ... They wanted to attack that old one, the men of Rotavu and of Ropaias. The men from Marvar jumped in: – 'You look out, if you do anything to Limgammelang, you will see something today'. It nearly came to a big fight.

If they had not been strong this *skul* would not have come; they would first have finished these people. As he (David) stayed here he sold the place we were talking about. Eventually, they sent [...] to poison Ailongbel, presenting him with a poisoned yam. He answered: – 'No, I have already eaten' – 'Never mind, eat, I will sit down here I'll watch you eating'. People could tell that they wanted to poison him, but he said 'never mind, I will eat and I will die'.

This story told by the grandsons of Ailongbel is structured as a myth: (1) it begins by evoking the hero's physical superiority and his customary recognition as a dance leader, which wins him a name, Limgammelang (or Gamnelang). (2) After being carried away by white men he is converted in Queensland; his attitude contrasts with that of his friend, Frank's father, who enjoys his time at sports while Ailongbel goes to Sunday school. (3) When the two friends come back to their island, both of them lapse into heathen ways and return to dancing. (4) He receives his second and definitive call from a missionary, who gives him back his Christian name, 'David'. (5) He is then formed as a teacher in Aulua where he also gets a Christian wife, before being sent back to

Axamb. (6) At his return people gather and first notice his wife from Aulua. From the time he sets foot on the island, Ailongbel's actions are very symbolic and present a fusion of Christian and customary symbolism: (7) he comes towards his fellow islanders holding a palm and the Bible. The purpose of holding the customary decorative palm is to appease the angry reaction he can anticipate. He gives it to an ancestor of Wase and Wilson, i.e. to a senior member of the Rotavu nasara who are the traditional opponents of Ailongbel's family and their allies of the Marvar nasara, as we saw in chapter 1. The presentation of the palm seems to attenuate the breach of custom that he is about to commit: the establishment of Christianity follows a customary road. (8) The following action marks the real beginning of Christianity on Axamb: in a kind of Malakula Eucharist, Ailongbel gets hold of the most easily available food, a coconut, and shares it with his wife. For him and for many of the future converts, conversion to Christianity was synonymous with sharing food with women, with the abandonment of the system of separate cooking fires for ranked men. This was the Bible's message, its most radical break with traditional ways. To the other Axamb people, he was at once making clear that he was destroying the old world. The sudden violent reaction of his opponents shows that this was also the way they understood his action. Indeed, Deacon (n.d.: 16004) recorded in one of his notebooks that the worst swearword in Malakula was *cuan laamb tiga*: 'eat at the profane fire' – that is eat food cooked at one of the women's fires. (9) Just as his act was introduced with a customary gesture, Ailongbel and his group were saved by customary alliances. Ailongbel was under the protection of the Marvar people and they allowed him to bring the new life. (10) The last but crucial step for the establishment of *skul*, the purchase of mission land, unsurprisingly followed the same pattern. According to the story, the land was sold by Ailongbel himself. This implies a claim to the land area around the church that would be contested by the opponents of the family of Ailongbel who do not recognize that family as the original

landowners (see chapter 1). Steps (7) to (10) tell of a much more dramatic and expedient importation of Christianity than any missionary, unknowing of local symbolism, could have achieved. (11) The final episode as well makes perfect sense from the point of view of the missionaries as well as the Malakulan people. Ailongbel is sacrificed, he has to expiate his deed as the pagans cannot forgive him. He accepts his fate, takes the poison and dies. His end mirrors his first action as an apostle. He began by sharing food with his wife in what could have been his Last Supper. But his life was taken only after he had accomplished his task. The final gift of poisoned food, which he accepts knowingly, finally realises the martyr's death that he had anticipated and accepted. His resignation again echoes Jesus' last moments, particularly as it contrasts with the attitudes of the heroes of traditional narratives who outwit their opponents and kill or take revenge on them (see Appendix 3: The Life of Longman).⁴⁷ The ambiguity of the first gift on the beach (gendered Eucharist and breach of the traditional order) is reproduced in the second gift in his house. Indeed this second gift of food represents the evil ambiguity of *kastom* that lies in the association of customary gifts of food and murder by witchcraft, a murder made even worse by the fact that his opponents did not accept his initial message of peace.

The image of Christianity is also relatively austere; in Australia Ailongbel goes to Sunday school instead of entertaining himself with his friend; the lapse to heathen ways is expressed as a return to dancing. The career of the hero is reflected in the three names he successively assumes in the story: Limganmelang, Ailongbel and David. It is by the former, a customary title, that he was known in the island until his return; the missionary visiting Axamb calls him by his Christian name, thereby bringing him back

⁴⁷ Echoes of Christ's life in Ailongbel's hagiography remains in the limits of what can be expected for a saint and a martyr (cf. Momigliano 1977: 119). Rambo (1990) discusses the figure of Magruai who, like Ailongbel, displayed many qualities at the opposite of those of the traditional hero, but is understood to have announced the imminent arrival of Europeans and who could have been Christ himself.

to Christianity; the narrator refers to him as Ailongbel. On his grave he is named 'David Ailongbel', taking his Christian name as a first name and his original name as a patronymic⁴⁸ (see chapter 5).

The whole apostolate of Ailongbel can be read as a liminal moment in the history of Axamb – in the sense, given to this term by Turner, of the transitory moment between a previous inferior condition and the acquisition of a superior status (1969: chapter 3). So can each of the key episodes from the sharing of the coconut on the beach until his death by sorcery. These processes of detachment and incorporation are re-lived on a regular, daily or weekly basis, in church services, in ritual dances, and in family and in communal meals. Each of these occasions tends to level distinctions between individual members of the community, although there is often a reserved dish or table for guests of honour. The liminality of Ailongbel's meal on the beach had of course a much stronger character because it introduced a new era on Axamb through the destruction of the ancient order and the promise of renewed harmony, but every family meal commemorates his eucharist. The two key meals of Ailongbel are as much a detachment of Axamb from its past as the reaffirmation of the threat that this past will continue to exercise on the converted population (cf. chapter 4). Similarly, the destiny of the Namal sets up lasting features of the relationship between church, people and *kastom* in Lamap.

The presentation of food has always been an important aspect of life in Melanesia, well documented from the beginning of anthropological studies (e.g. Malinowski 1922: chapter 6, 1935 I: 27ff, 40ff). There is indeed something very customary both in the final, murderous offering of food to Ailongbel and in his obligation to eat it just after a

⁴⁸ Later generations on the contrary takes their father's first name as a patronymic (e.g. Mark Andre) and some more recent converts have kept a single name of traditional origins (i.e. Mansipbon, Masinglelu). In these names, varied endings allow to distinguish different person with the same name, as Mansipbon and Mansiplül.

meal. The practice of offering food is an important aspect of relations between neighbours and family in contemporary Vanuatu, from the exchange of special foods prepared for Christmas parties to simple presentations of food to visitors, or exchanges of local and imported goods between relatives from town and country. These generous exchange relationships are considered to be an important aspect of ni-Vanuatu *kastom*, contrasting with the stingy businesslike ways of Europeans and Asians. However, as shown in the story of Ailongbel, exchanges were mandatory but also restricted according to the ritual status of men and women. In particular, men of a specific rank could not share food cooked on the same fire as food prepared for men of a lower rank or women (see Vimbong's story in chapter 4). The abandonment of such rules in Christian villages was the very expression and condition of conversion. 'To come down and eat with the women' was the standard phrase for conversion and expressed the abandonment of the grade hierarchies.⁴⁹ Instead of eating at separate fires, the Christian family and the Christian community show their cohesion around meals, daily, at weddings or at large communal parties during which the entire population of the village gathers in a communal hall or on the school field. These parties transform the rules of exchange; instead of the traditional segregation, the whole group now contributes to the production, preparation and consumption of food.⁵⁰ Cooking techniques themselves were transformed by the adoption of saucepans. Traditional cooking, by steaming food in bamboos or roasting it, was more time-consuming but adapted to the segregation of

⁴⁹ If ritually acquired status was seen in Malakula as conflicting with Christianity, Christina Toren (1999: 57, 61) showed that in Fiji hereditary chiefship was actually supported by Christian symbolism. Her paper links the popularity of reproductions of Leonardo's Last Supper to its conversions with hierarchical seating arrangements for meals. The chief's drunkenness or 'death' is compared to the sacrifice of Christ.

⁵⁰ New Christianities emphasize different symbols, sometimes to similar effect. For the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea the Christian community is based not on communal meals but on public prayers granting the sincerity of speech (Robbins 2001).

fires.⁵¹ Incidentally, men do much less cooking, especially those born in Christian villages. Food could also be prepared in large stone ovens, a technique still frequently used for family or community celebrations. However, this revolution in the rules of food sharing increased fears of poisoning, a revenge of the old order. I was often warned against accepting food from strangers, especially when visiting other villages; in practice, people limit the risks by visiting only their close relatives or regular hosts in distant villages and by not travelling alone. The sharing of food continues an older tradition of exchange, but at the same time the fear of poison marks the limitation of Christian ethics by the evil side of the continuing power of *kastom*.

Ailongbel had to die because he had broken the rules. He had to speak the symbolic language of the old system in order to destroy it, but the old order took its revenge on him by the same medium that symbolised the changes, a general but dangerous exchange of food. The story also sets the basis for a division between good and bad Western influences. Starting in Queensland, while Ailongbel was going to Sunday school, his Axamb companion spent his free time boxing and shooting birds. The men who returned unconverted from Queensland were precisely those most dreaded by Protestant missionaries: 'they become the worst enemy of the missionary' (Miller 1989:44).⁵² Following the same path as many other returnees Ailongbel and his friend started dancing again. Unable to resist the 'temptations' of their own island, they slipped back into heathenism. In the oral version of Ailongbel's story this slip is only temporary and reversed by the final call. We will see that missionary sources give a

⁵¹ It is tempting to project a reverse image of the recent change in cooking techniques into a more distant past and advance the hypothesis that the abandonment of ceramic techniques in large areas of Vanuatu may be due to the adoption of ritually segregated fires. This could be checked by archaeologists if they could associate with the abandonment of pottery a shift in the number of hearths.

⁵² Many of these quarrelsome returnees had actually been expelled from Australia after a reform in immigration laws early in the 20th century and attempted in revenge to organize a premature form of indigenous nationalism (MacClancy 1983: 127ff).

different image of Ailongbel, as they sanctioned him for his involvement in modern and customary exchanges – what the missionaries saw as the negative sides of colonization as well as the old system.

Other elements of Ailongbel's story also make sense from the point of view of the interplay between indigenous and Christian elements. When he lands on Axamb, people notice that he brings with him a wife from another area; it was necessary for her to be a Christian already to allow for the spectacular taboo break on the beach. If he had married in Axamb, he would have had to go through the traditional exchanges and 'paid' for his wife, a practice opposed by early missionaries. Then he would have had to convince his wife to break the taboos with him. He also presents his traditional allies with a branch of a tree, symbol of their good relations, while the people who oppose him and his religion and who will eventually kill him come from the other moiety of Axamb. All these elements give meaning and direction to the story; they contrast with the incomprehension and silences of the story of Namal.

The missionaries' view of Ailongbel

The diaries of the Presbyterian missionary Leggatt are in accord with the oral tradition, recording a visit he made with Ailongbel in 1899 in order to buy land and settle teachers on Axamb.

This little island had a peculiar interest for me, as it is the home of two lads who have been with us for four years. They had returned from Queensland [where they had been] in the Mission School at Bundaberg ... I persuaded them to land [at Aulua], ... promising to take them home in my board. They did so and were quite at home, and resolved to stay on until the 'They Saveyed the Book', so that they might then go back as teachers to their friends ... one was named David, ... the other Alban. David got married but Alban resolved to get the training of [the

Teachers Institute] (252).

Although this was not the first pastoral visit, it can be considered to be the moment of the actual establishment of the church on Axamb. The details of the story coincide with the oral account, except for the absence of the coconut episode and of the contrasted reactions it caused in the two rival groups of families on the small island (see chapter 1).

The mission's history adds another dimension to the life of David Ailongbel, that of apostle of the mainland of Malakula between Oxai and Farun, where no white missionary ever settled. He often changed residence: in 1902 he replaced John Toro as teacher in Oxai, whence he quickly fled with the whole population under threat from bushmen (251); in the following year, 1903, he became the first teacher at Lexumb, near the present village of Farun (255, 256, 258). His impact on the conversion of Axamb was not immediately decisive: in 1899, when David and Leggatt visited Axamb, there were 111 people on the island. A few years later there were forty church attendants in 1903 and 1904 (253), a number that probably corresponds roughly to the demographic importance of his allies. The following year however, while David was still based on the mainland opposite Axamb, people unexpectedly deserted the Church en bloc. The Christian population was reduced to one old woman and a few small boys.

The Ahamb [Axamb] people are not quite so satisfactory as formerly. They are engrossed in preparation for some heathenism (254).

The decline was never attributed to the death of great numbers of the population. Axamb being on a small island seems to have suffered less than the mainland villages and Lamap. The definitive winning of the islet for the mission was brought about by a wave of returnees from Queensland, forced to leave 'White Australia' and arriving back

on Axamb in 1906 (254).

Ailongbel remained a Christian even when his relatives temporarily lapsed into 'heathenism' but his ambitions were not limited to the service of the church. Following the example of Forlong, he was engaged in trade not only with Europeans and Christian converts but also with pagans. A trader-missionary like Forlong would deal with pagans as a matter of course in the process of converting them. Such commerce was not tolerated by the Presbyterian pastors, who had other views on the establishment of Christian society. The example of Forlong did nothing to discourage David to carry on with the trading:

Got to Lehumb about eleven. David a much astonished man, as we found him with a great crowd trading copra. Went along to Lopal where we created much amazement. So Toby who says he is coming back to Jesus. Warned David about letting the world and trade engross him. It would be better to dismiss him as his work is most perfunctory (Leggatt's diary, 5/10 1904 in Miller 256).

Not deterred, David was and was soon doing even worse things. Eventually, around 1914 he was 'suspended from teaching and church membership for trafficking in pigs with the heathen' (Miller 285).

This was not an isolated case as about the same time three teachers in the Aulua area were suspended for their involvement in pig trafficking (285). So about sixteen years after David's return to Axamb, he was dismissed, and from then on disappears from Presbyterian annals. There is a similitude between the report of David's fall in the official history of the Presbyterian mission and the local account of his death. His fall and his death are both brought about by conflicting interests over the exchange of food, cooked food in the oral narrative, live pigs in the written text. In the oral version, the

community is limited to the inhabitants of Axamb, in the written version it is supervised by the missionaries. There were contradictions among the missionaries as to the proper relation of trade and religion. There were also contradictions proper to the new Christian leaders. Trading in pigs was fundamental to the old grade hierarchies, and the abandonment of these hierarchies with their rituals and taboos was the essential step in becoming a Christian. This we have already seen with the theatrical gesture of Ailongbel in sharing a meal with his wife, but it is also expressed in many other stories of conversion, as we will see in the next chapter. The pastors distrusted all forms of trade and clearly associated teachers' dealings in pigs with the continuation of pagan activities: 'trafficking in pigs with the heathen', 'presents of pigs to heathen relatives', 'sold his daughter for twenty pounds and twenty pigs', 'dealings with the heathens over pigs' (285). These examples show that the pig dealings involved matrimonial compensations as well as pig exchange and perhaps pig fines. There is no evidence however that these dismissed teachers were still involved in the *namanki* in their own names. The preparation and organization of pig killing ceremonies was the most exciting part of traditional life. Early converts parted from it with difficulty. In Axamb itself, when David was gone, the entire population took up the *namanki* again and abandoned the Church for a time. Even the friend of David who returned with him from Queensland, and had apparently continued his education longer (Miller 252, 253), was taking part in *namanki* events, unbeknown to the missionaries. His grandson Charlie told me that it was at a *namanki* on the mainland that his grandfather met a heathen widow whom he married on Axamb. Perhaps it was difficult for them to abandon the old exchange networks with their pagan relatives who might still have required help as they were busy making names for themselves by killing hundreds of pigs. This aspect of their life was actively hidden from the supervising missionary; being Christians did not cut them off from their obligations of support. Indeed such obligations led the Marvar

men to protect Ailongbel and similarly much of the conversion work was done in accordance with traditional links.

4 Compared lives

It is revealing to compare the stories of Ailongbel and Namal. Although the latter died an 'enemy of the faith', some themes are common to both stories. A first parallel is their customary prestige. Ailongbel is presented as a brilliant dance leader in an attempt to make him appear as a prestigious person in pagan society. The Namal was much more than that, having reached the most prestigious grade of the *namanki*. The title-names used by the missionaries correspond to this man's genuine status in Lamap, whether or not the missionaries understood much of its meaning. Similarly, for Lamap people today the customary prestige of Namal is embodied in his name, but they disagree as to the nature of this prestige – whether it was purely transactional or literally rooted in a place owned by right of origin. In the oral account Ailongbel's customary virtues before conversion made him a kind of proto-Christian, he embodies the positive values of *kastom*, in contrast to the depiction of the Namal as a cannibal by the missionaries after his death – a judgement ambiguously endorsed by Lamap people today. The Namal's life is an account of a failure in bringing together the two worlds. He was not a convert but he accepted the presence of a missionary such as Douceré, sending his children to the mission school. He did not trust Douceré entirely though, feelings which the latter reciprocated, nicknaming him a joker or a trickster. Later Namal entered into open conflict with more assertive missionaries and his death seemed to bring about a divorce rather than a fusion. This failure may also explain the more secular form of modernity in Lamap compared with Presbyterian villages.

In both narratives the hero is rooted in the old culture; the two men also show at some stage a hesitation in their attitude towards the new religion, as Namal tried to befriend the missionaries Ailongbel lapsed for a while. The most striking parallel between the biographies is found in the death of the two men. Ailongbel dies as a true Christian martyr, poisoned by the adversaries of the faith (who also happened to be the traditional enemies of his family). The use of witchcraft epitomizes the part of evil in the old order that most frightens the Christians (see chapter 4). The fate of Namal was more ambiguous since his irregular execution made him an anti-martyr of the conversion of Malakula and of the inquisitorial inclinations of some missionaries. His death was the occasion for an effervescence of funerary ceremonies that outraged the missionaries. The martyrdom of Ailongbel, unlike that of an expatriate missionary, could not result from a usual disease, because such a death would not have been the consequence of his apostolate. He had to be killed. He took chances with his original breaking of the food sharing taboo and he would have been killed sooner but for the protection of his relatives (the story does not tell what would have befallen the silent white missionary who accompanied him on that journey). His sacrifice becomes more than that of a missionary, nearer to the original sacrifice of Jesus: he came to save his people by sacrificing his life to uproot the evil practices of *kastom*. His sacrifice is rendered more poignant and its voluntary nature more obvious by his acceptance of poisoned food, so that the beginning and the end of his missionary career are put under the sign of the Last Supper. A funerary monument in his honour as well as the church that has been renamed after him were rebuilt simultaneously in 1998, the year of the Golden Jubilee of the independence of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu. They now jointly testify to Ailongbel's legacy in Axamb, although this recognition required lengthy discussions – indeed a canonization trial – as traditional opponents of the family advanced their own candidates for commemoration but were eventually defeated (cf. chapters 1 and 5).

The lives of these two men have parallels elsewhere in the Pacific and in Vanuatu, as European contact, missionary enterprise and colonization enhanced the abilities of some individuals, mostly men, to seek pre-eminence in exploiting the new forces or mediating between the old and the new orders. There are famous cases of such chiefs in Oceania – Kamehameha in Hawaii, Pomare in Tahiti, and Cakobau in Fiji. Such key historical figures in insular Melanesia and New Guinea have never reached the same international fame, but like Namal and Ailongbel, their biographies can personify the transformations of their societies. Similarly, Pionnier's temptation to rely on the force of arms to support missionary work was not unique. John Paton, one of the founding fathers of the Presbyterian mission caused a similar outcry when he enlisted the support of a British navy warship to take revenge on the pagans that forced him to leave the island of Tanna (Rodman 2001: 134). MacClancy (1983: chapter 4) comments on the rise and occasional fall of a series of illustrious men of central Vanuatu. Keesing, who was also concerned with the development of local historical research, was interested in the life of Kwaisulia, a man whose life presents parallels with Ailongbel, Namal, as well as the great Polynesian conquerors. He was a returnee from Queensland who, although he never converted, became at the end of the nineteenth century a mediator with traders, and then with the British colonial authorities. This enabled him to establish his power above traditional chiefs. Keesing observed that the memory of this man was taking on a mythical dimension in the new generations, although he was mostly remembered for his ability to emulate whites (1992: 174-192). If Kwaisulia is remembered as a mediator of wealth and power, other historical figures give local roots to Christianity. Magruai, who travelled through the Simbu area of Papua New Guinea shortly before the arrival of Europeans in the 1930s, was a poor, dirty man with odd personal habits, the opposite of the local big men's quest for prestige. His unusual figure was later interpreted as

announcing the arrival of Christianity – indeed, among the younger generations, a belief grew that he had been Jesus himself (Rambo 1990: 177, 182). European wealth and Christianity reinterpreted in local ways are the key elements that make the lives of these heroes paradigmatic of the transformation of their societies in the colonial encounter. National and regional histories should build on these individual situations to show how the colonial process of unification came about and was later interpreted differently in each region. The wide scholarly interest in messianic movements (Worsley 1957, Burridge 1960, Lindstrom 1990) covered only one aspect of Melanesian attempts to come to term with the changes. Guiart (1970: 137) suggested long ago that we should consider the whole range of Melanesian attempts to cope with religious and economic changes in order to avoid projecting our own misconceptions

The insistence of early Axamb Christians on the reorganization of meals is one instance of adaptation of the Christian message to a local context. In Axamb and elsewhere in Malakula, these changes broke the old fabric of authority, or perhaps reinvented it, as we will see in the next chapter. The change of cooking practices can also be seen as an inversion of the old order. In Fiji, on the contrary, Toren (1999: 45-66) describes a fascination with imported tapestries copying Leonardo's Last Supper – in which the placing of the personages fits and justifies Fijian notions of seating hierarchy. In a recent article, Joel Robbins (2001: 906) writes similarly about the conversion of the Urapmin of the mountain Ok in Papua New Guinea. Robbins shows that the appeal of Christianity rested on God's guarantee of 'true talk' in public prayer. In a society in which listeners traditionally mistrusted speakers ('too much can happen between the heart and the mouth'), public prayer sanctioned by a fear of divine retribution for falsehood created a revolutionary new space for sincere speech.

As we saw in the Introduction, Lamap can be characterized as a more modern place than Presbyterian communities such as Axamb. The continuous reliance on expatriate and fully formed clergy leads to a concentration of the religious activities of the whole area into a single large church to which people converge from relatively distant villages. Presbyterian churches on the other hand form a more dispersed network and services are most often conducted by a local elder. Predictably, religious attendance is less assiduous in Lamap, especially for men from distant hamlets who come in small numbers. The relationship to *kastom*, the concentration of religious activities, relative church attendance and the importance of affiliated organizations in Presbyterian and Catholic areas can be related to the circumstances of conversion. In Lamap there is a much sharper distinction between Church and *kastom* than in the Presbyterian villages. The interest in *kastom* revival is largely a concern of middle-aged to young people who form club-like associations.⁵³ Their activities are linked to a greater sense of cultural loss and to revival aspirations. Such groups dance with masks for national and religious ceremonies as well as for tourists. On the other hand, in the Presbyterian areas where the conversion process was more of a local affair, there has never ceased to be a continuous but uneasy involvement of Church leaders with the old culture. In Lamap the dance groups aspire to a specialized and sanitized artistic practice of *kastom*. In the Presbyterian villages, customary dances continue to be performed on a much more regular basis, in a simplified way, without any of the decorations studied by the men of the Lamap groups from published photographs (cf. Geismar 2002). The Presbyterian *kastom* dances compensate for a lesser visual impact with better and more varied songs, testifying to a stronger cultural continuity. Traditional songs are mostly opaque for a village audience, as they have often been acquired from other groups and are transmitted in an original language of which little if anything is understood. Pig

⁵³ The membership of one such group, or *nakamal*, largely overlapped with the scout troop and a kava drinking circle.

exchanges, songs and dances could be practised in the absence of missionaries without leaving much trace, especially as the village green in front of the church could serve as a dancing ground (cf. Introduction). Masks and costumes would thus have been the only conspicuous pre-Christian elements that could have attracted the ire of touring missionaries. However, the new form of dancing accommodated the same spirit of community as the common meal, men and women dancing together. The form has further incorporated heterodox Christian songs: an increasingly popular dance is called 'Salvation', apparently based on Salvation Army songs, but not otherwise different from contemporary performances of traditional dances, during which the singers stand in the middle of concentric circles of dancers.⁵⁴ Salvation dances were adopted with enthusiasm in new villages during my fieldwork, even in Catholic Lamap and in Adventist areas on the east coast – bringing forth a common form of popular religious practice independent of the official Churches. The occasions for dancing also differ between the two areas, as in the Presbyterian villages no preparations are necessary for masks and costumes so that performance can be easily set up at little notice. They require more preparation in Lamap. The spirit of the Presbyterian dances belongs to the same category as the transformations in eating practice introduced by Ailongbel; like the communal meals, the dances are a moment of *communitas* or negation of the hierarchies. In Lamap the clergy headed by a French priest is fundamentally outside of *kastom*, even when they ask for *kastom* dances to be performed at parish events. The Presbyterian clergy on the contrary can join in the customary dances with the rest of the population without difficulty. They also continue to be involved with aspects of customary knowledge. This can cause problems for them as the knowledge of benevolent aspects can lead to suspicions of malevolent practice (see chapter 4).

⁵⁴ Salvation also refers to a parade organized in a few villages around the time of Christmas in which young men clad in white shirt do paramilitary routines (fig 4) while young women in their PWMU dresses (see Introduction) accompany them with some dance movements of Polynesian and European origins.

5 Conclusion

The two case studies show how different the experience of conversion could be. Beyond the differences between Catholics and Presbyterians, it is the relative degree of involvement, as well as the personality, of missionaries and leading converts that contributes to what I have called a strong and a soft model of conversion. The former involved an important missionary presence and could degenerate into violent conflicts with local people; the latter, no less fraught with misunderstanding, involved missionaries over-stretching themselves, and paradoxically resulted in faster and more solid conversions conducted by local leaders. In both cases, the conversion enterprise eventually succeeded, but not for the reasons the missionaries believed – there was no miracle in Lamap or in Axamb. As elsewhere in Vanuatu, the Catholic Church had a tendency to rely on a strong model and as a result achieved a tighter control in matters of faith but has difficulty in forming an indigenous clergy. However, it also suffers less than the Presbyterians from the rising tide of fundamentalist churches. The Catholic Church revised its condemnation of ancient dances and encourages the present revival of *kastom*, but this revival takes place outside of the Church. In Axamb, as in neighbouring Presbyterian communities, the lesser involvement of expatriate missionaries meant that local people developed a more independent understanding of Christianity and that eventually a more complex relationship arose between Church and *kastom*. There has not been a revival as in Lamap but traditional dances have long been adapted to religious holidays, for example 'Salvation' dances and songs.

Unlike other chapters based exclusively on oral traditions, this chapter is based largely on missionary literature. The aim of the first two chapters was to analyze the relationship between the histories of closely related people, considering all the variants

of the narratives as equal alternatives. In this chapter the focus is shifted to the conversion process and the relationship between missionaries and converts. In the absence of a developed local narrative of the conversion of Lamap, missionary texts are read 'against the grain' (see Douglas 1998: part 3) for traces of indigenous understandings where missionaries were only confused by sudden switches between enthusiasm, indifference and hostility towards the mission. I suggest that these changes reflect people's disarray in a period of dramatic depopulation and their attempts to improve their lives. The comparison between the local epic of conversion of Axamb and the official Presbyterian history shows the missionaries' ignorance of local events and the process of magnification of the role of Ailongbel, which eclipses the memory of other 'teachers' and of the missionaries themselves in the local epic.

In addition to the analysis of past events, this chapter is also concerned with the analysis of historical narratives. Whereas the strong and soft models represent my own outline of a typology of the mission process, the narratives themselves develop their own typologies. The missionaries had a limited register with which to comprehend their interlocutors, with recognizable types such as good old chiefs, cannibal tyrants or troublesome assistants, which are found across the faiths and in different times and locations. Local narratives from various areas of Melanesia reveal a more interesting range of heroes mediating between the invading forces and local people, reflecting the original diversity of the cultures and the changing conditions of the encounters.

In chapter 2 we saw that the historical relationships between families could be analyzed in terms of encompassment, which occurs when people try to develop histories more convincing than the histories of their rivals. They do so by incorporating elements of other histories into their own, which in turn can actually help their rivals by making the

histories more similar and more open to competition. As we saw in chapter 2, this analysis was originally inspired by Sahlins's work on cultural contact. Indeed, in the present chapter the relationship between missionaries and local people presents the same combination of mutual incomprehension and collaboration that allows all parties to cultivate their own advantage. The missionary sees souls to be saved from sin, the Melanesians may see in the missionary a source of knowledge and wealth. To achieve one's aims each one accepts, in good or bad faith, to let oneself be circumscribed by the other. Similarly, when people appropriated Christianity on their own terms, they were forced to make concessions to the missionaries' views, or to the views of local teachers who took on the work of conversion. Recognizably 'pagan' features of traditional dances were dropped while the dances continued to be performed; nevertheless, the practice of these dances incorporates the profound reorganization of society, emphasizing the community rather than traditional status distinctions. On these bases, encompassment remained lame, as inevitably the Melanesians realized the perpetuation of inequalities, between white people and themselves. This realization invites indigenous formulations of Christianity and can be the cause of a change of religious affiliations.

Chapter 4 The Last Converts: Survival, Conversion and Witchcraft

*I didn't portray you three as merely long-suffering.
I also showed how women in your position made the best of it.*

Natalie Z. Davis (1995: 3-4).

1 Introduction

This chapter completes the analysis of the conversion of South Malakula by considering the life histories of some individual converts and the dramatic context of depopulation that accompanied their conversion. The chapter includes a discussion of a recent series of witchcraft accusations in the village of Oxaï, showing that contemporary witch beliefs and accusations have roots in the conversion process. The previous chapter focussed on Namal and David Ailongbel who belonged to the first generation that began reinventing their way of life in a Christian context. Vimbong (fig 27), Tamaki, and Liis, the narrators of the following stories, were all born in the early 1940s and were respected persons in the beginning of their old ages when they told me about their youth before conversion and about the generation of their parents. Unlike the first generation of Christians, for recent converts the religious change was also a change of residence: 'to come down and eat with the women' as old men expressed it. The previous chapter focused on the eating revolution; this chapter will present the social organization of the Christian community and the possibilities it offered to migrants.⁵⁵ All three were born in pagan villages and went through some stages of the traditional socializing process: they all have the characteristic elongated skull which distinguished people from South Malakula before conversion from people from other areas of Malakula and from other

⁵⁵ The consequences of the 'coming down' for the understanding of history and the relationship of people to their ancient villages and to their new community will be discussed further in chapter 6.

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Chapter 4

Figure 27 Vimbong (right) and his elder brother Airanglul (left)

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Figure 28
Massaging the face of a new born

islands.⁵⁶ They went, or were meant to go, through the early stages of initiation and circumcision.⁵⁷ Converts like them witnessed the disappearance of the old order but nevertheless acquired knowledge that often gives them the status of experts in historical matters. They lived through the end of the demographic catastrophe that wiped out most of their kin: by the time they established themselves definitely in the Christian villages, they had often lost all their immediate relatives. Liis was an orphan who got widowed several times while she was still a child, Tamaki still had his mother and Vimbong had a teenage elder brother. Vimbong and Tamaki came down as children but were animated immediately by a passionate desire for education, which led Vimbong to become a leading elder in Farun and Tamaki a primary school teacher. For Liis, conversion followed her marriage to a Christian man. Her third husband, a deacon, was killed as a suspected witch and she narrowly escaped the same fate at the death of her fourth, as she came to be suspected herself for surviving too many husbands. Her narrative and that of Tamaki allow for a discussion of witchcraft as an 'institution' of modern society alongside religion. Religion and witchcraft framed the migration of the population to the coast. Witchcraft has become closely associated with the period of conversion because of the many deaths that continued to occur until practically the whole population adopted the new beliefs (cf. chapter 3). Converts' stories reflect the horror of the combination of epidemics, killings, infanticide, infertility and despair. For the narrators the cause of these evils was rooted in their own culture. Christianity meant more than

progress to be achieved through business or education as Lienhardt (1982: 86ff) wrote

⁵⁶ There were several techniques to modify the body of new-born babies. Skull elongation, the most visible, was obtained through the binding of the malleable baby skull. Still today one can recognize at first sight those people who were born before their parents converted because they all have these long heads. The practice has been discontinued but less noticeable techniques continue to be applied, at least in Farun where I saw and discussed some of them such as the straightening of the nose (fig 28) and the reversal of the curve of the arms, to make them double-jointed (cf. Deacon 1934: plate 3; Cailliot 1887: 511).

⁵⁷ Circumcision was initially opposed by the missionaries and was not systematically practised for some period after conversion although it was one of the customs that was later rehabilitated, along with bride price and dancing. Some senior men confided to me that they had never been circumcised or only as adults, in the privacy of a medical practice.

of the Dinka of the Sudan. Conversion was seen as a chance to escape through religious enthusiasm as well as education and marriage – Salvation, literally. However, the coastal villages were far from immune from disease and, on the contrary, were likely to be more exposed to malaria. As a result, witchcraft fears continued unabated in Christian communities with suspicions directed to their own members, in particular some of the religious leaders, leading to witch killings until the violence of the epidemics decreased.

2 Witchcraft theory

Many ethnographers have expressed unease at applying strict definitions of witchcraft and sorcery (e.g. O'Hanlon 1989: 56). I prefer to use witchcraft rather than sorcery, as a more general term also preferred by historians. Indeed, even if the distinction is usually referred to Evans-Pritchard's Azande study (1937),⁵⁸ it originates in the speculations of English theologians and witch-prosecutors who had little regard for actual popular beliefs and practices (Macfarlane 1999: Appendix 2; Keith Thomas 1991: Appendix A). Similarly, Turner found that the application of this distinction by Africanist anthropologists became meaningless as each author's use of the concepts contradicted definitions given by others (1967: 113–127). In South Malakula the traditional categories are modified by the introduction of new concepts: the main distinctions are between new and old forms of supernatural killing (the former more frightening) or between forms of esoteric knowledge that are acceptable or not from a Christian point of view. However, as we will see, the limits are not always clear.⁵⁹ *Nakaimas* is a

⁵⁸ A similar distinction was already used in 1932 by Fortune (1963: 150ff).

⁵⁹ I do not think that Wallis's (2002) revival of the word shamanism first used by Layard would further the understanding of witchcraft, certainly not in South Malakula. Most of the so called shamanistic characteristics of the *Bwili* of north east Malakula (initiation, drinking medicinal plants, transforming into a shark, magically gaining sexual favours, etc.) are widely found in South Malakula and in other areas of north central Vanuatu but are not as closely associated in a single coherent initiation context as Wallis thinks.

Bislama word of vernacular origin which in South Malakula is used to refer to a way of killing people said to have been recently introduced from the island of Ambrym (the Vanuatu capital of magic). The victim is said to be attacked at night, his or her guts removed but does not remember it and drops dead soon afterwards. This new form of witchcraft is opposed to the broader and more familiar concept of *posen*, considered paradoxically less frightening by the people who survived the last great epidemics. Margaret Rodman translated *posen* as 'poison' and so did before her Pionnier, the missionary opposed to Namal (cf. chapter 3), who became obsessed with a fear of being poisoned by resentful pagans (Douceré 1934: 182, 192). In fact, *posen* (*nesogk* in the Maskelynes) includes both effects by direct action – poisoned arrows or food – as well as killing at a distance through manipulation of a person's refuse (cf. Watt-Leggatt 1902: 108). When Cook visited Port Sandwich, he acquired poisoned arrows of a type still known in the recent past. The poison however proved ineffective on some of the ship's dogs (Forster 1982: 575). Another concept, *lif* (from 'leaf' in English), refers to the use of plants in local medicine as well as charms or inherent magical power, harmless or lethal. Although other elements, notably stones, were said to be used by magicians, leaves from specific trees and shrubs are the most frequent ingredients for potions and charms. This knowledge is usually accepted as a morally valid inheritance from the pagan past, but that distinction is fragile. For example, there is only a thin line between the use of leaves (*lif*) as medicine and their use as love magic (Bislama *masing*).⁶⁰ There are many such 'leaves' used in varied forms of magic, generally of a reprehensible character but not always criminal; a young man had a leaf that he used to avoid being taken to court for seduction. The knowledge of all these things is often

⁶⁰ 'In this whole field there was often no clear distinction between the use of natural remedies and supernatural or symbolic ones. Many seventeenth-century prescriptions which seem magical to us were in fact based on obsolescent assumptions about the physical properties of natural substances' (K. Thomas 1991: 224).

lumped together as *kastom* in a restricted sense, i.e. as a traditional equivalent of Western medical and technological knowledge. This aspect of *kastom* also covers such things as the charm of invincibility which allowed Tamaki's father to triumph over his enemies (Appendix 3) or, in a modern context charms that allow knowledgeable men to compete with Western technology:

The plane of Vanuatu exists. You can go to Vila [the capital] in one hour. Just one thing: you should not swallow your saliva, you should not open your eyes. In one day, you go and come back from Ambrym a hundred times (...). The old Dan in Burbar uses it to go to Lamap (...). A man from Atchin works in Vila. At night his family in the island put a plate for him after dinner. He flies on that thing and comes to take his food. They don't see him but his old man knows because he showed him these things. (Jekita)

Such accounts are enthusiastic. One Malakulan pastor even claims to have purchased a similar magic, which contrasts with the attitude of the missionaries who insisted on total abandonment. Many old men are also said to regret the loss of their fertility magic that they had to surrender to their religious authorities.⁶¹ This change of attitude reflects the distinction between black and white magic, certainly not shared by the missionaries, but could be one example of the revaluation of *kastom*. This ambiguous similarity between black and white magic, that should be kept separate in the modern order of things in Vanuatu, can lead to witchcraft accusations that includes reference to supposedly harmless forms of magic. Indeed, if people were not killed on witchcraft suspicion after 1963, suspicions still arise when deaths happen in unusual circumstances. In 1997 an old woman died in the village of Peskarus in the Maskelynes not long after having a dispute with an old man about a piece of land. There was a court to discuss the accusation of witchcraft, which was dismissed. Far more serious was an episode of

⁶¹ Soon after the major international exhibition on the arts of Vanuatu that was originally shown in Port Vila in 1996 (cf. Bonnemaison et al. 1996), Ralph Regenvanu told me that the main objects that people wished could be returned were magical stones.

witch-hunting that happened in the village of Oxai a few years ago (see below).

Turner (1967:113) regretted that excessive preoccupation with classification and functionalist interpretations of witchcraft and sorcery made anthropologists pay less attention to the association of witch beliefs with high levels of morbidity. Indeed, ethnographers of the Pacific have not often taken into account the impact of depopulation on culture and society, perhaps because there was a tendency in the late colonial period to minimize the impact of the epidemics⁶² (e.g. McArthur 1968). When the decline is mentioned it is often mostly attributed to an increase in violence following the introduction of guns, as for example in the various contributions to the volume of pacification edited by Rodman and Cooper (1983). Margaret Rodman in particular does mention 'poison' alongside gun warfare as a source of depopulation in Ambae (1983b:152) but she barely mentions the role of the epidemics (150) which she does not explicitly link with witchcraft.⁶³ Authors relying on European documentary sources tend to give more attention to the impact of diseases (e.g. Young 1992: 213-216; Douglas 1998). Deacon's book, *Malekula: a Vanishing People in the New Hebrides* (1934), is another exception although the book itself does not engage with the social consequences of the epidemics other than observing the quick disappearance of entire villages. Bronwen Douglas (1998: 225-261) is perhaps the only scholar to consider the impact of epidemics on local understandings of Christianity. In three case studies, she compares the reception of Christianity with the etiology of disease on the islands of Tanna,

⁶² In the last decade archaeologists have challenged relatively low estimations of population densities in the Pacific islands and have somehow returned to the high estimations of 18th century explorers. The core argument of this argument is the existence of extensive irrigation and other methods of intensive agriculture in areas that are now sometimes completely abandoned and ruined (Sand 1995: chapter 10 and annex 1; Spriggs 1997; Kirch 2000: 311-317).

⁶³ Rodman probably wants to respect what her informants told her (i.e. that people were killed by witches) but she blurs their voice and her voice. Mary Douglas in her emotional article about witch hunting among the Lele in the 1970s rebukes that kind of attitude, expressing instead compassion for the victims of witchcraft accusations (1999: 177).

Aneityum (both in Southern Vanuatu) and the Isle of Pines (in New Caledonia). She shows how the understanding of the relationship between religious specialists and diseases causing spirits led the Tannese to hold the missionaries responsible for the epidemics, whereas the people of Aneityum, who believed in independently minded spirits, did not attribute the responsibility of diseases to the missionaries but to God. The inhabitants of the Isle of Pines held an intermediate position. As a result, the conversion histories of these islands followed different paths. The importance of her work is to show that the reception of Christianity was specific to each case and, rather than in syncretism, resulted in attempts to make sense of the new religion in a given context, according to a series of local events and a local culture of reference. In the case of South Malakula the main impact of the epidemics was to prepare the field for conversion by shattering the traditional society. It also paved a way for a diabolization of tradition. Because deaths were attributed to witches, usually thought to be powerful men, many of them were shot in revenge, including leading Christian converts, said not to have given up their evil ways. This notion is expressed today as 'bad customs' (*rabis kastom*), opposed to good customs.

Above all, sickness, infertility and death were attributed to witchcraft rather than introduced disease; people did not consider themselves hopeless victims of a European microbial invasion but looked for responsibilities among themselves, adding grief to suspicion, hatred and revenge killings. The high death rate displaced the perception of witchcraft as motivated by jealousy and perhaps as a force of social control and became unexplainable malignity as individuals were suspected of killing friends and relatives for the smallest vexation. Suspected witches, then and now, tended to be old men knowledgeable in ancient law, including early religious leaders thought not to have

really relinquished their dangerous powers.⁶⁴ The quest for conversion and education was linked with survival. The continuing explanation of sickness and death by witchcraft after conversion inscribed in local Christianity the periodic need to eradicate witchcraft and evangelize once more.

The conversion process has led to a concept of *kastom* divided between what has been sanitized in order to be integrated into Christian life and the powerful traditional practices. The latter tend to be considered with suspicion and ultimately become essentialized as witchcraft. Other powerful aspects of tradition are essentially ambiguous: the power of high ranked men, family spirits, magic and strength in fighting can be either good or appear as mindless evil violence.

Knut Rio's recent work on sorcery in North Ambrym (2003) presents strong similarities as well as differences with my analysis. Rio wants to move away from a simpler understanding of sorcery as a mirror of social and political tensions and put it in a wider social and historical context. Rio similarly finds that the period of depopulation in the first half of the twentieth century (he reckons a 90 % fall between 1910 and 1930) is central to understanding the context of conversion and the evil connotations of the concept of *kastom* (see Introduction), as it encompasses sorcery (130ff). Colonial authorities repressed the sorcery of high ranked men and replaced it as an instrument of moral control, but far from disappearing it became accessible to anyone who would dare to purchase it from a practitioner (137ff). In the late 1990s there was a resurgence of sorcery fears which Rio links to the revaluation of knowledge of *kastom* and history (149ff). Doing so, Rio follows the same bias regretted by Turner, to give priority to anthropological analysis over the actual death. Indeed we will see that a similar wave of

⁶⁴ The late Darrel Posey once told me that in Amazonia as well shamans were held responsible for epidemics, which led to several gaps in the transmission of knowledge.

witchcraft fear in a village of Oxai was explicitly linked by the people to a rising number of deaths after decades of good health.

3 Witchcraft today

Witchcraft is mostly associated with the sad period that saw the end of the pagan villages. The end of the depopulation era brought an end to revenge killings. The children of those who were killed have either accepted the apologies of the killers (Aikon), never tried to take revenge on those they suspected of having poisoned their relatives (Airanglül), or even accepted the culpability of their fathers:

They shot Father in 1963, on Wednesday 15th of January. They said he was a witch (*mekem posen*). He had already come down. Why didn't he give up all these things? But he went ahead with them, that's why he was shot. (Airanglel, son of Alaw, the last person shot on suspicion of witchcraft)

These are things of the past. Now that we are in the *skul* I don't want to know anymore. (Aikon, about the killing of his father by his future father-in-law).

Vimbong expressed the general belief that the high mortality of those years was caused by witchcraft and that it was reversed with the shooting of witches. In this sense, witchcraft represents the evil side of pagan society that led to its self-destruction. Christianity alone could redeem and help people to rebuild society. Witchcraft however proved more elusive and resilient. It was only one aspect of magical activity and the limits of magical and practical knowledge have never been clear.

Witch-hunting in Oxai

The old Ailül lives alone with his family in the hamlet of Pimar less than an hour's walk from Oxai. He moved out of the village because of witchcraft accusations a few years ago. When I visited him he said that these accusations were now forgotten and that

some of the people who accused him now entered his kitchen when he was away and helped themselves from his leftovers. However, a few months later I met him again in another village because he said he wanted to be further away from Oxai. Ailül's son, Wenji, still residing in Oxai, said that the accusations against his Father began after the death of an old woman, Benjamin's wife. Later, according to Wenji, it was found that it was not Ailül but another man, Charley, who was the culprit. Indeed, Charley had died soon afterwards and his death was interpreted as caused by the failure of his last sorcery attack: when the spell does not work quickly enough it turns against the witch. Charley was brought to hospital in Lamap where, says Wenji, he became delirious, asking for people to go and feed something. This would have been the result of a miscast spell, that now required to be fed in order not to turn against the witch. Not long before, after the burial of a young man who committed suicide on the islet of Avox, elder Tiosa saw men standing near the grave: they were Charley and another man. They couldn't explain what they were doing there after mourners from Oxai had already left. It was a young man from Axamb who was living in Oxai who had begun to accuse Ailül and other old men from the village. They were repeatedly accused of murder and severely beaten up until eventually the accuser was exposed as an impostor and made to leave the village. Several anecdotes were given showing how he was abusing people. Once he was found accusing two old men of having flown into a house and eaten up a whole saucepan, which had actually been eaten by a group of young men. The number of these anecdotes shows that it took time for the population to turn against him. One of the accused, Arör, an old convert, had the protection of his children and challenged his accuser to check at once where he pretended the charms were hidden, which he wouldn't do. In other cases, the witch-hunter was able to find the buried charms but now some say that he himself had flown to these locations and buried the charms. Arör on his side suspects that it was that man, the accuser, who was actually killing the people of Oxai. The witch-hunter

had actually fled Axamb after having been suspected of killing people by witchcraft. He was unlucky and soon after he arrived in a hamlet near Oxai there were several deaths in a row, whereas before he came there had been no death in that hamlet for many years. I think he started formulating witchcraft accusations as a way to divert them from him; as he had already been accused he would soon be suspected again. This may be why he took on himself the job of identifying witches, targeting old men. He does not seem to have attacked the most numerous and powerful family in the village, who probably supported him, at least in the beginning, but who did not share the blame for his wrongdoing.

Since the days of Alaw and Morten, the character of the people accused of witchcraft has changed in some aspects, but remain mostly old men. In the past suspects were often leaders of the Christian communities, whereas in Oxai they were not prominent members of the local church – one of them was very old and already senile – but they all could be perceived as having roots in *kastom*. Many deaths can actually become suspect and diseases that do not always lead to death are routinely attributed to minor witchcraft actions as I experienced it myself.⁶⁵ One example is that of a young girl who fell into a coma. When two relations came back from the field and heard of it, they were very surprised because they had seen her in the fields. This could imply that the girl was already dead and that her body had only the appearance of life. The girl recovered and the possibility that she might have been killed by magic was not talked about.

Suspicious can arise all the time but there is no punishment for the offence of witchcraft and the Oxai episode happened far from the local police. The police today are much less present than they were in colonial times, having stopped regular patrols and rarely

⁶⁵ Once as I suffered from an ear infection in the Maskelynes, a neighbour, a woman originally from another island, diagnosed witchcraft and named the woman responsible next to whose garden I had to pass to visit another village. My neighbour was frequently asked to explain the cause of diseases; she would put her hands on the forehead of the patient, then go to sleep and the answer would come in her dreams.

leaving their headquarters: the absence of homicide is mostly due to the fact that guns were confiscated after independence. There are no more 'bushmen' to shoot suspected witches. However, an unusual series of deaths could trigger fears of sorcery and lead to a period of witch-hunting (cf. Mary Douglas 1999).

Religion provided an alternative resolution for the tensions resulting from the accusations. After the expulsion of the witch-hunter, a session of reconciliation and exorcism was organized during a tour of the 'Evangelists' – a movement directed by Elder Jimmy Anson from Ambrym dedicated to the eradication of witchcraft and the healing of community disputes.⁶⁶ (cf. Tonkinson 1981). Thanks to the Evangelists, Arör could convince the villagers of his innocence through a public confession at the end of a religious service.

I wasn't afraid. I went. After all the other (accused) men followed me. Now they say that if somebody accuses me they will have to lick the Bible. (Arör)

4 Two generations of converts

The following life histories were well rehearsed with family and friends before I heard them, and Vimbong's story had been outlined on paper and even been performed in front of a national audience of Presbyterian elders. The life of Ailongbel discussed in the previous chapter has been given even more publicity as a narrative of the establishment of Christianity in Axamb. The more limited purpose of the following autobiographies is the edification of younger audiences who cannot imagine the tragedies that accompanied the narrators' conversion and their early progress in the Christian community through education and marriage. The careers of two men,

⁶⁶ Elder Jimmy Anson himself is the victim of gossip targeting his preoccupation with witchcraft, which is a danger faced by many witch-hunters.

Vimbong and Tamaki are seen as a glorious completion of their conversion, while Liis tells of the adoption of her only son whom she saved from infanticide at the hands of her unconverted relatives. None of the three dwells at any lengths on the later events of their lives, inscribed in the normality of the present expressed in the formulaic enumeration of one's achievements.

Classic life histories in anthropological literature such as *Nisa* (Shostak 1982) or *The Children of Sanchez* (Lewis 1961) were motivated by a scholarly interest in the rediscovery of the humanity and feelings of anthropological subjects; these stories focus on daily life often in the most intimate detail. The most well known Melanesian life history, *Ongka* (A. Strathern 1979), was born of a more idiosyncratic context, the narrator being stimulated by the view of a film about his large *Moka* ceremony. No single event however dominates his 'self-account' unless it is his progression as a successful big man in traditional exchanges as well as in modern avenues of wealth and power. All these life histories have been edited to present the changing world in which these people were living. The following stories from Malakula are simpler in purpose and in origin. They existed independently from my interest and their object was not primarily to transmit knowledge of a lost way of life but to preserve the memory of the circumstances of conversion. As such they present parallels with the histories of heroes; Tamaki in particular was very fond of telling the high deeds in fighting and magic of his father (Appendix 3). The more formal account of the men's careers finds immediate parallels in similar accounts in funerary inscriptions that will be analyzed in the next chapter. Finally, Vimbong and Tamaki may be reacting to the work of Graham Miller (1989) on the history of the Presbyterian mission as reflected through missionary sources. Some copies of the books have reached Malakula and the interest raised by these publications is only equaled by the disappointment at finding few links with local

memories. Because these books are relatively selective in the periods and places for which they provide information, some villages like those of Axamb are better treated than Farun or the Maskelynes.

5 Vimbong: the Preacher

Vimbong believes in the moral value of the story of his life and he is concerned to make it widely known. His is a story of the physical and spiritual salvation of a pagan-born boy (*bon long hiden*) who should have died at birth but instead grew up to become the leading elder of his adopted village. In his notebooks he showed me a sketch of his life listing the dates of various accomplishments of his career. However, he wants to see published a fuller account which he has prepared carefully and rehearsed regularly with his family and visitors but not yet written down. The most official of the occasions at which he recited his stories was at a week-long annual national conference of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu which was held in Farun. Vimbong acted as a guest and after every evening meal he was telling a folktale (*kastom stori*) to the delegates. On the last night, he told them a real story which put the delegates in tears when he revealed in the end that he, Vimbong, was the hero. He then called forth a village choir who had rehearsed the following hymn: 'Through the valley of shadow I must go / but the dark waves of Jordan will not harm me, / there is peace in the valley I know'.

I was not born in the village; I was born on the road. My mother, my brother and my father came here, in Farun, to visit my uncles. Uncle told Mother to eat some yams that he had kept. So they stayed for a while before they travelled back. On the way, Mother felt that she was giving birth to me. Father told my brother that they would build a shelter and that Mother would deliver me there (1943). After three days they went back to the place where we were staying, Tampangpang. After just three months, Mother died. They sent word to the uncles in Farun to come to Tampangpang. When they came, after they had cried and dug a hole, they thought about the future. They said that I was too small, they would kill me and bury me with Mother. But Brother took his knife, matches and an axe, and

we ran away into the bush. Thus they came to take me, Father too let them: 'my leg is bad, I can't look after him'. But I was nowhere to be seen, then they returned to Farun. Brother was carrying me; there was nothing that I could suckle, so he took a coconut from a tree that the wind had blown down and made me suckle it. We came back home and he alone was looking after me, like a woman. He looked after me until I could crawl and get strong.

We went to Loxornbal where after a long time Father got ill and died. When he was still ill, my brother cooked a yam but it wasn't done well. Father was sleeping alongside his gun – he tasted that yam, got cross and shot at my brother but brother ducked down and he missed him. In the night, when I was already asleep, Father told brother: 'I feel that I am dying. If you hear something, you should not be afraid, you must stay inside. Here is the gun – there are the cartridges'. After he finished talking, he lay down and gave his last breath. Brother woke me up and told me that Father was dead. I wanted to cry but Brother did not let me. We stayed the night; we heard something pass above the house making 'fui, fui, fui'. A bit later it came back and fell down on the slit gong. Many spirits came, they were shaking the thatch. They were coming for the corpse, we stood frightened until dawn. In the morning Brother told me to go out but he closed the door from inside with a bamboo and came out over the roof. He held me because he was afraid that a spirit could catch me: as it was still early, there was nobody. He went to hit the gong; he hit all the 'rhythm' names (that Father had reached in the *namanki*).⁶⁷ So people heard it and knew that the old man was dead. In these days there were no more people already, just in Livatbumxau and Taoran. We walked until (the house of) Bulngitös. People had heard the gong, they cried when they saw us, we cried as well. Women wanted to hug me but I didn't want, I only wanted brother. Father's (classificatory) fathers in Livatbumxau also heard and came to Xornbal where Father had died. They killed pigs, they attached Father's body to a bamboo and laid him up underneath the roof where he rotted away.

At that time we were not staying in a single place, we were going everywhere, staying three weeks in Farun, one month in Barnesingaol, in Lömür. We were with our uncle Mansov. After, we went to stay with Father's fathers in Livatbumxau. There, Brother got circumcised. Once, he was in the men's house and he wanted to pee but the women were watching the door of the house and he was afraid to urinate in front of them, so he made a hole in the wall. One grandfather was so angry that he wanted to shoot him but the grandfather who had sponsored him gave a pig (as a *fīne*). Shortly after, he ran away and went to *skul* to Farun but I stayed. When he was away in Farun, we went down to Lönxaixor on the beach (...). Brother came and wanted to take me but they didn't let me go. They were talking and talking, they made brother go back to

⁶⁷ Alongside rights to perform dances and songs, to wear some decorations, and to eat at a separate cooking fire, each grade of the hierarchies was associated with a specific rhythm that could be beaten on the gongs to announce an event related to that person (cf. Deacon 1934: 136).

Tampangpang. When he went back there they allowed me to stay with him. We were staying alone in Tampangpang, there was nobody else. We did not stay for a whole year, we did not finish the food we had planted but I told brother we should go to Farun: I wanted to play with other children (1955). In Farun, I went to children's school and after they sent me to Aulua to District School in 1961. In 1964 I went back to Farun where I was doing nothing until 1966 when I went to teach in Tomman. I came back to Farun in 1967 and in 1970 they made me elder.

As Vimbond wished it, his story is quoted here in full. Many of its details are relevant for the meaning of his conversion in the context of the reinvention of the society; there are also important differences with the shorter story of his brother and other stories discussed later in this chapter. Vimbond made his story an emblem of God's call to the last generation of pagans, although he himself was not fully grown up before he 'came to school'. Like the account of Ailongbel's conversion of Axamb (chapter 3), the story deliberately unfolds as a myth or at least as one of the tales after which it was narrated at the Presbyterian conference. The theme of a child saved from death soon after birth has obvious biblical parallels, but Vimbond did not draw explicit references to figures such as Moses or Jesus. Vimbond escaped from a society before conversion described in the darkest terms: his uncles wanted to bury him with his mother, his father shoots at his brother for a trivial matter, the spirits terrify them and his brother escapes death a second time, after being threatened by a grandfather. These negative aspects of life in a pagan village were reinforced by Vimbond in a further comment about life in the village of his grandfathers:

They whipped me, one of the sisters over there was bad; if I ate food that had been cooked they beat me, they made me eat dirt, they threw ashes in my food.

Only his brother's love emerges as a positive element until they go down to Farun.

Vimbond describes the reason for this move as wanting to play with children, but the

general lesson of the story is that of salvation in view of a mission. In another anecdote he told how, as a child, he developed a longing for prayer. In the village of Lönxaixor, where his grandfathers were living, the population was mixed, pagans living alongside Christians. It was because their grandfathers were pagans that they did not want to allow Vimbond to join his brother in Farun but they agreed to their idea of having them live alone in their old hamlet. One day, they went hunting but could not catch any pig until:

One of those who already went to *skul* told us to stop 'while I pray'. After he prayed, we were not allowed to say amen: they did not allow those of us who did not *skul* to say amen. After he prayed, we walked a bit and the dogs started a large pig. Today that works only with a few men. Later, as I was staying with brother in Tampangpang, we were looking for pigs, Monday, Tuesday, until Saturday we did not catch any. At that time, I was thinking: 'if only we *skul*, we would already have caught many'. That thought made want to come down to *skul* and want to become elder.

Vimbond's elder brother, Airanglül, is a short and thin man who was admired for never getting ill until recently, but in 1998 he thought he had perhaps finally been bewitched. He does not think of his life as a narrative like his brother and prefers to speak about specific places and events. Being just a bit older makes him belong to another generation than Vimbond, as he got to know life in pagan villages until he was well into his teens, whereas Vimbond only saw that world from the distressed perspective of an orphan. Today, in their family, Airanglül will be consulted for the meaning of place names and various traditions. Vimbond's story shows his brother beating their father's rhythm names on the gong, which is a kind of knowledge that is by now mostly lost. The only gong in some of the contemporary villages is the church bell, sometimes a metallic object, sometimes a reconstitution of a traditional gong – appropriating a musical instrument from the old culture to the new religion. Airanglül made a correction to Vimbond's story concerning the episode of their father shooting at him: it was not just that he had poorly cooked his father's yam, but he had let his fire die. As we saw in

the story of David Ailongbel (chapter 3), the food segregation of ranked men was an essential hierarchical feature of the traditional world; in this family of three, the teenage boy had to keep two hearths one for the father and one for the uninitiated children. Whereas Vimbond saw the more absurd side of their Father's violence, his brother insists on the principle of segregated cooking fires. Apart from his duties in keeping separate hearths he had also experienced the responsibilities of the practice of revenge killings:

I was not allowed to walk around because our father had killed a man. Only towards the sea, not to the bush. The men on the other side, in Malön, had shot Grandfather then Father killed one of them. He gave them a pig for that man but, regardless, they went on poisoning us until only the two of us were left and we came down. We were just staying in one village. My father was the first born with his brothers and nephews. (Although) we were just staying there, they poisoned them.

This is the account of a conversion of a man who saw the physical end of a world and who explains this disappearance and his own *conversion* in the very words which made sense in a pre-Christian context. Coming down was the only alternative left, not a child's longing for playing mates or a divine call. Vimbond, on the other hand, is perhaps a more complex figure as he belongs neither to those who really knew the older world nor to those who grew up in a Christian community. These differences can be understood in terms of generations in relation to the central event of conversion, but these generations are not connected to absolute dates as historians speak of the 'generation of 1789' or 'the Spanish generation of 1898 which experienced an end of the empire' (Burke 2001:159).⁶⁸ In the case of South Malakula, generations as a sociological concept have another dimension, related to the context of a person's coming down and especially their age. Those who converted as adults, whatever their

⁶⁸ From Mannheim 1952: 'The Problem of Generation' in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* 276, 320.

respective ages, share a certain approach to the world, although divergences appear as conversion is an event spread over nearly a century.⁶⁹ Some of the contemporaries of Vimbong and Airanglül, like the grandchildren of David Ailongbel, are already the third generation of Christians and some young people of the age of Vimbong's children were still born in the hills. Among the latter were the last children to have their skulls elongated. The lives of David's descendants are still marked by their ancestor's actions, his martyr death, the enduring hostility and support he raised and the related land disputes. Vimbong, on the other hand, is his own hero; he experienced miraculous events which accompanied the period of conversion, such as his own survival or the efficacy of prayer. Such events belong to a more remote past for the grandchildren of converts. The true scale of the succession of generations therefore belongs to the family: Vimbong could become a figure similar to Ailongbel, in his own family, in two or three generations from now.

The other main event in the history of South Malakula is the demographic recovery. This event is not so much spread out between various families but rather corresponds to the gradual decline of epidemics (see Introduction). Vimbong locates the demographic turning point for Farun in 1963 more than thirty years after it affected the archipelago as a whole:

In 1963, I was at school in Aulua. One man asked me where I would go after school. I said I would go back to Farun, then the man asked me: - 'With whom will you stay?' - 'With the people over there.' - 'But soon there will be no one left.' There were indeed only 45 people left.

⁶⁹ For example, the last people to convert as young adults, soon after independence in 1980, were not allowed like their predecessors to go to school to learn to read and write. Vimbong said in his story that he went to children's school because there was a school for adult converts, but when adult converts had become a rarity in the country of Vanuatu a law was passed fixing the age limit of primary school children. The objective of the law was to restrict the numbers of children who could try to repeat the examination certificate in the hope to be admitted to secondary school; it ignored the specific case of these few remaining 'bushmen', who now face the humiliation of illiteracy.

The old Alaw, father of Airanglel, was believed to be responsible for many sorcery killings in Farun, Axamb and Oxai. He was often accused in courts but he always denied. Many 'bushmen' had already died when the brother of Lisax also fell ill and went back to the hills to die. His nephews came to avenge him. Early one morning, Airanglül was working in his garden when he heard a shot and a shout: he knew it was not hunting but murder. He ran back to the village and asked Vimbond if anybody was gone to the gardens but Vimbond answered that they were all at home. Then they saw Airanglel coming and they asked him if any of them had already left to work. He said that his father was gone already. Airanglül told him to hurry to his father's garden as the 'bushmen' had killed him. 'I heard a shot but I know they were not shooting a bird, I heard somebody shouting.'

Airanglel and Aikon went to the garden. Alaw heard the voice of his son and told him not to come near, as he did not want to see him, only Aikon went. Then they called people from Farun and Axamb. And many of them came to carry him. Aimbon, a teacher from Axamb, seeing Alaw dying told him: 'Old man, I warned you many times but you did not want to listen. You denied it. Now that is catching up with you.' Before the death of Alaw there was no other child apart from Vimbond. A month after his death, Setina the mute daughter of Airanglül was born and many children followed her. Before his death it could happen that two or three people died within a week, after there could be two or three years before somebody died.

Many of Alaw's attributed victims were recent converts like him. He became the focus of the anger of their surviving relatives like the missionaries who were held responsible for the deaths of the people they baptized (cf. chapter 3). The settlement of mission communities in hot and humid lowlands made them more sensitive to diseases and epidemics, reinforcing belief in witchcraft, which otherwise does not appear as a main cause of death in other ancient narratives and folktales (although in some of these stories people drop dead like flies).⁷⁰ Belief in witchcraft was paradoxically reinforced by the end of the epidemics, which seemed to have been brought about by the killing of

⁷⁰ It is very delicate to use folktales as historical documents, as it is difficult to discriminate between themes of varied origins and inputs from different periods. Darnton (2001: 24) has shown that careful scrutiny of this material can help to go beyond *l'histoire immobile* and give insights into the otherwise silent lives of the illiterate classes of the past.

the witches active at that time.

In other villages, particularly in Lamap and in the Maskelynes, this tragic past seems to be further away, as the period of depopulation was not mentioned to me. Axamb and Avox seem to have suffered less but similar stories are told by the descendants of refugees to these places. It is possible that these areas recovered earlier from imported diseases and had easier access to European health care.

Vimbong's Hero: The Good Elder Dick Wilson

A contemporary of Alaw, like him a religious leader, died a few years later in Farun without having been suspected of witchcraft. Vimbong found this man, Dick Wilson, important enough to write a short biography of him thirty years after his death:

This is the narrative of Dick Wilson 31/8/97

In the village of Faru, South Malakula. He was born in the year 1901. God called him to go to the TTI (Teacher's Training Institute) in the year 1921. He did his studies in a four years term. Then in 1925 he came back and he held the job of teacher in Larvat village, North West Malakula until the year 1929. After, he came back to rest for one year only in Axamb. Again he came to Farun to hold the work of teacher in 1931.

In that time there were many bush people who had not come to Christianity yet. In the time where he was teaching, people did not have chiefs, elders, deacons and PWMU (Presbyterian Women Missionary Union) and none of the other titles (names).

Indeed it was Dick Wilson alone who took up these names of community work (*i takem ap everi nems ya blong wok wetem olgeta man*).

Dick Wilson was a man who had a strong faith in our Master Jesus Christ, and he was a man who liked everybody as well. And he was a man who could heal people's various diseases with native medicine. He pursued these different works until 1958 when he stopped teaching and began to work as a chief until 1967. But the Call came to him again that he should become an elder another time, in 1966-67. In that time the preparations were going ahead for his ordination that

should have taken place in the year 1967. But God took him out very quickly on the 29th of May 1967.

The man who wrote the narrative of Dick Wilson is Mr elder Avimbong Ativo.

Right underneath in the same notebook was an outline of Vimbong's own life, all in dates, of the type one often finds on graves:

Born in 1943

Avimbong Ativo or Vimbong Satlon, born in a heathen amil or village.

1976 Chairman of Surlaf Co-op

1982 Secretary of the Co-op

1988-91 Leader of the prayer group visiting the homes of the people of Farun

1989-90 Chairman of the school committee (Kalwal school)

1991 Appointed by the Axamb assembly to work as chairman of the evangelists

The comparison of these two texts with Vimbong's oral biography shows the links between the two persons. Vimbong's use of the expression 'God's call' about Dick Wilson going to *skul* shows that he would think it relevant for his own experience as well. Dick's career is otherwise detailed around dates at which he assumes certain functions (teacher, elder, healer and chief) until the ultimate consecration that would have been his ordination. His main work though, with the conversion of bush people, has been the building of an organized Christian community in Farun which is expressed by the establishment of 'names' or titles of functions 'chiefs, elders, deacons and PWMU'. With the exception of the women's organization, Dick is presented as having created these titles by inaugurating himself these functions in the progress of his career. To some extent these functions were the delegation of colonial authority – deacons and elders being accountable to the missionaries as the chiefs were to the district agents. But these white men representing the colonial power were distant, only coming on tours every now and then. More importantly, these 'names' suggest a similarity with the grade hierarchies; they opened the possibility of a prestigious career replacing the

namanki, whose spirit was thus rebuilt into Christian life (see chapter 5).

Vimbong's written biography curiously begins where his oral account stops. After his date of birth, it takes us immediately to the 1970s, but his oral account ended in 1970 when he became an elder. Still, both stories ignore such facts as his marriage, birth of children, etc. The absence of these details shows that Vimbong wants to communicate the exemplary dimension of his life. The oral account describes how he was saved to do the work of God; the written one shows his progress in the pursuit of *names of community work*, i.e. as a spiritual heir to Dick Wilson. These 'names' he assumed show him bringing further progress to the organization of the community, as founding chairman of the village co-op, chairman of the committee of the newly established primary school and chairman of the local committee of the 'Evangelists' for their Millennium tour.

These developments show Vimbong's career as it takes off from the colonial legacy but still preserving the basic concept of progression inherited from the competitive spirit of the *namanki* through the acquisition of name titles, or even better in their creation. A difference however reflects the modernity of Vimbong as opposed to Dick Wilson's roots in custom. Dick was a healer, versed in native medicine, whereas Vimbong leads a prayer group who are called in at the bed of ill people and occasionally pray for the resolution of marital or educational problems. These functions are also covered by the work of the Evangelist movement, which were summarized by Vimbong in a memo that he used for the training of new members:

I Stewardship
Backsliding
Final judgment

II Counselling
Healing
Prayer needs
Reconciliation

The first part of the list summarizes the topics necessary to prepare the pupils to lead the community in the right way in the perspective of the Final Judgement, which many suspected might occur at the end of 1999. The deadline made it important, or allowed the religious leaders to be very strict on an orthodox behaviour such as unmarried lovers. The second part focuses on the improvement of people's life, often at their own request.

Finally, Vimbong's interest for Dick may be connected to the land situation in Farun. Like Vimbong, Dick Wilson was not a landowner in Farun, being born in Faru (near Oxai) and having lived in Axamb as Vimbong wrote it in Dick's biography. The transmission of the history of both their lives is a security against the growing claims that the local landowners should have authority in the village. Vimbong's narratives would show on the contrary that the 'names of work' were not created with land ownership in view, in the same way as climbing the *namanki* was not linked to any kind of landed aristocracy. Those who claim authority as land owners eventually make the opposite claim as the descendants of Namal: they want to transform indigenous land rights into hereditary power; the others want to secure land rights on the base of former authority. In Farun, similarly, some people join a claim to land ownership with a claim to authority over village affairs. In the light of these growing contention, Vimbong's enterprise of telling the story of Dick Wilson's achievements, as well as his own, reminds people that this landed logic did not apply to the foundation of the Christian community.

6 Tamaki the teacher and his sister Liis, widow

Tamaki and Liis are about the same age as Vimbong and like him belong to a generation of respected senior people who converted in their youth and who established themselves with success in the Christian villages, in their case Axamb rather than Farun. The main interest of their stories is to tell us more about the motivations of the generation that preceded them and who disappeared in the last waves of epidemics, witchcraft and violence. They show the importance of witchcraft as a negative foundation of modern society. Whereas Vimbong talked about early leaders of the Church, the histories of Tamaki and Liis have more to tell about the life and death of adult converts of their parents' generations, including in the case of Liis the men to which she was successively married as a young girl.

6.1 Tamaki

Tamaki is a very articulate man who has thought about the meaning of the changes he went through in his life. His reflection and curiosity extend further as he attempts to reconcile Genesis with the origin myths of Malakula in a theory of multiple creations. Tamaki in fact has two stories to tell, his own, analyzed in this chapter, and that of his father who died when he was very young but whose exploits he reconstructed by enquiring with surviving relatives. He also told me a story about his maternal grandmother who died and whose ghost was stopped on its way to the realm of the dead, brought back to life and made to marry his grandfather. These stories represent the historical horizon of Tamaki, showing his respect for the pre-Christian past, including violence and magic if they were the expression of virtues of bravery, generosity, cunning and wit. So the anecdotes he gathered about his father all tell how he escaped being killed and managed to kill his adversaries by the application of these

virtues. The social web of the killings does not interest him; very few names of persons and places are mentioned in these anecdotes. It is a disembodied, moral vision of the past (Appendix 3).

By contrast, Tamaki's recollections of his childhood experiences give much more detail of the relations between people and the places where they lived, although the child Tamaki appears interested only in his successive projects and unmoved by the physical disappearance of his family. The adults around him, on the contrary, alternate between feelings of anger and despair although some of them were trying to reconcile their collapsing world with the building of a new society. The tragedy of this story is the failure of such a project held by a man who was shot as a witch. This episode will lead to a discussion of the roots of contemporary witchcraft in the period of conversion.

Tamaki begins a story of his life with a description of the movements of his family after the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother. This life was punctuated by the deaths of relatives and a search for places where one could live in company. Many details are given as to place names, relative location of villages, people's identities, kinship relations and other interactions such as elopement and disputes. These details reflect a society in which people still had projects and prospects although population numbers were falling. That period ended in the case of Tamaki's family, with a false rumour according to which the Americans would kill all the pagans who would not come down at once to the coast.

Life in the bush and first conversion

Father lived in Peneju all the time, in Baramru village. When he died, people came to bury him and another man (Salnarnarx) took my mother. We left for Loxul. Salbl was taking care of him because he was his *tatalamb* (one mother,

two fathers). They were with some Oxai people, from Manje's family: Staki (Mobal) and Eni.

Mother had an argument with the *tatalamb* of Salbl, perhaps about a pig, and we moved to Limerasüs, just down the hill (in the same nasara). We stayed there with the man who took us, his name was Axav. After perhaps only two years he died. An old man came to take the mother of Aröv (she was Axav's sister, living with him and Tamaki's family). They ran away in the night and went to Ravuxen. He was afraid that people would shoot him. They stayed there until Arör's mother died then he married another woman called Bula. After this we left Limerasüs (...) because there was nobody left. Axav was dead and his sister had run away. We wanted to go back to our own land. We only stayed for one year; we were trying to make a *nakamal* (men's house or initiation fence) for my circumcision in the second year when we heard that the Americans had said that all bush men should go to *skul* or they would all be shot. I did not go to the *nakamal* anymore. Father told mother, mother told me: 'we are going to *skul*'. When they said that to me, I did not want to go: I had many pigs, chickens and dogs. Aivuv's father was angry: 'if you don't want to go they will shoot you'. But I still did not want to go. They insisted so that eventually we came down to Luoimalngai in 1947.

This story shows the collapse in Tamaki's mind of the pre-Christian world in which his biological father had been a hero. After his father's death the life he describes is structured around death, people moving around to find companions or to escape from their enemies. The social and cultural collapse is indicated by the aborted attempt to get Tamaki initiated and circumcised after his parents are frightened by the rumour that they would all be killed if they did not convert.

In the village of Luoimalngai where the family had come down, they learned that the American threat was not real: they had already left the country. The family experienced that the situation on the coast was even worse than in the hills.

Attitudes towards death

After we stayed there for two or three years, people did not live well (*ol man oli no stap gud*), they were talking about poison and about shooting people. Father and Mother told us that we would go to the bush again. I did not want to. [His

parents said:] 'If we are all dead then you will come *skul*'. Now I said that I did not want: 'If we go to the bush first, we don't know who will die first, the two of you or me. Then your project won't happen. I don't want to go back to the bush anymore'.

In these days there was no school until class one began in 1953. Isaiah gave me my first pencil in that year. They shot Aliis's husband, my *tawian* (brother-in-law) and then we all ran away. Mangul was the first to take Aliis; after, the man [Morten] who was asking us to come one after another [to the Christian village] began to kill people because he wanted to marry Aliis. First, he killed Aliis's husband, then he killed Salnarnax because he did not want to let Aliis to him as he was a harsh wife beater. Salnarnax got ill so we went back to the bush. They had the better of me, but not really yet. I had planted a watermelon in Luoimalngai, I had to abandon it but I wanted to see if it had grown. We stayed one year in that place, Lixarxaru. After one year, the father of Bonglexlex, Aindriv was visiting us to prepare a plan to kill Morten. The two of them arrived one night, but I was thinking about my watermelon, I wanted to see it. When I was talking about that melon, Father and Mother got angry: 'They are poisoning us but you can only speak about that watermelon? We are dying and you are thinking about that watermelon?' They cooked and we sat down for dinner. They said they were getting ready to go shoot Morten. As Father was speaking thus he put down his torchlight, I took it and went to hide it. When they finished talking they looked for it until in his anger father shot a nambangura tree. They knew it was me who hid it. Mother said [to her husband]: 'It is your fault because it was you who said the Americans would come, then you did not want to go *antap* anymore.' That make Father's spirit cool down (*tingting blong papa i kom daon*), he said: 'All right we are going back to the sea'. He gave up murderous thoughts (*hem i nomo tingting blong sutum man*), he would just die like a dog. He came then and became very ill. He was still alive when Morten took Liis. I did not see him die; I had sores on my leg I went to Santo. If I had not hidden that torch, perhaps Aivuv and me would never have come to *skul*, we would all have died *antap*. Because those who went back *antap* all died. *Antap* there was too much poison.

Tamaki seems to contradict himself: people die on the coast because of witchcraft (*posen*) but on the other hand if they remain in the hills they would all die, also because of witchcraft. People were not safe anywhere, but the anger of the 'bushmen' concentrated on the suspicious deaths below on the coast which we would link to malaria. If life in a one-family hamlet would be more destabilized by a single death, a larger community showed the despairing spectacle of frequent illnesses and funerals. As

a child, Tamaki developed an indifference to death, caring more about his animals or his watermelons than about his parents' lives, or his own, as he could not be convinced that he would survive his parents. However, Tamaki today is convinced that his past stubbornness and indifference actually saved him and his half brother, as they would otherwise have died in the hills. Eventually, his stepfather resigned himself to his fate and returned with the family to the village of the man he was convinced was bewitching him. Now, there was a reason to suspect that man, Morten, a deacon who was the leader of the community and who was taking on himself the task of converting his relatives. He was a widower and he had views on Tamaki's cousin, Liis, a widow-orphan in charge of his family. To reach his purpose he was said to make his way by removing the obstacles to his marriage: Liis' husband first and then her foster father.

Rivers (1922: 94ff, 103ff) is the only analyst to take seriously 'the psychological factor' in the depopulation of Melanesia. He contrasted communities of Christian enthusiasts, thriving with children, with depressed villagers 'deprived of nearly all that gave interest to their lives' – although he also saw vitality among those 'fears and strong enough to withstand European influence'. Rivers's arguments curiously did not include illness itself as a contributing factor to the attitudes of islanders, which as we can see from the stories of Tamaki and Vimbong was the determining factor.

The concentration of population in coastal villages probably led to a concentration of witchcraft suspicion on a few individuals held responsible for a greater number of death among their neighbours than suspected witches in isolated hamlets. In the hills hamlets were reduced sometimes to a couple of people, as we saw in the narratives of Vimbong and his brother Airanglül who lived alone and with their father. Airanglül thought that witches had killed the rest of the family, but these witches were not their immediate

neighbours since they had none. Morten should have been responsible for those he had encouraged to come down. He did indeed assume some responsibilities, as we will see. The quick illnesses and deaths of these guests suggest instead an evil inversion of hospitality. That interpretation cost Morten his life as it did of many others before and after him until Alaw closed the series (see above); all were killed by the pagan relatives of the victims. In earlier days, a killing called for revenge (see above the story of Airanglül), but in the Christian villages there was no such thing. The Condominium authorities were not present very much but still toured regularly to consult with the chiefs they had set up and to hear such cases as would be brought to them, murders in particular. The Christian dwellers were then defenceless both against witches on whom they could not take revenge and against the violence of 'bushmen' who were beyond the district agent's reach. Pagan violence became as frightening as witchcraft because it could not be countered by the threat of vendetta. Converts could only flee. Already half a century earlier, David Ailongbel, in charge of the village of Oxai, had fled with the whole population to the missionaries' residence in Aulua on the east coast (see chapter 3).

The end of the revenge killings in the new villages is demonstrated by the peaceful relationships between children and other relatives of alleged witches and the man who shot them. In one case even, a man married the daughter of the man who killed his father, who, said he, apologized for the killing.

Morten, deacon and witch: the story of a failure to reconcile skul to the traditions

In Tamaki's story, Morten is the character who is most active apart from Tamaki himself. Although he was a religious leader committed to the conversion of the 'bushmen', he was still attached to some elements of the old culture. So, as after the

death of their parents, Morten felt responsible for the young Aivuv, Tamaki's half brother, and he paid an (unconverted) 'bushman' to circumcise him. In these days circumcision was condemned by the missionaries and it had to be performed in the bush. Morten's attitude contrasts with that of Tamaki's parents who gave up Tamaki's circumcision when they came down. Even the 'bushman' who had been paid by Morten did not object to Tamaki taking his brother back, although it meant that the boy would never be circumcised. Today circumcision has been rehabilitated and is a full part of village life; it is either practised in a medical context or in a very restricted customary initiation. Morten's trusting of a child to the care of a pagan would seem very bold for a religious leader, at least from a missionary perspective. He was attempting to preserve and transmit some traditions to the next generation. Tamaki was already outside that world, dedicated as he was to entrepreneurship and *skul*. Tamaki's stepfather and the initiator did not share such projects and were not dedicated to transmitting anything to their children. Neither genuine converts nor relapses, their moves back and forth between *skul* and *antap* (the hills) were motivated by fears for their safety and ultimately by despair and acceptance of death. It is significant that people would not say that they were going back to *kastom*; perhaps the term did not exist at the time; instead, unsatisfied converts were simply going back *antap*, in the hills. Places and ways of life were linked: if people went back *antap*, they could not continue to be Christian, while living down on the coast was to accept the *skul*.⁷¹

The making of a witch

In Tamaki's story, the problem of witchcraft is first mentioned in general terms: 'people were not behaving well, they were talking of poison, they were talking of shooting people'. Then the responsibility of Morten is brought about by his desire to marry Liis

⁷¹ There were however exceptions such as the coastal village mentioned by Vimbong in which lived his unconverted grandfathers.

as he is suspected of having killed Liis's husband and to be working on the death of her stepfather. He was then allowed to marry Liis but her stepfather died nevertheless. From then on, further deaths were attributed to Morten regardless of plausible motivation, as he was already widely believed to be a witch. People began to attribute to him victims in other villages: 'they did not know he had a plan, as he killed Betmak's uncle in Farun'. He must have appeared as one of the most dangerous men in the area: Tamaki thought he faced death by contradicting his views on the education of his brother, while all those new converts who died soon after their arrival in the village perhaps felt that they were murdered by their deacon. Eventually, vengeful 'bushmen' ambushed Morten in his garden.

After Mother and Father died, we went to work for the Condominium in Burbar to make the road. When we came back in 1953 I started school in Luoimalngai. The old pastor Aimbou sent these teachers: Isaiah to Luoimalngai, Jaitok to Faru, Veri to Oxai. I went to school for one year when they shot Morten. When we came back from Burbar, we were surprised to see that Aivuv was not there, because Morten wanted to kill a pig for the circumcision of Aivuv. He had sent him to Aindriv in the bush so that the latter would circumcise him. I went at once to look for him because there was no other boy to play with. I went to see Aindriv who told me: 'Morten is a witch (*posen man*), if you take Aivuv, we will bury you next week.' 'It doesn't matter I want to take Aivuv back to *skul*.' To come back, I took another road. Morten was angry and was following us but he did not catch us. When we reached our house we were afraid, but we did not now he had (another) plan. Indeed he went to kill Betmak's uncle in Farun. His end came in 1953 when people went for the opening of a church in Farun. All the men went to cut some leaves down in Lavundrav, but the old man went to the garden with Liis. They were hiding behind a nakatambol tree⁷² when they shot him. When the guns fired the women heard it at home and ran at once for us at the point.

We went to bury him in the night; we just folded him.⁷³ Soon after we came back

⁷² *Dracontelon vitiense*, or dragon plum, a tree with large buttresses, behind which it is indeed possible to hide.

⁷³ The grave, hurriedly dug in the night, was not long enough to stretch the body so that it had to be folded in the hole.

Liis too arrived.⁷⁴ At the time we were very frightened. We were all stuck in Isaiah's house. When we got up we dispersed. Liis and Kalangis went to Farun. Aivuv, Skopel, Mesak and Samnokis went to Faru. I came here (Axamb) with Isaiah because in Farun there was no school.

The story keeps an objective tone throughout, even when referring to Morten: he is introduced as a kinsman, a brother-in-law, and there is never any ethical condemnation of his actions. This neutrality concords with the reported attitudes of the villagers towards Morten. He is a dangerous man who kills the people around him, but he is also a relative and a neighbour with whom daily activities are shared, he is given Liis in marriage and takes charge of the education of Aivuv. Aindriv, who was planning with Tamaki's stepfather to shoot Morten, remained in sufficiently good terms with Morten to accept payment for the circumcision of Aivuv. Tamaki and Aivuv, although they were afraid of him stayed in the village (they took precautions such as building higher beds so that somebody sticking poison through the wall would not find where they were laying). The whole village was more frightened by the killing of Morten than by all the deaths attributed to his witchcraft. Liis ran away in the bush and only came back to the village at night to find the whole frightened population gathering in the house of a teacher from Axamb before they dispersed in the morning and the village ceased to exist.

Tamaki's later life

Tamaki had developed a passion for learning and preferred to follow his teacher back to Axamb than to follow other relatives who fled to various coastal villages. His choice allowed him, like Vimbong, to engage in a career, although it was not easy for him as an orphan to convince his hosts to pay for his education.

⁷⁴ As we will see Liis was still a child and she was so frightened that she hid in the bush from the time of attack at dawn until late at night.

I went to school with Pastor Aimbon as teacher. After going to school two years, I passed [the entrance exam for secondary education]. Old Philip was looking after us but for Aisen and me nobody was ready to pay [the school fees] and they cancelled [our acceptance to secondary school]. We went back to school for one year and we passed again, the two of us as well as Taso and Tomsen. Philip and Robert came to tell that only one of us could go. 'Aisen only will go, the rest of us will make copra to pay his way'. Taso did not want to go. I went to hide in the house of John Selik and I cried so much. The father of John Selik went to tell Robert: 'We should not block [him].' Robert then came with 1200 [francs]: 'That's your money, but take care not to make any trouble'. Alright, we all left in 1956, three years, then Taloa [off the coast of Santo] three years and after three more years in Kawen [Vila] I came to teach. I only taught for eighteen years because the mother of my children was strange (*difren*), she made us argue all the time, so they removed me in 1981.

Teaching posts:

1964-65 Axamb

1966-67 Santo

1969 Unua

1970 Axamb, when I built this house.

1971-73 Tomman

1974-78 Tisman

1979-81 Aulua

Tamaki became one of the first Axamb men to earn a good salary, while his friend Aisen who went to school with him worked as a civil servant and became the first Axamb MP.

6.2 Liis, a widow, a mother

Before drawing further conclusions from Tamaki's life and considering what it tells us about the constitution of the new society, I will discuss the life of his cousin the beautiful Liis, the widow of Morten who was said to have killed her parents and previous husbands in order to marry her.

Liis is a very outspoken old lady, unlike many others of her age who can be shy of

talking to strangers. Liis's story is first a story of husbands: like many other women she was married very young to an old man before she was big enough to have sexual relations: 'I was too small. I didn't know I was married.' This happened because there was a sex ratio imbalance (see chapter 2) and men could have more than one wife. Also, most people were relatives who were not allowed to marry although strict rules were often bent. Nevertheless, it made it difficult for many men to find a wife, so they would marry a very young girl and look after her, 'cook for her' until she would come of age. A generation before Liis, the French doctor Joly (1904: 358) noted in the village of Melip in south-west Malakula, that as soon as people heard the news that a woman had given birth to a daughter, men flocked to secure by a payment the right to marry the girl.

Unfortunately for Liis' first husband, he died within three months, before she was big enough for any marriage purposes. Her next husband died after a year and half; the third, Morten, was assassinated after a year. With her first three husbands she was still a little girl, not so with the fourth one with whom she lived in Farun for three years and adopted a son, André. She was still in her teens and a widow four times. With her fifth husband, from Axamb, she lived twenty-four years before he left her a widow for good. While she was with her fourth husband, Liis realized her desire to have a child by rescuing a pagan baby. This rescue is really *her* story, the one she wants to tell, as Tamaki and Vimbong's stories tell of their salvation and successes.

The 'bushmen' before, when they did not want a child, exposed him for a day and, once dead, would throw him in a basket in the sea. They only wanted little girls. I did not have a child and I told one uncle, Aisingtax's grandfather: 'Stop harming (*spoilem*) children, I want a little boy.' One day, very early in the morning, while my [fourth] husband was already at morning service [shortly after daybreak], I saw my uncle coming: 'Uncle, what's up? – No, we heard that you wanted a child, is that true? – Yes I want. – My daughter had a small boy that we are going to throw away. – No don't waste the child, I want it.' We waited until the end of morning service, my husband agreed and we followed the

uncle to his village at Matlelamp. I saw the child laying on a leaf, head and legs on the ground, I burst in tears (*hed i foldaon*). His father was standing near, I asked: 'don't you have a small tin?' In the old days (*bifo*) they were keeping these very small tins for silver coins. He said: 'Yes, I have one, I'm keeping my money in it. – Leave your money out of it and I will use that tin to wash the child.' They had not washed him, he was just like that.

Liis's story gives a woman's perspective on the period of conversion and demographic decline. She lived these events through a series of husbands that she had not married by choice and who died one after another. She was already three times a widow while still considering herself a little girl. Another woman, older than Liis but who was married five times like her, viewed child marriage with more anger at having been disposed of: 'I was like a pig', that is she was sold when small to be fed until she reached childbearing age. For Liis and many other women, conversion was a matter of marrying a Christian man (for men, similarly, coming down to Christian villages could give them a chance to find a wife). Liis survived through these years but could not get a child. Her childlessness can be connected to the low fertility rate of those years, as Vimbong observed when he noticed that after the killing of Alaw children were born again in the community. Low fertility was aggravated by infanticide, which was nearly the fate of two of the characters from these stories: Vimbong was saved by his brother, Liis saved her adoptive son André. In her narrative we can see the beginning of a Christian moral stance about the practice of infanticide, especially in the details of the condition of the baby, unwashed and with his head and feet on the ground. It is not a full denunciation however and neither Tamaki's fatalism nor salvation rhetoric are present in her story. She did not even mention that she herself escaped death as she was suspected of witchcraft after her fourth successive husband died of a long illness. These suspicions arose also because she had been a wife of a man himself shot for witchcraft. A plot to kill her was rumoured when her husband was still alive.

Tamaki, then just back from school in Santo, heard rumours about this and walked to Farun where he stayed until the husband died. The 'bushmen' came to mourn with their guns but Tamaki was praying, with Liis behind him. Then he asked the grandfather of André, the uncle who had told Liis about the baby, what was to be done with the child. He answered that Liis could keep him and that if they needed him for work, they would send for him, then they went back. (Told by Tamaki in Liis's house)

Tamaki thought that he protected Liis by his presence and diffused the tension by talking about the child. Again, the moral stance towards the 'bushmen' is ambiguous: they are relatives who can be dangerous but who can be kept at a distance with the help of prayer and the recall of common kinship. The unsaid of these stories is that these 'bushmen' died without descent, as did all who did not convert, but again this is not morally exploited. The story also shows that witchcraft accusations were not unanimously accepted; Tamaki did not believe in Liis's guilt neither did her next husband who took her to Axamb and even the 'bushmen' abandoned their murderous prospects relatively easily. Although Liis's uncle was perhaps about to shoot her they could resume peaceful cohabitation.

7 Conclusion

Protestantism forced its adherents into the intolerable position of asserting the reality of witchcraft, yet denying the existence of an effective and legitimate form of protection or cure.
(Keith Thomas 1991: 590)

In her article about a wave of witch hunting among the Lele of Kasai in the 1970s, Mary Douglas (1999) identified the causes of this phenomenon, in the social context of conversion to Catholicism, in remarkably parallel terms to Keith Thomas's (1991) analysis of witch-hunting in early modern Britain. Both authors saw the cause of the rise

of witch-fears in the removal or vilification of traditional means of control without eradicating belief and fear. Douglas goes further in her analysis of the social and economic transformations that accompanied religious developments, focusing on a disempowerment of old men from their economic wealth and social prestige, leaving only the fear of witchcraft increased by the demonization of the old (Douglas 1999: 179).

In South Malakula, also, waves of witchcraft fears accompanied the development of Christianity and show signs of continuing today. The relationship between witchcraft and the new faith appears much more ambiguous than in the British or the Lele cases. Both Douglas and Thomas emphasize the suppression of the witchcraft control by religious reforms rather than an increase in witches' activities. In South Malakula, if such instruments of control existed, none but revenge was efficient enough to have been reported after more than a century of epidemics. What seems to have brought about the killing of witches was not the disappearance of other means of witchcraft control but the disappearance of the need to find a plausible motivation for the witch to have killed his reported victims. In the understanding of local people the witches themselves were responsible for the annihilation of the old order and its followers. As Tamaki explained, to stay in the hills was to condemn oneself to die: 'We would all have died *antap* (...). *Antap* there was too much poison'. Conversion was not primarily a means to escape the economic and ritual domination of old men but to be saved. Now that the conversion is complete, old men are still in charge, as religious leaders, family heads and landowners, but some of them continue to be targeted as witches, although foreign women and young people can be suspected of introducing new forms of witchcraft even more terrible. There was thus a transfer of witch suspicion from older pagans to older Christians, suspicions that appeared to be vindicated by the atonement of the epidemics

after the last revenge killings in the early 1960s. Recently, perhaps in line with an increase in mortality, there has been a renewal of witchcraft fears and accusations. This renewal is linked to the ambiguous relationship between Christianity and *kastom*. From the onset of missionization, it appeared that some converts, including religious leaders, had not entirely given up their old ways. This was true not only in the eyes of the missionaries: there has been a resistance to their attempts at complete demonization of the old order. As Ailongbel continued to deal in pigs (cf. chapter 3), deacon Morten spirited a boy away into the bush for circumcision. If in modern Vanuatu some aspects of *kastom* revival take a folkloristic if not a touristic character, others such as circumcision and bride price have firm roots, resisted missionaries' bans and have been wholly integrated in the local Christian way of life.

The deep attachment to some aspects of the old culture extends to the knowledge of 'leaves', whose application ranged from the treatment of various ailments to philteres, charms for invisibility, flying and killing. Among the Lele 'even the ancient law of herbs and symbols was condemned' (Douglas 1999: 179). In Malakula instead people try to draw a line distinguishing the empowering from the demonic: Elder Dick Wilson has become a saintly figure also for his virtues as a healer; deacon Morten was shot for his purported witch killing. This ambiguity has been transmitted to modern times, people actively researching powerful traditional knowledge and being afraid of its evil misuses by others.

Dick Wilson and Morten have become semi-legendary figures of the last phase of conversion, but the contrast between them can be reported back to the by now fully legendary figures of the first period of conversion such as Ailongbel and Namal (see chapter 3). As we saw, the latter, a high ranked man who became an enemy of the

missionaries, was demonized by them as a cannibal assassin, a child eater, quite likely a witch. The close analysis of the priests' own writings shows his role to have been more ambiguous, as a tentative mediator between the mission and the old order. Conversely, Ailongbel is venerated by his descendants as the apostle and poisoned martyr of Axamb but mission history shows him in customary endeavours. These earlier histories are heroic narratives of the struggle for the replacement of the old order with Christianity. By Malakula standards, they are histories of people and places of ancient Christianity, going back three or four generations. On the contrary, the narratives presented in this chapter are offered by the last converts to complete and perhaps rival the epic of Ailongbel. This series of histories allows us to see how much conversion was a generational event. The attitudes of heroes and narrators depend in part on their position relative to that event. It was of course not a single momentous event such as 1789 but one that took place over more than a century from 1880 to the late twentieth century. Depending on how late the people of a place converted, they feel they have to catch up with Christians of the second and third generations in terms of education, business awareness and careers. The convert narrators of this chapter knew personally the heroes who led them in the Christian path, but taken individually the predominant feature of their interpretation of conversion was the respective age and education they had reached by the time they came down from their villages in the hills. Their views are definitely marked by how much they knew of the old culture, how much and how they understood what was happening to their parents who did not convert and died with resignation. The survival of the converts was based on enthusiasm for the possibilities that Christian villages alone could by then offer: children to play with, the magic of prayer, education, or finding a husband.

Chapter 5: Graves: Christian Historiography in Malakula

1 Introduction

This chapter covers the evolution over the last sixty years of Christian funerary monuments built by the inhabitants of South Malakula. In particular, I will focus on the new role of concrete tombs as a support for historical writing. The new funerary practices have completely replaced pagan art and ceremonies, but their local development has taken original forms with roots in the traditional culture. Early inscriptions reflect a basic contrast between the coastal converts and their pagan neighbours, while the most recent inscriptions reflect a changing view of history and a revaluation of *kastom*, or in other cases, express a complete appropriation of Christianity. This analysis expands some of the main themes of the thesis regarding the syncretic foundations of contemporary society: the pagan past is embedded in the adopted funerary customs, but so are the values of local Christianity, the preoccupation with genealogy and the link of people to place. The knowledge of the location of pagan graves often depended on oral transmission; because of their durability, concrete graves have taken a prominent place in the transmission of history. Short of erosion damage, there are always fragments left of the most fragile tombstones built over sixty years ago. Because they were relatively fragile, early standing crosses and stelae have been replaced in the last twenty years by low and massive slabs that also offer the advantage of a large space for decoration and writing. Writing on graves in Vanuatu offers two clear advantages in a humid climate: it is much more resistant than paper – and in a society without organized archives, it cannot get lost. Like the stones erected by pagans, graves are there permanently to be seen and their inscriptions can then be read by all, whereas paper documents are kept by individuals, sometimes jealously, only to be displayed in crucial occasions, not unlike orally transmitted knowledge.



Chapter 5 figure 29

The burial site of Kulkul Lexlex, one of the oldest in South Malakula

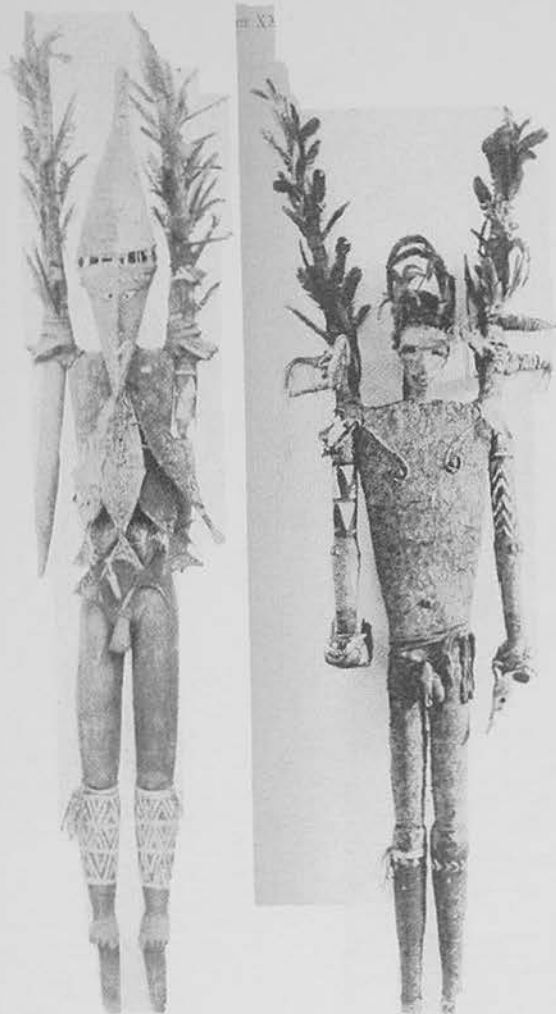


Figure 30

Two *rambaramb* (after Deacon 1934: plate xx). The figure on the left could be from the Lamap area.

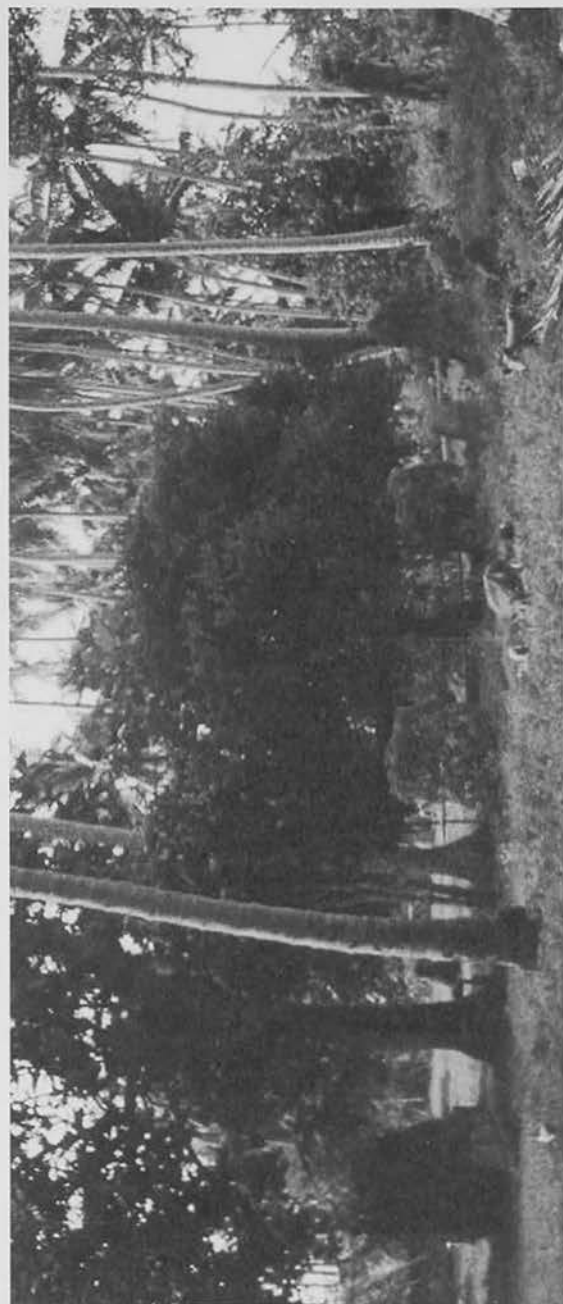


Figure 31
A stone alignment in Lamap

2 Funerals

Pagan burial sites can be difficult to identify after a few generations (fig 29). Watt-Leggatt (1904: 128) describes the burial of women and boys with their ornaments in shallow graves decorated with plants and perishable items such as bamboo and pandanus mats. But the original site meant less than the erection of a monument, at least for senior men, whose bones were reburied near the village square (*amil*) under a heap of stones. The skull could be detached from the body and over-modelled with clay, hair and shells to give it back the likeness of the deceased and sometimes finally set on a life-size sculpture, known as *rambaramb*⁷⁵ (fig 30). Senior men could otherwise be remembered by the stones they erected at the occasion of pig killing ceremonies (fig 31).

An abstract of the description of the funeral of Apwil Naandu, as it was narrated to Deacon (Appendix 4), preserves rich details linked to the grade hierarchies of which the deceased was a prominent member. A comparison with Deacon's account will serve as a basis for the description of contemporary ceremonies.

Contemporary funerals present very few elements identical to Deacon's description: there is no gathering before death (though people still do wail demonstratively); the body is quickly buried instead of being exposed for more than a week; there are no displays, decorations or dances related to the abolished grade hierarchies. The pigs of the deceased are not distributed, no garden is destroyed, food not formally exchanged and no widow secluded. The choice of rituals is often optional, reflecting what the

organizers of the funeral feel is appropriate. Modern rituals centre on relatives and

⁷⁵ *Rambaramb* is the word used in South West Bay, but the word does not seem to have been used in southern and eastern Malakula where the effigies were designated by a more general word, *temes* or *temet*, meaning 'dead person' or 'spirit'. Guiart records in unpublished fieldnotes the words *natemat pispis* (Maskelynes) and *temes nevinbūr*. Guiart also recorded in Axamb a story relating the origin of the first effigy, called here *naxmats*, which Guiart translates as 'statue' but could also mean 'dead'.

neighbours rather than rank, and on communal meals prepared with imported foods and drinking parties rather than traditional exchanges. The body is generally buried the day after the death, the grave dug by young male relatives, particularly those that had a joking kinship relationship with the deceased. After the death, male relatives abstain from shaving for five days, after which they come to the deceased's home to shave collectively, by order of seniority, -mothers' brothers being assisted by one of their sisters' sons. The process is organized and paid for by the closest relatives. Close male kin let their beard grow and gather to shave after a hundred days. The holding of a cycle of ceremonies on specific days after the death, a widespread custom in Malakula (Speiser 1913: 98f; Layard 1942: 544ff) and elsewhere in Vanuatu (e.g. Jolly 1994: 165f), is one of the most important elements from pre-Christian funerals that continues to be practiced today.⁷⁶

The erection of the monument came after several days of funerary ceremonies performed for Apwil Naandu. The decision to build a modern concrete grave, however, is only taken after an unspecified length of time, from a few months to several years after the burial. More recently there are examples of several graves being built at once, which increases the solemnity of the event and spreads the costs between the organizing families. On such an occasion distant relatives from other villages are invited to stay for some days. During this time they are treated to several meals of local beef and traditional dishes made with pork, as well as of imported food such as rice. Drinks include tea, coffee, milo and alcoholic beverages, as well as locally produced kava. Previous practice (as at Apwil Naandu's funeral) involved the killing or exchange of large numbers of pigs, but at contemporary funerals pigs are not often ritually slaughtered. At the occasion of the simultaneous building of four graves in Farun,

⁷⁶ In South Malakula the choice of periods of five and hundred days could be an innovation, as Deacon does not mention these periods.



Figure 32

Kersom's uncles slaughtering a pig at the ceremony for
the building of his grave

This image cannot be made available in ORA at this time

Figure 33

The graves of Leah Enis and Bula Alick near Oxai,
with the grave builders

however, one family purchased a pig to be killed by the maternal uncles of the deceased (fig 32). 'Uncles' did not have any specific ritual role in the three other cases. I had been specifically asked to take a photo of the three classificatory mother's brothers of the deceased posing to slaughter this lone animal, a tribute to the customary value attached to pigs. Reflecting traditional values, the animal was male and castrated, but it did not have its lower tusks growing in circle as pigs of value traditionally did (cf. Deacon 1934:193ff; Baker 1929; Layard 1942; Funabiki 1981).

Modern funerals echo the ancient ceremonies but emphasize the family and the community, the bases of Christian society, rather than the hierarchies of old. Graves are now built for anybody, women and young children as well as prestigious men (fig 33), while everything appearing to be connected to pre-Christian beliefs has been suppressed. This transformation has not been achieved at once. The example of funerary inscriptions will show how a typical Christian custom had been progressively developed and tuned to local agendas.

3 Ethnography and epigraphy

Anthropologists have not paid much attention to Christian burials, and especially to the use of writing on graves. Two of the most interesting publications are Astuti's (1995: 123-152) study of the funerary practices of the Vezo of Madagascar and Teilhet-Fisk's (1990) paper on Tongan grave art. Astuti's ethnography is rich in detail and interpretations, focusing on questions of identity. Participation in successive ceremonies accompanying the various stages of the erection of funerary monuments is central in this process, as the living must work collectively for the dead, to entertain them and to assure them that they are remembered. Astuti's (1995: 5) analysis suggests parallels with both the pagan and Christian funerary ceremonies and monuments of South

Malakula. Unfortunately her approach is deliberately synchronic and ahistorical – a theoretical position supported by the lack of interest of the Vezo themselves for history (*ibid*: 75) – which leads the author to virtually suppress all references to Christianity in the book. If it were not for a couple of passing remarks on the singing of hymns (119, 145) her reader would be left to wonder whether the crosses set on tombs are Christian symbols at all. Her elimination of history contrasts with Bloch's land mark study of funerary rituals of the Merina of Central Madagascar (1971), which carefully relates the transformations of Merina society to the continuing identification of people with their tombs and parishes. Bloch's analysis will be useful in the consideration of the connection of graves to power and social structure, but Astuti's material is paradoxically more suggestive of continuities beyond the rupture brought by conversion to Christianity. In contrast to Astuti, Teilhet-Fisk (1990: 223) focuses on the syncretism of recent Tongan grave art and links it with the social transformations of Tongan society in the last two centuries. She underlines the tension in modern Tonga between the expression of rank in traditional funerary arts and the relative democratization reflected in the graves of commoners (*ibid*: 227).

A couple of recent studies on funerary inscriptions show many parallels with my analysis of Malakulan graves. The study of Gallo-Roman epigraphy by Woolf (1998: 77-105) is particularly interesting as it deals with the transformation of a colonized people and variations in the romanization process in different areas of Gaul. This process parallels the differentiation of Christian culture emerging in various parts of South Malakula. Surprising similarities appear also between Malakula and early modern England. In his study of epitaphs as a literary genre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Scodel (1991: 21ff, 163ff, 202ff, *passim*) links the emergence and development of new styles of graves to religious and social upheavals. The development



Figure 34

The mission cemetery in Lamap



Figure 35

A stone is laid in memory of Bishop Lambert, once
curate of Lamap

of lengthy epitaphs on private funerary monuments reflects tensions between the Protestant suspicion for former Catholic practices (and other 'idolatrous worship of the dead'), and the wish of aristocratic families to perpetuate the memory of their ancestors (sometimes even to invent some ancestors) (ibid: 16, 23). In the same way my analysis will show the relation between pagan heritage and Christian revolution in Malakula.

In spite of the differing eras and location discussed in their material, Woolf's and Scodel's analyses are similar to the one I will propose here. The contrary is true for the only serious study of Christian graves and epigraphy in the Pacific – Fischer's (2002) analysis of a cemetery of the Wampar people in the hinterland of Lae in Papua New Guinea. Wampar graves vary in appearance from those of Malakula, but the dates, content and development of the inscriptions are practically interchangeable between the two places – with due respect to the differences between Tok Pisin and Bislama. However, Fischer (2002: 102, 116, 149ff, *passim*) is primarily interested in these graves as a complementary source for his census data and never treats the inscriptions as sources for the history of socio-religious transformations.

4 Cemeteries

Most of the graves referred to in this chapter are from the Presbyterian villages of Oxai, Farun, Avox, Pelongk in the Maskelynes and Axamb. Indeed, the religious divide between Catholics and Presbyterians is reflected in burial practices. In Catholic Lamap, graves are much less conspicuous and those that I saw did not bear extensive inscriptions. In the other villages, one finds cemeteries often in the midst of plantations next to the main paths leading to the villages, near the church, near houses and in public squares. It seems that in the 1950s cemeteries were established outside the villages, possibly following instructions of colonial authorities concerned with hygienic aspects

of the disposal of the dead. These cemeteries are reaching capacity and people choose at their convenience, also within the village near one's home. Western graves, such as those of the local Catholic mission, remain a direct model for the tombstones (fig 34). Another possible source of inspiration lies in the erected stones found all over the eastern coast of Malakula to celebrate the achievements of high ranked males in pig killing ceremonies (fig 31) (cf. Layard 1942), a practice occasionally adapted to the celebration of today's great men (fig 35). If the cemeteries are not carefully tended, vegetation quickly covers them. Other hazards threaten the graves: falling trees, earthquakes and, in Oxai, erosion by the sea have influenced the evolution of the style and the location of the tombstones, from the earliest 1940s fragile lime stelae, to elaborate crosses and stelae of the 1970s, and to the contemporary massive concrete slabs. It also led to problems with the identification and rebuilding of broken graves and to an increase in the surface available on each grave for decoration and most importantly for text. In all the villages, graves were very similar until the 1960s when varying access to local education led to diverging use of English and Bislama. Rarely was a local language used. People do not know how to write in their own tongue but become literate in English at school and in Bislama at church. Inscriptions in English are now often composed by people who have secondary education, for example pastors and school teachers, which accounts for the greater fluency of these recent texts. On the other hand the switch to Bislama in some villages, where people are often less educated, has led to texts of even greater fluency.

While collecting inscriptions, I tried to have a selection of representative graves for each cemetery I visited. There were generally few graves from the 1970s and the 1980s, which seem to have been periods of low mortality. The 1990s saw a rising number of burials. I translated Bislama inscriptions, trying to stay as close as possible to the local

use of English words. The life before conversion for example is often expressed as 'living in Heathen', probably formed after 'in Heaven'. The texts in English or in approximate English are given in the original.

With the exception of the small cemetery of the Catholic missionaries in Lamap and of the few graves of Presbyterian elders located next to their churches, there is generally no notion of a sacred ground or of the graves themselves having a sacred character. For the most part people's attitudes towards graves and cemeteries are casual. In figure 33 we can see the builders sitting on the graves drinking. Special precautions are not taken while building a house or walking on a path near graves or cemeteries. Nor is much thought given to excavating bones while digging a toilet, for example. A noteworthy exception is the sighting of a suspected sorcerer near the tomb of his alleged victim at night (cf. chapter 4).

5 Chronology of inscriptions

The earliest surviving dated tombstones are simple stelae from 1939 and the 1940s – not very long perhaps after the death of Apwil Naandu.⁷⁷ It seems that for a few decades after conversion temporary materials only were used, or if concrete was used, the inscription consisted just of a name without date. Prior to this concrete must have been available from traders who exported copra and sold imported goods to local people. The use of local languages remained exceptional. The language of the first inscriptions, a combination of King James English, Pidgin English and current English, indicates that the building of graves was a local concern, done without the intervention of missionaries. The early texts do not report much: dates of death and of burial, name, in

⁷⁷ Deacon himself was honoured with a concrete tombstone in South West Bay more than twenty years after his death in 1927. The French anthropologist Jean Guiart paid for the concrete but no payment was accepted for the labour (Guiart, personal communication; Gardiner 1987: 67-69).

the case of infants their age (adult converts did not know their ages), and in some cases the status of a chief or a chief's wife and the duration of his 'reign' (Appendix 5: 1). These stones meant other things however. Christianization was far from complete and these monuments testified to the religious status of converts and their children. The difference with the pagan way of life was made concrete by several innovations: the use of writing and of the language of white people, the display of knowledge of calendar time, and the use of lime and imported concrete purchased with money earned from coconut plantations. These stones were erected for all members of the family and community, including women and small children. At variance with reports of pagan infanticides (cf Chapter 4), the inscriptions of the period express particular loss and grief at the death of small children. Possibly this contrast reflects a new conception of early childhood; in pre-Christian times perhaps newborns were not considered full persons. Margaret Jolly (1998: 183ff) casts doubt on the credibility of early accounts of infanticide and neglect of children, which she thinks were the product of a male theory of the 'bad mother'. Somewhat unfairly she discredits these old accounts on the basis of the evidence of 'collective mother love' observed during her own fieldwork (ibid.: 191). She thinks that mothers were blamed for infants' deaths that were caused instead by exotic infectious diseases. In chapter 4, however, I relied on autobiographical accounts of infanticide and negligence of orphans as well as child marriage. Scodel (1991: 4 n9) refers to a similar debate among English historians about a possible link between a decline in child mortality and the expression of grief for infants' death in the eighteenth century.

In the following years the form of tombstones became more innovative, crosses at first and then various geometric and anthropomorphic shapes (fig 36). Longer sentences in the inscriptions allowed for the development of information, with a growing insistence



Figure 36
Pelongk cemetery



Figure 37
Drawing of Bula harvesting a wild yam



Figure 38
The grave of Hailif, Avox

on dates, on the duration of disease, and on the time lapses between death, burial and grave building.

9/3/1957- N. H. [New Hebrides] Presbyterian mission- Ogae [Oxai]- This man he was- sick about three moon [months]. oc. no. de 12 fr- iday he was diad- and on Saturday 13- we bury him his name- was Paik ye was old- again on 1958/3/9- october 5 wednesday we made his grave (Oxai). (See also Appendix 5: 2)

Towards the late fifties more biographical elements are covered for people who had been born in the community or who had lived there for a long time.

1934 This- woman his name Torty- she was with Hauv Ben 18 years. and again. him- was die. on. 1957 october- 16 Tuesday. (...) we buried him on wens- day (Avox).

The biography of Torty from Avox is particularly interesting: if the dates are correct, this woman died aged 23 after 18 years of marriage – which would show that early Christians were still practicing child marriage. As we saw in chapter 4 in the life of Liis, some women tell how they were married and widowed at a very young age, being looked after by much older husbands. Torty is one of the first adults to have a recorded date of birth (1934) on her grave. This date nearly coincides with the most ancient dated graves (1939), which suggests that Christian people developed a strong interest in calendar dates at the same time they began building concrete tombs. There are some earlier recorded birth dates on more recent graves, but we will see that these are associated with emphatic attribution of extreme longevity to elderly converts.⁷⁸ By contrast, middle-aged people who died in the 1950s never had their dates of birth written down.

⁷⁸ Fischer (2002: 98, 102) confronts in a more systematic way his census data to the dates of birth written on the tombstones and finds that the age of many old people is greatly exaggerated.

Differences in religious status within the community also began to be recorded, distinguishing the first converts who had become leaders of the church from new comers on the coast. The latter often did not survive for very long and the length of time they lived with the community is recorded.

15-9-1959

Manifahai

He was one – of the first – Christian – who began – the work of – the gospel – here at Farun – He was also – faithful to – the way of – Christ a m u n (...) (Farun)

Date

8-7-1959

Kaloris – He die on – 1917 / 1969 – He come. – Here about – two years. and. – 7. month. and. – He die and - his. grave. – made on 8 / 2 - 1969. (Farun)

In earlier periods, the time of conversion was never indicated because most people were recent converts, a fact that was already signified by the very building of the grave.

The second and third generations of Christians began to be more anxious to stress their own achievements in education and church responsibilities.

THIS IS – the memorial – of Avok first Elder – HE WAS ESRON – HE WAS IN the work – of the elder from – 1947 to 26 – August 1973 – when he died – his faithfulness – of Leadership was – a memori – by his people.⁷⁹

Esrone's grave is one of the first to record the career of a religious leader. To become an

⁷⁹ As in some other inscriptions, the use of capital letters does not seem to emphasize important words. The alternation of upper case and lower case can have more to do with a relatively improvised layout due to the conditions of writing in fast drying fresh concrete. People who do most of their reading in church tend to read aloud as did Europeans in earlier centuries. Ong (1982:120f) thinks that the fact that written words were read aloud lead to more inconsequential use of larger or smaller caps and relative position of words on the title page of early printed books. Words did not need to be conceived as visual units since they would be restituted audibly. It could be tempting however to compare this occasional emphasis with random alternation of loud and soft speech in sermons. Niko Besnier (1995:140-168) interpreted this alternation as an affirmation of power of the religious orator thrusting his truth on the audience.

elder, he had to go beyond primary education and follow training in Biblical scholarship. Instead of a religious career like Esron's, the graves of elderly women began to give more information on their families. For children, on the other hand, a more emotive discourse appeared, focussing on circumstances of death, expression of affection and religious support for the grieved parents. The graves of elderly converts from the first generation who died in these years emphasize their extreme old age.

Laflaf Obed – born on 1876 – Died on 2nd Aug 77 – The Second Man to Enlighten – Christianity on this – island He lived – to be 1002 [hundred and two] years (Axamb)

This is the memo, of a – widow named MARTHA – Martha was born / the island of AVOh in the year – 1924. She was married – to Gabin. They bore – five children of which – only one of them got – married is Okai village – where she came to stay with until the time – she passed away. – she was a hundred – and three years old – when she died in (Monday) – the 6th July 1978 – 28th Aug. 1979

1963 – date 9/5 – this girl she was not sick but she was – sink into the water – because she duest [did] not yet – walk no persons see him – when she was sink until she – dead his name was – Catrina. (Oxai)

This is the – memorial of – Jimmy Moffet. – He was born on – Saturday 19 December – 1959, and he died on – Teusday 6th August 1960 – he was taken up by his – loving Saviour Jesus – Christ for he says, suffer – little children to come unto – me. and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of god. – Luke 18:16, -- Tatevit's son. (Pelongk)

In the late 1970s, nephews, brothers-in-law and other male relatives enjoying an informal relationship with the deceased began to draw and write evocations of the dead person in a friendly and informal style. This trend continued into the 1980s, which seem to have comprised a happy period, if grave writings can be trusted. Today inhabitants of South Malakula say of these years that the price of copra, the main export crop, was better relative to imported goods. There were very few graves built in 1970s and 1980s

and few deaths reported from that period in later graves. The graves became larger and more resistant to earthquakes and other hazards. The inscriptions tell much more about the lives of the deceased presented in fluent stories and not only in lists of dates, achievements and relatives. This change is brought by familiarity with writing in English for the most educated people and in Bislama, after the churches and other national institutions of independent Vanuatu began to use that language as an alternative to English and French. The use of local languages is limited to informal and often humorous inscriptions on the side of the main text with the drawings. The drawings themselves become more lifelike, referring to aspects of the personality of the deceased in a school-influenced style (fig 37), continuing the trend of increasing formal and textual complexity.⁸⁰

Abonglelekev [Bonglexlex]

He was born heathen. He was the last man to be touched by Christ's call when his time came to join the Christian life his years reached 71 when he left behind five sons and two daughters. He died in the French hospital in Lamap on the 7th November 1984 at one o'clock on Monday morning. We made this memorial stone in November 1986.

Family leaf [nasara lif] naenu (Bislama: Navinu). (Oxai – translated from Bislama)

This inscription takes us a step further in the progress of conversion, insisting that this man had been the last to convert ('born heathen', 'last man to be touched by Christ's call', 'joined the Christian life') – although in other areas the last pagans converted yet a bit later. The comment thus reflects the emergence of a coherent community in which relatives are not distinguished any longer by religion. At the same time it could be the first inscription to use the word *nasara*, a Bislama word of vernacular origin, which in South Malakula became a central concept in the expression of land claims (see chapter

⁸⁰ In a different context O'Hanlon (1993) noted the greater emphasis on the meaning of Wahgi shield designs given by increased realism and the use of words.

6). This inscription is also noteworthy for the precise time of death, which increasingly was written down. The inscription on the grave my friend Kilia built in 1990 for his four-year-old child who had died in 1988 focused on the exact time of death. 'He was ill for one week and he died at the Lamap clinic at 17minutes past 1 p.m. on number 20 -1 - 88' (translated). On the back of the grave a brother-in-law of the child expressed his sorrow in a colloquial way: 'your life was wasted for nothing, brother-in-law' (*you west blong nating tawi*). In this case there was a two-and-half year delay between burial and grave-building, but generally delays vary.

The surviving relatives begin to be listed in greater detail. In these years the graves acquired the form they still have, adopting massive slabs that allowed for more space for decoration and inscriptions. The grave of Hailif made in 1985, six years after his death, is original in its geometric composition and its decoration more than in the content of its Bislama inscription, which is all about dates, including an unlikely remote date of birth, 1897 (fig 38). In the decoration of the grave, arrows connect the imprint of a bottle in the concrete to drawings of a cross, coins ('dollars'), and a coconut tree with fallen and split nuts. It is an allegory of how Hailif fuelled the drinking habit that led to his death with money made from coconuts. While the close family was in charge of the conservative biography on the stele, joking relatives could write additional comments or draw in the remaining available space.

Grave building has become a significant affair, occupying a large group of men for a half day, but its organization requires more planning for the close relatives who must, amongst other things, arrange the purchase and transport of pigs and cattle from relatively distant places. Since 1996 in several villages, groups of graves have been built on the same day, making the event a more impressive celebration involving the whole

village and many outside guests, and strengthening the cohesion of a community paying respect to its dead. Figure 33 shows a double grave built on one of these occasions allowing for increased effect and durability. The funerary inscriptions avoid claims or topics that could stir trouble; in particular they never mention witchcraft as a cause of death. Instead, the commemoration of church leaders and family links masks divisions amongst neighbours and relatives (cf. Scodel 1991: 204). The original conversion to Christianity that brought individuals to the community is mentioned, but not later conversions to rival churches that caused families to leave the communities. Similarly, land claims can be inferred from some inscriptions but are never expressed directly. This is probably why graves are never apparently desecrated, although people occasionally threaten to do so in the context of land disputes.

The increase in the numbers of graves built, land disputes, and even witchcraft cases (see chapter 4) are linked to a growing demographic pressure. The tensions created by land shortages between the descendants of migrant converts and original coastal landowners make people more concerned about their history. The graves of the founders of the Christian communities have become central to the land claims of their descendants, who restore or rebuild them in a durable fashion with ornate and extended texts. Others reassert with pride their pagan inheritance and rebuild the graves of old pagans famous for their knowledge and powers.

The celebration of great men by individual families does, however, interest the whole community. Early converts and church leaders opened the road of education and new careers, and the whole community takes pride in the moral prestige of early conversion. Recent converts, being newcomers to a village, find their own pride in the revaluation of their inherited knowledge. Graves of women on the other hand tend to remain more

of a family affair, their inscriptions focusing on family relationships. The impressive appearance of some women's and children's graves can also be a demonstration of wealth, while their location forever marks the land once occupied by a family.

Recent graves built in the mid-to-late 1990s saw the development of more diverse styles of funerary inscriptions; lists in particular detail the increasingly complex career paths of church leaders (Appendix 5: 3) or, especially on women's graves, past husbands and surviving relatives.

BULA ALICK

In memory of our -- grandma, aunt mother mother -- in law sister and sister in law -- and niece Bula Alick

Born in 1909 and was married to the -- following husband's 1 George 2 Joel -- Haigal 3 Baiyek and 4 Arör She had four -- sons and 2 two daughters She was 91 years old -- when she died on 19 November 1996 at 9am.

Placed on Thursday 30th October 1997.

[Drawings of flowers and Bula herself digging a wild yam, which was her favourite food '*Woman blong kakae wael yam*']. (fig 33, fig 37)

On the other hand, a greater place can be left to the expression of tragic circumstances of death or on the virtues of younger people.

[Written on the cross in relief]:

This is the memory of -- Edlen he was belong -- to Jerrys famly: he was -- born on the 23rd Septemba -- 1969: and was handicaply -- on his right body but he -- can do heavy works. He -- was died on -- the 17 01 96 -- with the age of 27 years -- old he was died with the -- marriage problem by -- ending up his -- life with -- drinking -- tablets: but his faithfulne -- ss and his love -- alwuas remain -- and remember -- by his families -- and the people

[Written on the sides]:

He left behind his two -- brother two sisters and -- his mata

This memorial -- was made on -- date 10th 10 96

From the past -- he was a good -- player and also -- he was a -- health -- worker.

There are also drawings of flowers, of a heart pierced by an arrow, of a star

preceded by the word 'love' next to a picture of Edlen playing football. Behind the grave a bottle has been inserted into block of concrete to serve as a flower vase. (Avox)

These inscriptions reveal a radical change from the more formulaic epitaphs of the early church leaders and an even greater change from the pre-Christian monuments. They represent the Christian private virtues as opposed to depiction of the public careers of important men. Some of the trends that appeared in earlier inscriptions are further developed, such as the recalling of surviving relatives and the recording of time. Thematic depictions include generosity, private misfortunes, community service, sport, and favourite foods. These connect the deceased to the community and the family, which, as we saw in chapter 3, were the main social expression of the conversion to Christianity. Temporal precision brings to light another aspect of the conversion to Christianity: respect for the Sabbath and knowledge of clock and calendar that must have distinguished the first Christians from their unconverted relatives. In daily life few people wear watches and time is usually broadly observed by reference to the time of the day. Apart from religious services, radio programmes and plane schedules are the only domains requiring punctuality. The hospital is clearly the source of the minute timing of death, which is reported on the graves as it gives a solemn and intense character to the inscription.

In discussing traditional equivalents to the European calendar, my friend Romain Batik, from Lamap, (formerly a primary school teacher, minister of education, and *filwoka* (fieldworker) of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre), advanced that a calendar based on the annual cycle of development of yams had existed. Indeed there are still important ceremonies marking the first yam harvest of the year. However these ceremonies today are celebrated at fixed dates, irrespective of the actual development of the plant; this

shows a major difference between the regularity of the imported system and variable traditional time computations. On this I follow M. F. Smith's (1994: 190-224) analysis of the changing meaning of time in a village of Catholic converts in Kairiru Island, Papua New Guinea. According to Smith (*ibid*: 195), the Kairiru islanders have partially adopted European time, although they are still confused about the difference between moons and months, and sometimes women in particular are very approximate in their evaluation of clock time. The precision of European time is greatly admired by the Kairiru people as they associate it with efficiency and economic superiority, and hence some kind of moral superiority (*ibid*: 7, 215ff, *passim*).

The inscription on the grave of Farun's last convert exemplifies the general rehabilitation of traditions that took place after the near total conversion of the country. It expresses a new valuation of pagan virtues reflecting the pride of Farun people, who are generally less educated but include among them several experts in customary knowledge. The inscription is also remarkable for the precise date of conversion, 10/3/1991.

Name: Vimburtong

He was born in the year 1939. He was a heathen man but he married and had two children. Later he heard God's summon to come join the community of Christ in the month of March, 10, 1991. It made him a man who helped many people when they were ill [by his knowledge] of native medicine. He died on the 3rd of November 1997. This stone was made by his relatives on the 26th August 1998. (translated)

The Christian refoundation of the society around the nuclear family also appears in Teilhet-Fisk's (1990: 224ff) stylistic study of modern Tongan graves, whereas other funerary arts such as mourning dress and funerary gifts still reflect traditional rank distinctions. The use of imported materials also transforms graves in permanent

monuments, whereas traditional commoners' graves made of sand and stones would disappear in a few years if they ceased to be redecorated. Concrete in particular can be considered ugly in Tonga but is increasingly adopted as sign of modernity and wealth as well as for its ease of maintenance (237f). Similarly, in contemporary South Malakula, funeral ceremonies, inscriptions and grave decorations reflect the Christian re-foundation of society based on the family and community instead of the former grade hierarchies. But the emotive appeal to family values is itself based on the traditional kinship system. (In fact it could be said that a lot of what appears traditional is a Christian revolution whereas obvious Christian imports fulfil functions similar to abandoned customs.)

6 Rebuilt graves

As the conversion of pagans ceased to be an issue and Christianity became as much part of Malakula as Malakula was part of the Christian world, pride in pagan traditions and pagan achievements began to be expressed, particularly on the rebuilt graves of early converts.⁸¹ Another recent striking development of funerary art is the redecoration of pagan burial sites (fig 39). The rebuilding of graves can have serious implications, as old inscriptions include very limited information that sometimes is no longer legible. The rebuilding of a grave of a long deceased person allows for the extensive rewriting of what is deemed appropriate to be remembered. One such project was blocked in a village because the identification of the grave would have provided proof of continuous occupation of the place and had direct implications in a land dispute.

Two of Oxai's oldest and most populous families are in dispute about graves that would

⁸¹ Woolf (1998:103) describes a similar process in the romanisation of Gaul: 'Funerary sculptures had ceased (...) to be an expression of Roman culture and came instead to reflect a series of local customs with local characteristics and trajectories of development'.

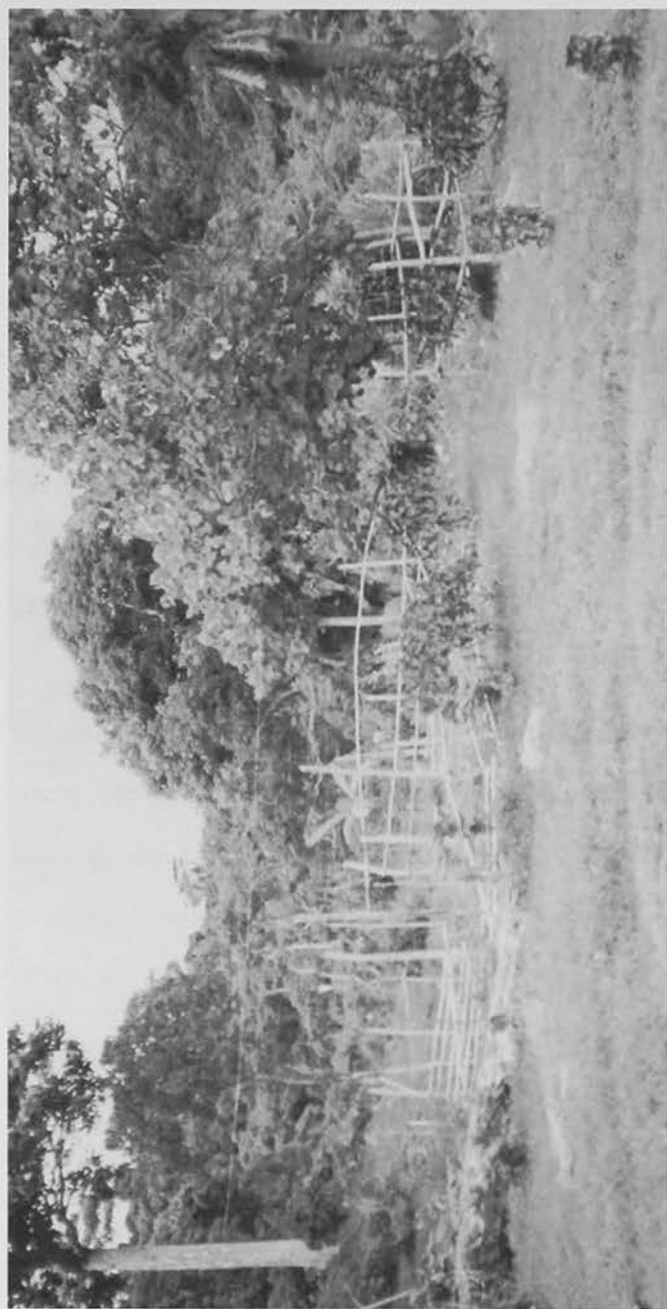


Figure 39
Redesigned pagan graves, Taoran

support their claims as original occupants of the village land. The patriarch of the village, Tomi, claims the whole area of the present village. He says that his own father had been a village elder and was buried not far from the church, near the present house of Tomi's son, John Miller. The family wanted to rebuild the grave in grand style but their plans were opposed by old Benjamin and his family: the stele bore no name but according to Benjamin it was the grave of an old man from a nearby islet that he himself had buried. Benjamin and his brothers oppose part of the claim of Tomi to Oxai, as they claim ownership of the hamlet where they resided. Benjamin's claim relies also in part on the identification of the grave of his grandfather Billy. In the course of my survey of funerary inscriptions in the nearby male cemetery of Marbaxo, it was asked if I had seen the grave of Billy, father of Saphat, founder of Marbaxo. Indeed, many graves were half-buried and difficult to read. In a later conversation Tomi's son, John Miller, contested the identification of Billy's grave, or at least its significance saying 'They lie ... or perhaps it is true but there are other men with him.'

John Miller meant that Billy had lived along other men, whose families are extinct; these men came from various places and needed not have land rights in Marbaxo. The sea slowly erodes their half-forgotten graves, which people would only protect if they could claim them. Graves have prominent historical significance in Oxai because the early population of the village was very unstable. Here is Benjamin's version of the early village history:

The old Billy and his son Saphat adopted Tomi and Jesnari. Later Tomi settled in Axamb and came back to Marbaxo (Oxai) when Saphat paid a wife for him. He only stayed a little while in Oxai before moving to Faru.⁸² He stayed in Faru until 1982 and then joined his son who had already moved to Oxai a few years before.

⁸² Faru was once a large settlement but is now reduced to a hamlet on a swampy islet between Farun and Oxai.

According to Benjamin, Tomi's long absence explains his limited historical knowledge. On the other hand, Benjamin and his brothers did not grow up in Oxai either but rather in Avox where their father Saphat moved after the death of his own father, Billy. While in Avox, Saphat was regularly returning to Oxai to look after his coconut plantations. He resettled when his sons grew up; there were then seven adult men in Oxai, belonging to four families.

Graves are increasingly important in land litigations as markers of long term residence (cf. chapter 6). The example of Oxai shows how much this importance is linked to migrations and depopulation in the first half of the 20th century. Traditionally graves could have served as boundary markers – especially in the interior of the island where the graves of one family can be found over an extended area as people changed the location of their hamlet several times in a lifetime. Depopulation increased mobility, however, as people regrouped to live with surviving relatives. As those people frequently died outside of their territory, graves have become a contentious marker of land rights.

Because of disputes no graves were rebuilt in Oxai, but in Farun and Axamb there were several new monuments erected to the memory of people who had been buried decades earlier in the more modest styles of the time. The first grave rebuilt in Farun is precisely one that can have implications in a land dispute. It is the grave of Jack Sakran, who died in 1932; a relatively early date as the oldest dated graves in my corpus are from 1939. Jack Sakran was the father of Ailengyaw, a senior Farun man.

Jack Sakran – *ambilil* from the Malmev *nasara*; he was living in Heathen when

God called him to join the *skul* in 1923. But he went back to Heathen. But God called him strongly so he came back to *skul* in 1925 until the time of his death in 1932.

Jack Sakran was a Taboo man in *kastom*. He was using his eyes as a weapon to kill things like men, birds and animals. This stone is set as a memorial by/for the grandfather/grandchildren, father, uncles/nephews and the family as well. 19th July 1996. (Translated)

Each part of the inscription presents one of the two aspects of conversion: change of residence as well as religious belief. What is implicit in the first part is that Jack Sakran's original village was very near Farun; he needed only to move up and down one hill when shifting from church to pagan life – as did Tamaki's family, whose history was recounted in the previous chapter. The second part strengthens the image of a man of *kastom* whose extraordinary power is still remembered by his descendants. Lina, Sakran's granddaughter, said that when she and her brothers were small, the anger of their long dead grandfather could make them ill. Another innovation of the above inscription is to mention the rank (*ambli*) that the deceased had attained in the hierarchies. This ambivalence reflects the position of Sakran's son, Ailengyaw, who claims much of the land area around the village on customary grounds and also some religious authority: his father was an original inhabitant of the area, with strong customary powers and also one of the first converts.⁸³

Ailengyaw is also preoccupied with the fast population growth of Farun, which leads more and more people to ask him for land whose commercial value has increased with the exploitation of kava as an export crop (see Introduction). He is not satisfied with the present situation which gives converts and their descendants free access to land.

Ailengyaw attempts to position himself and his family strongly in the church as well as

⁸³ Guiart (n.d.) collected lists of grades throughout South Malakula and shows *ambwil* to be the eighth grade, out of seventeen in Farun.

in *kastom*. He thinks that the prominence of his family as original landowners and as founding members of the Christian community should entitle its members to positions of responsibility in the community. As well as being an elder, Ailengyaw is known as a man of custom who specializes in traditional medicine. His position in *kastom* is strengthened further by the funerary inscription he composed for his father sixty-four years after his death.

Similarly the next inscription shows the aura that can now surround the memory of early converts.

Bonglel Airangsoh

He was born in the Amil (heathen village). He was the last old man of Manurkekei. He had two wives and two children. His teeth fell down, all of them, and new teeth grew again. He saw darkness covering this world in the year 1833. He passed away in the year 1964. The children, the grandchildren, the respected families laid this stone in his memory. Laid on 26th August 1999. (Translated)

This stone was built on the same day (26th August 1999) as the graves of three recent dead discussed in the former section. Exceptionally for a person born a pagan, conversion is not mentioned in this inscription; but if Bonglel never converted then maybe he is not buried here and this stone would be purely a memorial. On the other hand, the extraordinary life span attributed to Bonglel puts him on the same footing as biblical patriarchs. The text also echoes the passage of the gospel describing darkness covering the sky after the death of Christ. We saw that many dates inscribed on the graves of venerable people attribute them ages of about one hundred years. In rebuilt graves the biographies take on biblical proportions. In people's sense of time 1833 is a very remote date, without any meaningful connection, and the inscription could imply that Bonglel was a witness to the death of Christ. On other occasions I have heard old people wondering if the reference in a story about such sudden darkness linked to a

volcanic eruption could not be the same as the one from the gospel. Most elements in the inscription underline the archaic character of Bonglel's personality. Whereas graves of converts normally state that they were born 'in heathen', Bonglel is described as born 'in the Amil (heathen village)', a term which has taken on historical significance. This local word is repeated in Bislama for the benefit of outsiders and younger generations.⁸⁴ *Amil* is never used for Christian villages and the repetition also suggests that Bonglel was born in a functioning village, rather than the dispersed hamlets of the last pagan generation. As the 'the last old man of Manurkekei', Bonglel's stature is that of the final 'accomplished' pagan of the family,⁸⁵ an effect increased by the marvellous loss of his teeth and their new growth.

The inscription on the 'stone' of Bonglel contrasts with that of Vimburtong presented above. Vimburtong was the very last convert. A benevolent old man, he died recently and his funerary inscription qualifies all his 'heathen' qualities in terms of characteristic Christian virtues. 'He was a heathen man but he married ... later he heard the call of God ... and he was the man who helped many men out of disease with native medicine.' The forty years between the death of Bonglel and Vimburtong are enough to put the former in a mythical perspective. The time of Bonglel's death corresponds to the demographic turning point after which the population of the Christian villages began to grow exponentially, whereas the last pagans like Vimburtong lived in growing isolation, with little left of the traditional ritual life.

The celebration of the 'heathen' Bonglel comes at a time in which converts and their

⁸⁴ The word *amil* was also used by Vimbong to speak of his own native village (see chapter 3). Originally though it might have only meant the men's house (Deacon 1934: 24,739).

⁸⁵ The sentence could also mean that he had no direct descendants and that this grave was built at the initiative mostly of his nephews, i.e. his sister's sons who could thereby secure their land claims against possible contests.

children begin to feel that they do not really belong in the coastal villages. For the descendants of Bonglel, this grave is a proud declaration of their origin in the hills, where they own land and where their *kastom* resides. If land pressure and ill will force it, many are contemplating returning some day. The first people to begin to do so are Mansip and his family, because various mining companies prospected their land. On the margins of prospecting operations, some gardens were planted, and old pagan graves were weeded, fenced and decorated with ornamental plants (fig 39). Moving back to the hills, however, would not involve a return to a pagan way of life. Mansip said he would be shy of wearing a penis wrapper in front of his daughter-in-law. People cannot go back to *hiden*, ('heathen') but a revival of *kastom* corresponds to a cultural view of a pagan past seen from a Christian base.

The inscriptions of Sakran and Bonglel were from Farun, a village of mostly recent converts. Those following are from the neighbouring islet of Axamb, whose inhabitants converted earlier and have been more successful in their education and careers. They are written in English instead of Bislama and they do not celebrate customary knowledge but rather the accomplishments of Axamb ancestors in the establishment of Christianity, including in mission work.

The graves of Axamb's first convert, Ailongbel, and that of Jeremiah Bahavus, an elder from the more educated second generation, lie in the middle of a public space opposite the Church. Ailongbel's grave commemorates the conversion of Axamb; Jeremiah's celebrates the progress of the island in Christian values. The contrast with Farun's recent Bislama inscriptions about powerful pagans characterizes Axamb as a place of old Christianity and education. In actual terms this contrast between the two places is not as strong. Farun had its own early indigenous Church leaders who did missionary work

converting the pagans of the interior. Axamb itself is a place where customary knowledge is better preserved than in many other villages.

The timing of the rebuilding of both graves reflects the politics of debates over history.

The new grave of Jeremiah Bahavus dated 15th of January 1995, apparently the first to be rebuilt in any of the villages in the area.

The Memory of Jeremiah Bahavus

Beginning of the Native Teacher -- Training Institute four years at -- TTI, so Jeremiah was his name -- called, he was the first man who -- left his home or land and relative -- for the light of the good news. So -- back to his home, he heard voice -- saying to him, whom shall I send? -- And he answered, here am I Sent -- me. Teaching in other village -- or in his own home about 21 -- years. His time came to end on Monday August -- 21.8.1952
Rebuilt the memory Stone on 15 May 1995.

The religious tone is more personal and the text has evolved into a story. Apparently Jeremiah, who died in 1952 after twenty-one years of service, was born after the conversion of Axamb early in the twentieth century (see chapter 3). Following a dialogue with God, he took the further step of leaving his home to preach.

The grave of Ailongbel was rebuilt on 21 August 1998, the day of the inauguration of a new church carrying his name, as part of the celebrations for the Golden Jubilee of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu.⁸⁶ The militant tone of the inscription reflects disputes over the choice of Ailongbel's name for the church between three groups also involved in a major land dispute regarding their status as migrants or indigenous landowners (see chapter 1). The debate reflected the original divisions of the island at the time of the introduction of Christianity (see chapter 3). The descendants of the first converts

⁸⁶ The Presbyterian mission is more than a century old, but the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu was established as an independent body in 1948.

supported those of Ailongbel in imposing his name and the recognition of his historical importance, against the descendants of those who resisted conversion at first. As well as their own victory, the rebuilding of the grave on the day of the inauguration of the church allowed the descendants to express in their own terms the glory and autonomy of Christian Axamb. By choosing a name of their own the Axamb people showed their appropriation of Christianity, even eclipsing the role of the white missionaries and presenting the people of the island as having converted themselves.

And the light shines in the -- Darkness and the darkness' -- did not comprehend -
- it -- John-1-5

Hailongbel David -- Born on this island. Taken as -- a sugarcane slave to --
Queensland for two years -- returned from Queensland -- to begin his Christian
educa -- tion at Aulua Mission Scho -- ol for four years.
He was the first man who -- sharpen the dark age with -- Christianity we rebuild
the -- memorial stone on 21st os -- 98 to mark the opening of -- This new
Church Building -- Named after him.

The preliminary quotation refers to the conversion process as a victory of light and darkness, which is also that of Ailongbel and of his descendants. On earlier graves, conversion was interpreted as God's calling and biblical quotations were of a more general application (e.g. 'let little children come unto me'). As a victory statement, the inscriptions includes elements of the biography of Ailongbel answering arguments that were voiced in the Church debate against the choice of his name. No other grave inscription begins by stating 'born on this island'. Indeed the island of birth is only mentioned when it was not Malakula. But Ailongbel's descendants are keen to stress their link to the island in view of the dispute regarding their status as migrants or landowners. Similarly, the choice of Ailongbel's name was opposed on the grounds of his limited education relative to Christians of the second and third generations, who learned English and spent time in other islands and, in some cases, Australia. The

answer inscribed in concrete was that Ailongbel did attend the mission school in Aulua, further north on the east coast of Malakula.

The other two sentences of the biography outline the epic of Ailongbel, 'taken as a sugarcane slave to Queensland', 'the first man to sharpen the dark age with Christianity'. These are the high points in life that follows a clear plot line:

- Birth on Axamb
- Taken away as slave
- Returns to complete his education
- Brings Christianity to Axamb/triumph of light over darkness

The elements of this narrative show the influence of Western and biblical stories.

Ancient tales and legends from the area on the other hand generally follow a much darker line, the hero often dying a victim of his jealous brothers.⁸⁷ There is an alternative darker ending to the story of Ailongbel, but perhaps not one fit for a Christian monument – we saw in chapter three that Ailongbel may have paid for his success in converting the island when he was successfully poisoned.

The new graves of Jeremiah and Ailongbel both make claims about the prestige of each man being the first to accomplish great things for Christianity. Their memorable deeds support the prestige of their descendants vis-à-vis other Axamb families, and recall the leading role of the island as a whole in the conversion of South Malakula. This new role of graves is made possible by the ever-growing fluency in writing, which leads to the

⁸⁷ There are some well known stories and popular raconteurs but there is not much concern for tales and legends in South Malakula, and they are complemented by variations on European fairy tales. The major work on tales in Melanesia, LeRoy's *Fabricated World* (1985) has a rigid formalist approach to the symbolism episodes. It also mistakenly emphasize the conservatism of tales ('their past is timeless and repeatable; it continues into the present' – *ibid.*: 25). This contrasts with my recordings of adapted western tales and with Wagner's (1978: 12) observation of the decreasing relevance of traditional tales. The most promising approach is Gow's (2001) analysis of the changing relevance of myths and other narratives.

development of epigraphy as a literary style.

Not all rebuilt graves necessarily have political significance. In 1998, two years after the rebuilding of the memorial to Jack Sakran, the grandchildren of Leitang made an affectionate new inscription for her grave.

This woman was called Leitang. She was born in heathen and came to school and she married. She had three children. She lived until 16th January 1955, when she died. This stone is a memorial of her, which her grandchildren built on Wednesday 19th August 1998.

Generally women's graves play a lesser role in making claims for history. The inscription's simple themes remain the same but the tone of the inscription is closer to a fluid oral style.

7 Conclusion

The building of tombstones represented a rupture with the pagan world and its way of life. One of the signs of this rupture was the approximate King James English of the inscriptions, a language that was never spoken. So was the enthusiastic use of calendar dates and clock time. There were no names in the local languages for hours of the day, days of the week, months and years. Gosden (1994: 189) suggested that the time-scale of daily life changes slowly over the long term due to its unconscious nature; on the contrary the public time of groups could change much faster. The evidence from graves of South Malakula shows that the fascination with European time was originally a religious concern. The abstention from work on Sunday, however makes that day the focus of the whole Christian week. Thus Saturdays and Mondays have to be reserved for food collecting, restricting the number of days available for clearing, cash cropping,

and community work (the last usually done on Tuesdays).⁸⁸ The public time created by religion had an immediate revolutionary and conscious effect on the daily life of converts and their descendants. Religion today also makes strict demands on people's awareness of clock time, especially punctuality in attending weekly and daily church services.⁸⁹ Technology has added a new demand for punctuality; airplane schedules and radio programmes, which are met by interested people. Otherwise most economic and non-religious activities continue to be organized around flexible schedules. Because these demands were part of the distinction between pagans and converts, they could explain the fascination with precise computation of time shown by many inscriptions. Dates of birth have now become so familiar that they are indicated even for people born before the adoption of the calendar. The attribution of very remote birth dates to these ancestors contributes to give them an epic dimension, putting their customary roots on the same level as Bible history. The various festivals, Christmas, Easter, etc. completed by a series of national celebrations are also connected to occasional millenarian worries.

Tombstones have become part of the local cultures, along with other Christian institutions. Different styles have emerged that reflect diverging visions of history, as the historical benchmark of conversion to Christianity is spread over more than a century and varies for each village and family. In agreement with Goody's (1977: 80) thesis one of the first applications of literacy was the drawing of lists, not of tax returns as in Mesopotamia, but of relatives and personal distinctions. Recently, fluency in writing English allowed some people to express in the biography of their dead a feeling

⁸⁸ This is made even clearer by the tensions created by the conversion of some villagers to Adventism, which advocates a Saturday Sabbath, so that they rest when others are most busy and must work when the dominant church would like to see the village in standstill. Resting on a different day, Adventists perpetuate the quest for control of time that marked the original phase of conversion (cf Knauf 2002:164). However, such tensions are not reflected by graves of Adventist persons, such as Bula Alick, or only as far as they are located in hamlets distinct from the Presbyterian villages.

⁸⁹ Protestants and Catholics alike have adopted for this reason a system of three rounds of bell ringing before service or Mass, to wash, to get on one's way and to enter the church.

of total assimilation of Christianity. Alternatively, Bislama texts now express people's confidence in both the customary and Christian base of their culture, in parallel with the revaluation of the pre-Christian past as *kastom* (see Introduction). The graves of women and children emphasize Christian values of community and domesticity, whereas the graves of prestigious men celebrate their careers as did the *rambaramb* of pre-Christian times.

The continuing practice of a cycle of ceremonies after death and the original burial, culminating in the building of the grave or its reconstruction decades later, links new institutions to the pagan past. Like past funerary sculptures and megalithic monuments, these tombstones confer ancestral status to the founders of the Christian communities. Christianity is not much more than a hundred years old in South Malakula and concrete graves cover an even smaller period, which means that many of the changes in the graves' style and function happened during the lifetime of the first converts. The time scale is even smaller if one considers the gradual progress of conversion. By the time of the narration of Apwil Naandu's glorious funeral to Deacon, there were already some well-established Christian communities. By contrast the first Christians must have had rather spartan funerals with temporary decorations on their graves, as is still the case today before concrete graves are built (fig 36 shows a recent temporary burial decoration in front of the older concrete graves). This new art form is not without historical parallels: tombstones are called 'stones', like the stones erected by the pagans, often celebrating the glory of prestigious men, as the ancient effigies did. It can be suggested that the use of concrete, beyond the imitation of European models, provided the converts with monuments at least as durable as those of the high ranked men – concrete standing for skulls. The increasing cost of materials and food requested for grave building ceremonies further strengthens the parallel with ceremonies of old, as

they become major ritual and social events that may need to be delayed for months if not years.

Both the ancient and the new type of funerary cycles can be analyzed in the terms of Hertz's (1928) famous study on the collective representation of death. Contemporary rituals allow for the expression of the solidarity of a group of relatives and fellow parishioners. According to Hertz (*ibid*: 70) as well, the main function of secondary or delayed burial was to transform the corpse into something permanent and the deceased into an ancestor. This can be said quite straightforwardly of the *rambaramb* but also of the more recent tombstones. Indeed Humphries (1981: 268ff), developing Hertz's ideas, suggested that the transformation of living persons into something permanent can be enacted through immaterial concepts and monuments as well as material remains. Hertz (*ibid*: 80) actually considered that the erection of monuments and tombstones could be an attenuated form of secondary burial. His study was motivated by the discovery of the importance of secondary burials throughout the Austronesian linguistic area. The development of a Christian funerary art in Malakula seems to be related to this age-old tradition, as are the other examples taken from ethnographies of Austronesian speaking people. Indeed, Astuti's and Teilhet-Fisk's studies describe stages in the construction of permanent funerary monuments spread over at least a year, or even more than fifteen years (Astuti 1995: 139). In each case these long delays are in part explained by the cost of the material and of other ceremonial expenses (Astuti 1995: 127; Teilhet-Fisk 1990: 237). The last ceremony of the Vezo funerary cycle centres around the erection of concrete crosses on which standard French sentences are written along with the name and dates of birth and death of the deceased (Astuti 1995: 135ff). An important aspect of the symbolism of these crosses is their anthropomorphism; their size should be proportional to the age and status of the deceased (*ibid*: 137). For children to see their

mother's cross, ornate with breasts, is like seeing her (140, 149). For the Vezo, as for the people of South Malakula, the concrete monuments are somehow equivalent to former anthropomorphic monuments.

The role played by funerals and graves in transforming the dead into ancestors, allows for the expression of kin relationships, and of the solidarity of groups with common moral and political interests (cf. Bloch 1971: 122f; 1981). South Malakulan graves allow for the close family's demonstration of shared sorrow, as well as supporting land claims and expressing the pride of a whole community. As such the graves reflect current issues through the biographies of the dead. There is of course a certain time lag between the most recent inscriptions and present political conditions. Funerary inscriptions as yet make no references to the politics of modern Vanuatu as its actors are still alive.⁹⁰ Recent inscriptions complete the evolution of the narrative style of historiography in South Malakula. The importance of recorded dates in the lives of early Christians is strengthened with the record of the career of later Church men. The grave of Ailongbel shows how this style is now used to rewrite the biographies of the most important converts. The new style does not easily allow an emphasis on pre-Christian elements, as for the inscriptions of Jack Sakran and Bonglel. A main obstacle is that precise dates are not known. Dates that appear to us incredibly remote reset pagan figures in the mythical time of biblical events. Pagan lives cannot be expressed either in terms of datable careers and these inscriptions refer rather to their virtues or to anecdotes ('his teeth fell down and new teeth grew again').⁹¹

⁹⁰ In 1999, the first Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Father Walter Lini, died and his funeral was the occasion of several events, linked to his numerous achievements in politics, religion and the customary titles conferred to him by the people of his island, Pentecost.

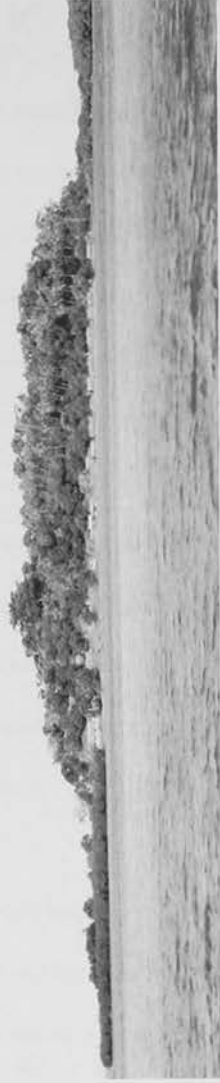
⁹¹ Momigliano showed in his paper on pagan and Christian historiography (1977: 116ff) that the new genre of historiography involved a growing reliance on documents as factual evidence of persecution. The new model of saints' lives proved difficult to apply to the biography of emperors, that remained indebted to pagan models.

Parallels between Malakulan funerary inscriptions and those of the Wampar area of Papua New Guinea are particularly interesting. Indeed, in both areas the earliest inscriptions date from the 1930s or 1940s, and focus on lists of relatives (Fischer 2002: 57ff) and precise dates and times of death and burial (ibid: 45ff). From the 1970s inscriptions show a growing interest in life histories, beginning with those of church leaders (92ff) Throughout the 1990s (104ff), inscriptions evolved into biographies and became closer to oral narratives. The importance of graves derives from the synthesis of traditional and Christian interests. The concrete monuments are like stones; narratives written on the monuments echo oral narratives, but honour women and children alongside prestigious men. Writing on graves gives these narratives a triple advantage: the material permanence of stone/concrete, the authority of written text, and the religious consecration of the burial ceremony. This powerful conjunction changes the status of narratives and creates a problem with the recognition of truth. We saw in other chapters how various contradictory histories are transmitted within distinct families. These conflicting histories only become public at the occasion of disputes and are otherwise transmitted in private circumstances. Graves radically change this balance, as their stability and publicity, as well as the collective dimension of their realization, make concrete evidence of the history written on them. Beyond the commemoration of an individual for the benefit of the family, funerary inscriptions can celebrate the achievements or the prestige of the whole community through the dead individual. Conversely writing can reinforce a sense of private ownership of words (Ong 1982:131). Ong (1982:81) notices the paradoxical inherent association, from Plato to modern authors, of writing and death. A written text is like a dead word that can be 'resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers'. The people of South Malakula seem to have come to the same conclusion as

Ong when they make graves a favourite support of writing. The history of the dead can be resurrected for an unlimited number of times. Malakulan graves also seem to fit very well within the category of *lieux de mémoire* developed by the French historian Pierre Nora (1984-1992). The impressive series of essays he edited is built around that concept that applies to buildings as well as symbols such as the Gallic cock, famous books, individuals, institutions, public commemorations and so on. For Nora it is a characteristic of modern societies that the memory of the past is mediated through these representations; he thinks that in pre-modern societies there is no such mediation and the past is alive in the present. Somewhat like Ong's conception of texts as dead words that can be indefinitely resurrected, *lieux de mémoire* for Nora are between life and death 'like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded' (quoted in Jackson 2002). South Malakulan graves, as representations, would then show the modernization of the relation of people to history, encapsulating and mediating memories of the past.

Chapter 6

Figure 41 Avox



Chapter 6 The Judge and the Historians

Art.72: The rules of custom shall form the basis of ownership and use of land in the Republic. (Constitution of Vanuatu 1980)

The so-called 'Archaeology' – the opening chapters of the work of Thucydides – assumes a new importance as linear reconstruction of the past on the basis of clues. (Momigliano 1966: 219)

1 Introduction

Within a few days of my arrival in Malakula, in August 1997, the elders of the village of Pelongk in the Maskelynes took me with them for the opening of a new church on the mainland. A part of the population of the nearby islet of Avox had resettled on a plantation located on a plateau above the muddy straits that separate Avox from the main island. The opening of the church celebrated the foundation of the new village. People spoke about the spaciousness of the new place (fig 40), contrasting with the crowded village on Avox (fig 41), and the convenience of living near one's gardens and plantations and the relief of not having to load copra and food on canoes. The new village had a number of competing names: Raniemb (red ground), Landung (as the landing place for canoes going to the mainland) and Paradise – the latter reportedly set by Jimmy Anson, a touring community healer and witch-hunter (see chapter 4) who had a role in the creation of the settlement.

The party was a success: people were happy, the hosts were generous, food abundant. Many events took place, typical of public celebrations in Presbyterian villages: the sacrifice of a pig, the erection of a stone, a performance by the local string band and a dance led by the elders on 'salvation' songs (cf. chapter 3) (figs 42-45). It took me more than a year though to understand the meaning of the central item of the ceremony: a play relating the circumstances of the foundation of the village (fig 46). The play

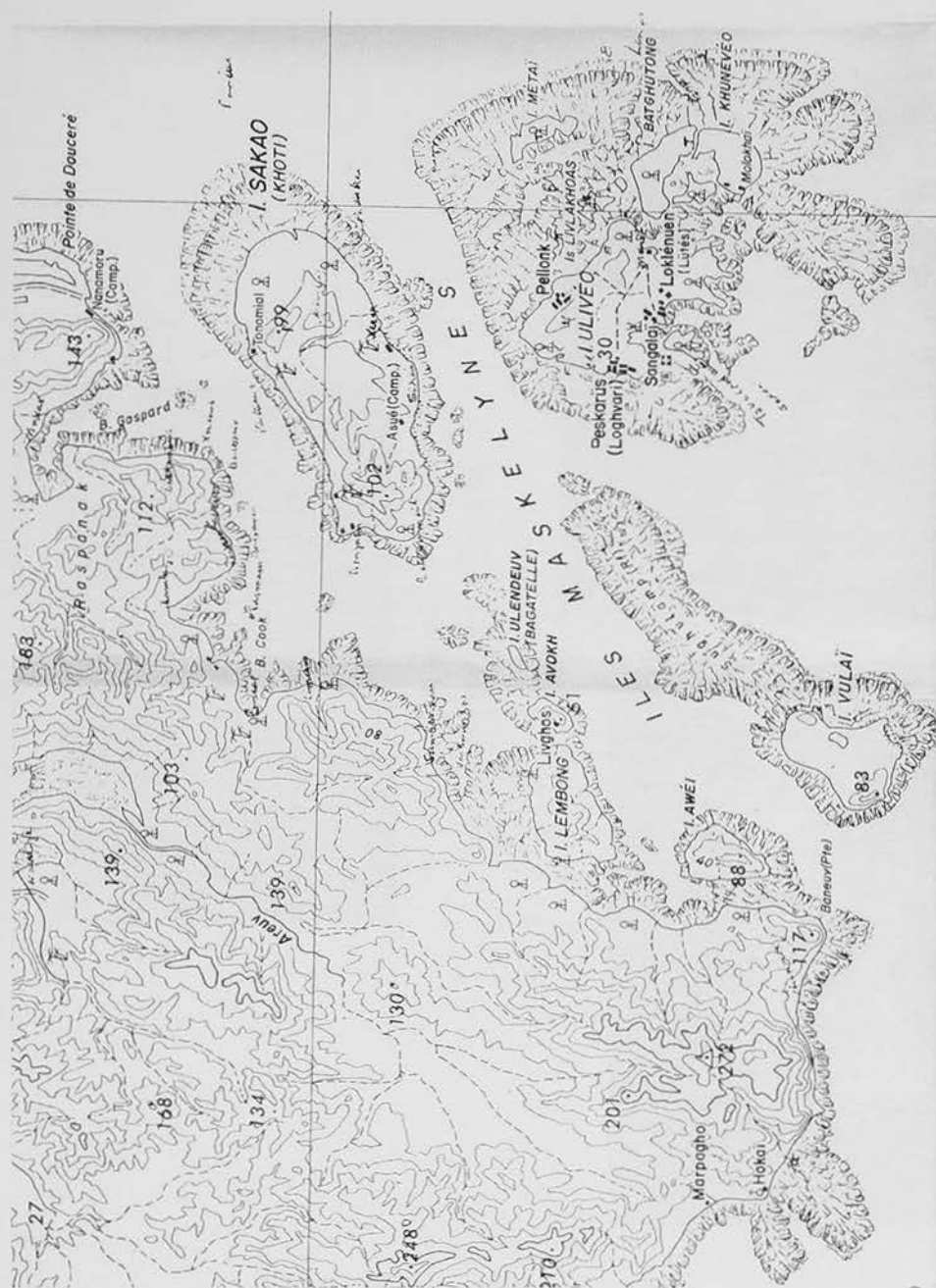
consisted of several scenes, beginning with a dispute between young people and ending with the quest for a new land by Elder Philip, equipped with a walking stick and curving his back under the burden of the divisions of the community. Eventually God led him to the new settlement, allowing for the establishment of peaceful relationships between the various groups. The event was celebrated by Salvation songs and dances by the elders in their Sunday's best, later joined by the remaining participants.

This ceremony was the epilogue of a dispute begun four years earlier and processed in record time through local courts, leading to a successful appeal to the Malakula Island Court. At the time of my fieldwork, it remained the only land dispute ever heard by an official court in South Malakula and the only one to be followed by a resettlement of part of the community, although this was explicitly not the wish of the magistrate. Other cases tended not to be concluded and to be circulated between various chiefly courts or to be put on hold in the illusory expectation of a forthcoming Island Court hearing.⁹² Given the wider range of court settings and the fast development at all stages of the dispute, the Avox case can serve as a base for discussion of the role of history in courts and the application of rules of evidence to local history. The analysis will show the limits of the approach of the Island Court, which is often similar to the model of case study familiar to legal anthropologists, although legal and academic research have different advantages and disadvantages.

1.1 Bakatel

Avox is one of the smallest inhabited islets surrounding Malakula (map 6); it is formed by one steep hill overlooking the village located on a narrow strip of level land on the

⁹² Only 14 cases of land disputes have been heard throughout the period of activity of the Malakula Island Court, out of a total of at least 81 claims which the clerk has filed. There are 18 files dating back from 1984, the first year of activity of the court, of which only 2 were heard.



Map 6
Avox and the Maskelynes



Figure 40

A courtyard in the village of Raniemb



Figure 44

Elders singing and dancing 'Salvation'



Figure 46

Elder Philip enacting the search for a new land



Figure 42

Raniemb's chief clubs a pig near the stone



Figure 43

Women's choir in front of the church



Figure 45

String band

eastern shore (fig 41). The steep slopes of the hill used to be cultivated but are now found too inconvenient, like the old location of the village on top of the hill, which required huge efforts to bring up food and other commodities. The small size of their home island is not a major problem for Avox residents, except for scarce building space, since they have ample access to some of the richest and most varied soils on neighbouring islets and on the mainland. Plantation resources, food crops and seafood, complemented by occasional game are generally more abundant than in nearby communities. Avox people even resent visits from relatives from Maskelyne who have less land and must occasionally be supported by gifts of food. The islet is very near the main island which can be reached on foot at low tide via a larger islet commonly called 'Avox number 2', on which a school is located from lack of space in Avox itself. The people of Avox speak a language closely related to the languages of Maskelyne and Oxai, although some people claim that their ancestors spoke different dialects, now extinct, on other islets and on the mainland. Towards the ocean lays the islet of Bakatel (Bagatelle), tiny as its name indicates but once the residence of a minor European trader (fig 47).

Bakatel is at the origin of the dispute that split Avox people apart. It is just large enough to attract the attention of Europeans: the trader could not have had much of a plantation there, but could do business with the Avox people; it has a certain charm as a deserted island situated next to a picturesque fishing village. Now a European developer wants to build tourist bungalows or perhaps even a casino on the islet.

The dispute exploded when this developer approached the villagers in the early 1990s. The prospect of a long-term lease and monetary return set people into irreconcilable positions, whereas due to the small size of the place they might otherwise have left the

dispute dormant for many years. One set of claimants, the family of Elder Tiosa Esron, or Barigne, claimed to be the descendants of the people who transferred their rights to those who eventually sold Bakatel for the first time. They also exploited the plantation after the trader had left. They were opposed by the Barbaxul (or Jesiah family as it was described in the court case) who denied Barigne's rights to Bakatel and to any land in Avox – asserting that Barigne are migrants from the main island (cf. chapters 1 and 2 for the themes of origin and migration). The population of Avox was divided and the local chiefs too closely identified with one or other party, so the dispute was brought to a higher local court in Maskelyne, which judged in favour of the status quo. Then Barbaxul appealed to the official Malakula Island Court.

Throughout Vanuatu many small islands that had acted as refuge during the times of depopulation (see Introduction and chapter 2) and as centres of conversion (chapter 4) have now lower population growth rates than larger islands, sometimes even negative ones (cf. National Statistics Office 2000). Like conversion and earlier migrations, the progressive abandonment of the refuge areas is a major event in the history of Vanuatu, affecting at various paces the whole country. In some islands migration is progressive, occasionally oriented mostly towards the towns – especially when there is no nearby greater island to migrate to – elsewhere communities split as a result of religious divisions. In Avox the events of the 1990s culminating in the land dispute and its aftermath led to at least a third of a population moving to the neighbouring mainland. The rise of land disputes is another fundamental event affecting people's daily life. It is inseparable from the demographic history of the country as well as from the process of colonial land alienation and its undoing after independence (see Introduction). This undoing led to the sole recognition of customary ownership of land in the rural areas of the country (cf. Van Trease 1987: 235ff; Lini 1980; Sope 1974), a legal issue linked to



Figure 47
Bagatelle and Avox



Figure 48
Barigne's map

the revaluation of *kastom* supported by indigenous politicians and church leaders. Often the same principle asserted against the planters was opposed to relatives who had been allowed to settle on the land. The land of extinct families caused other problems as it had often been occupied by unrelated people when the ownership status was not a matter of much concern. To fill these gaps, extensive claims were advanced by maternal relatives of the extinct families, sometimes at several generations' distance; occasionally these lateral genealogies can go a few generations beyond the direct ancestors. The research as to which families had the strongest claims led to many meetings all along the coast. Contemporary disputes are the occasion for the public voicing of rival histories otherwise transmitted within each family (cf. chapters 1 and 2) but they also bring about new approaches to history focusing on determining genuine land owners from migrants.

The material for this chapter is primarily based on the analysis of the text of the court decision and interviews with the claimants and their neighbours, complemented by material they had prepared for the court case. I also met and interviewed the magistrate and the Island Court clerk while doing archival work in the court houses in Malakula and Santo. In Avox I was staying with Jaitok Zetkiah who was a witness for the defendants who lost the case. The main representative of the defendants, Elder Tiosa Esron, was Jaitok's neighbour and as a result I had perhaps better access to the defendants point of view, having frequent meals and drinking sessions with them and accompanying them to their gardens. However, the two main representatives of the plaintiff family, chief Nakel and Morsen Joses, received me warmly for a couple of long afternoon sessions, as did people from other families in the islets and in the new village on the mainland.

In the following pages, I will first present the chronological development of the dispute and analyse the judgment of the Island Court. Then I will compare the historical principles according to which ownership is debated in South Malakula with the methods employed by the courts and the spread of regional and national ideas about true principles of ownership. One aspect of this process is the introduction of Bislama concepts replacing vernacular words. The most important of these concepts is *nasara*, a Bislama word of vernacular origin that was widely adopted after independence, as it filled a conceptual gap (see Introduction). The introduction of new concepts reflects the changing reality of people's lives and allows them to project contemporary ideas in the past, often erasing differences between past and present (cf. Gow 2001, Ernst 1999). The choice of a set of principles to test the true ownership of land reflect a particular vision of history and can be used by local historians to deduce events not recorded in oral traditions. This new deductive history can support larger land claims and lead to the resettlement of abandoned areas. We will see how the positions of the participants in the disputes cover a series of assumptions about the nature of history and the relation of people to their place. These are played out with various degrees of success in official and unofficial courts whose respective experiences supported different visions of the past.

1.2 The hierarchy of courts

Although until 2001 local courts have no formal legal recognition, a prominent discourse in the country has long been calling for the 'chiefs' to solve 'grass-root' problems (see Introduction).⁹³ The Island Court as well, faced with an exponentially increasing backlog of land disputes cases, encouraged a popular conception of a

⁹³ Such opinions were often expressed by politicians and the media during my stay in the country in 1997-99. These ideas are also expressed in various publications (e.g. Tepahae 1997 and W. Rodman 1985).

hierarchy of courts to which one could appeal successively, from village or family courts to the Supreme Court via unofficial regional courts and the Island Court.⁹⁴ The Island Court Act of 1983 establishes the Island Courts as courts of first instance. Apart from pragmatic reasons, the encouragement of local courts is justified by the idea that problems are best solved by those who know them at first hand. So a dispute within a family should be first presented to the family chief, disputes between opposing members of different families to a local elder or a village chief and more complex disputes should go to regional courts first. These levels also function as successive appeal courts from which parties can proceed to appeal to the Island Court. Another important aspect of the system, however, conflicts with the idea that proximity is an advantage in settling a dispute. The lack of legal recognition of local courts contradicts the celebration of the virtues of chiefs as problem solvers. In fact, the practice of the official courts is based on the opposite idea that chiefs are too closely related to the parties in dispute. From this perspective, the higher one goes into successive appeals, the less familiar a court panel would be with the case, with the Supreme Court being in theory free of local connection, especially since it has been most often chaired by an expatriate judge. Those with the most immediate expertise of local custom, on the other hand, are potentially suspect of pursuing their own interests in adjudicating or giving evidence.

The Island Courts are chaired by *ni-Vanuatu* magistrates, usually from another island and not normally related to the parties in dispute. The magistrates are assisted by local Justices, commonly called 'chiefs', chosen for each session of the court by the court's

⁹⁴ The clerk of the Malakula Island Court in Lakatoro told me he always checked with land claimants whether their case had already been judged by the chiefs. This appears also from a letter he wrote to the Barbaxul family in the aftermath of the Avox dispute (see below).

clerk out of a list of presidential appointees.⁹⁵ Mr Kollen Nicholas, then clerk of the Malakula Island Court, explained that choosing Justices for the hearing of a land case was a delicate task, as they should know the relevant custom but not be acquainted to the parties in dispute. As we will see, this principle of selection contributes to regional and national processes of harmonisation of traditions, because it leads to a shift from direct knowledge of the background of cases to the recognition of a set of principles used to validate or deduct history. It is also true that the institution of chieftainship is independent of customary and historical expertise. The colonial authorities required the villages to designate chiefs who would act as intermediaries between the community and the government; as such, it was more important for them to know pidgin English and to have experience of the wider world than to know the old ways. There is a contradiction between the idea that chiefs tend to be the guardians of custom and the selection process of most chiefs by election and sometimes by rotation.⁹⁶ Today, most men in South Malakula consider the work of chief as unpaid community work that should be taken in turn by all able-minded men in the village. Nevertheless, the function is endowed with a mystique derived from the institution in the places where it is traditional and continually projected on a national level by the radio and the official discourse of successive governments. This leads some men to volunteer more often than others following the preference of the community or by personal vanity; those tend also to take on the role of area court chiefs. The role of the people knowledgeable about history and customs is thus not so much to adjudicate disputes, which is the role of chiefs, but to provide evidence as witnesses. The chiefs have a general knowledge of the background of a dispute and of the recent history of the families in their own area. They

⁹⁵ The justices are appointed for life but there are apparently no clear rules regarding the selection process other than the appointment of representatives from all the major areas of each island.

⁹⁶ Willy Bongmatur, the long serving chairman of Malvatumauri, the National Council of Chiefs, was originally elected as a leader of Presbyterian and Anglophile communities against the French-supported high ranked pagans (Bolton 1999). Since then he has been actively engaged in the strengthening of his customary credentials, killing pigs and asserting rights to paraphernalia (Geismar n.d.).

do however accumulate more detailed knowledge by hearing land cases, as do the magistrates and Island Court Justices, thus creating a new type of historical knowledge beyond the transmission of history across successive generations of a single family (see chapters 1 and 2). The experience drawn from these cases necessarily leads to the recognition of common patterns of history and claims in neighbouring areas, although some magistrates are very careful while extrapolating from one case to another. People's understanding of history is influenced by the expectations of the courts (cf. Weiner 1995, 1997): the process contributes to a shift from intrinsic knowledge to sets of principles as the reference point for courts' decisions in land cases. There are, however, important dispositions ensuring that the courts reach a better understanding of each dispute: land cases must be heard in the original community and include visits to all the relevant places; the courts use Bislama which allows for the direct hearing of evidence without the mediation of interpreters. Their decisions are also mostly written in that language, directly accessible to the parties. The use of the local languages or the official languages of the courts (English and French) would require two interpreters, one from the local language to Bislama and another from Bislama to the European language. The absence of the local languages in the courts and the use of Bislama helps create a common customary legalese which is based on vernacular words originating from vernacular languages elsewhere in Vanuatu and is being adopted from Bislama into the vernacular languages of Malakula (see below).

1.3 Land disputes and anthropology

'every dispute seemed to raise new questions, reveal new insights, provide more stories'
(Just 2001:17).

There is a long tradition of case studies in the field of anthropology of law, dating back at least to Llewellyn and Hoebel (1941) and Gluckman (1955). This tradition is based

on a fieldwork oriented approach to law, attempting to deduce rules from practice. Sometimes it is justified by the assumption that the reverse process happens in the mind of people who go to court: 'it is with the possibility of litigation in mind that the law user thinks and acts' (Fallers 1969: 34). Reviewing the tradition, Peter Just (2001: 14, 17ff) finds that cases are not only the foundation of law but that beyond law they provide an excellent approach to culture because they reflect people's understanding of the world as well as tensions emerging from social changes. Thus, case studies of disputes are given a Durkheimian and Geertzian twist: 'it is in disputing, as much as in ritual that representations are made collective' (ibid: 18). Because his corpus of cases consists mostly of disputes about betrothal, Just (ibid: 161-234) understands culture and law as consisting essentially of sets of relationships between individuals. He approaches culture and social change from the point of view of the relationship between young people and their families, particularly the degree to which changes allow young people to challenge the arrangements of their elders. On the contrary, this chapter's focus on land disputes reveals other aspects of culture and of the tensions brought by social change. Such disputes throw more light on representations of history, particularly the history that is transmitted within families.

A reproach that could be addressed to all case studies of disputes including this chapter is that they favour conflict situations. An example of this is Koch's (1974) legal ethnography of Jalémó in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, which focuses exclusively on conflict among relatives, among neighbours and among strangers. To a certain extent, chapter 1 and this chapter attempt to overcome that limitation by going beyond a single dispute case and showing the interconnections between various families' claims that would never emerge simultaneously in any single dispute. Rather than suggesting the omnipresence of conflict I wish to show the potentiality of conflicts

in the long term, resulting from the ancient cohabitation of families keeping their own traditions. Anthropologists of law, here again in parallel to the practice of the courts, most often focus on the smaller land disputes that form the majority of cases. Disputes about limits or the ownership of particular trees arise annually when new gardens and plantations are prepared, and can more easily be resolved, unless they are only the façade of deeper disputes. Daily disputes can be the base for a general ethnography, covering marriage, property cases and the tensions arising when rules are not abided (e.g. Gluckman 1955, Fallers 1969, Nader 1990). Some of these authors develop the tradition of the extended case study, which following Turner (1967: 113ff) should go beyond the case itself to include ecological and demographic factors as well as the history of various groups, their divisions and their migrations. However, legal anthropologists miss another lesson from Turner – that disputes can hide more complex issues which may not appear if one interviews only the parties and the judges. This is even more true of a large land dispute such as the Avox case in which the stakes included the whole history, residence rights and means of livelihood of the entire village. Turner himself was committed to analogic interpretations – witchcraft reflecting struggle for land, for example. In this chapter instead of presenting a general ethnography, or interpreting land disputes as a symptom of another issue, the multiple facets of the case are considered through the evolving relationships between parties and witnesses. The method followed by the magistrate brought forth much valuable information, but he lacked the general perspective that a systematic enquiry would have given him. Thus, the court could not understand the relationship between the defendants and the witnesses and did not see that the formulation of the case was hiding a much more divisive dispute within Barbaxul.

2 The case

In an annex to the Island Court's decision to Avox and Bakatel is attached a document from the Maskelyne Council of Chiefs, dated from 16.9.91. Typically for such records, it is a very short document, which does not reflect the amount and variety of evidence submitted in the depositions and in the following debate.⁹⁷ Indeed, the only information about the context of the dispute summarised in that document concerns the genealogies of the two families involved. These two genealogies look comparable in width and length, which supports the decision of the council in favour of the status quo, perceived as a victory for the family who were presently harvesting coconuts on the islet of Bakatel. The decision had also wider implications because it rejected the claim by one family, Barbaxul, to be the only customary owners of Avox. This claim was based on knowledge that only Barbaxul people knew; it contradicted the general assumptions of the chiefs. Indeed, we saw that the chiefs are not selected for their competence in arcane historical knowledge but represent fairly well the average honest male community members; in accordance their judgments follow what seems more reasonable to them.⁹⁸ In the Avox case, the Barbaxul claim went against the general assumption in the area that the families involved were all native landowners. The Maskelyne chiefs were also related to Avox people and would clearly not like to deprive some of their relatives of their access to land. The direct interest of some of the Maskelyne people might also have been affected as many of them must rely on the more abundant supplies of their Avox relatives in years of drought. These reasons would make it very difficult for a court primarily interested in restoring community consensus to recognise a radical claim like that of Barbaxul.

⁹⁷ Knauf in his research on police files in Nomad, located in a remote area of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea, similarly found that the author of the files knew much more about the cases than he managed to write down (2002).

⁹⁸ So one of the chiefs who heard the Avox case was a man who must have been in his early twenties in 1991. Still, eight years later he disapproved of the Island Court for having reversed the decision of the chiefly court of which he had been a member.

The Barbaxul family appealed to the Island Court in 1992, a few months after the judgment of the Maskelyne Council of Chiefs. They were not the first in South Malakula to bring a land dispute to the official justice system, but their case would be the first to proceed until a hearing did actually take place. There are many other cases, mostly from Lamap and Maskelyne, that have yet to be considered by courts, sometimes after as long as ten years.⁹⁹ The court first met in Avox on 8.8.93. It was presided over by Magistrate Jimmy Garae, from the island of Ambae, assisted by three Justices, one from Lamap and two from nearby areas just outside South Malakula. This magistrate was very experienced, having been trained in the courts where he began in his career as a clerk assisting expatriate magistrates.¹⁰⁰ At that hearing, he immediately demonstrated his methodical approach to such complex land cases. The meeting was cancelled. The judge observed that all the arguments about the ownership of Bakatel referred to the island of Avox (*'everi toktok i kamaot long Avok aelan'*) and directed the parties to submit new claims including the ownership of the island of Avox as well as of Bakatel.

These instructions changed the dimension of the dispute from claims over a minor piece of land into a dispute that could alter people's rights to their residential space. We saw that local chiefs were not ready to consider a radical claim that contradicted their general knowledge of family relationships; the magistrate, having no firsthand knowledge of such relationships, was ready on the contrary to consider any claim

⁹⁹ I asked the court clerk, Kollen Nicholas, how cases were selected for hearings and in particular the Avox case. Due to the huge backlog of cases only a very small proportion of them have ever been heard, so he decided to ignore those that had been filed in the 1980s unless the parties came back to the court to enquire about the proceedings. He had also decided to better treat regions located away from the tribunal that tended to have been neglected by his predecessors, so that when the Avox dispute was filed he selected it for one of the next sessions. It does not seem that the involvement of expatriate business interest in building a tourist resort in Bakatel help to speed the process.

¹⁰⁰ I met and interviewed Mag. Garae while doing some archival works in the courthouse in the northern island of Santo in 1999.

seriously and the full implications of the arguments. Doing so he would contribute to a revolution in the formulation of claims in the area.

A new session was held on 8.6.94 after the original parties duly reformulated their claims. As set out in these new forms the claims involved the ownership of the village and therefore concerned the five or six other resident families of Avox but none of them decided to constitute themselves as claimants. The abstention of other families would lead to some confusion in the aftermath of the dispute, as the claims admitted to the court included much information relating to the neighbouring islets and the main island, on which other families not involved in the dispute also have claims. The two families submitted, as they were required, maps, genealogies and other statements of evidence as well as written depositions of witnesses.

A detailed analysis of the evidence submitted by the parties and its reception by the courts will show how the position of each of the participants – plaintiff, defendant, witnesses, Justices and Magistrate – reflect their individual conception of history as well as developments in the legal culture of Vanuatu. My purpose is not to correct the decision, only to show that the matter was more complex than what the Island Court could gather given its method and prior knowledge; on the contrary, I have great respect for the work of Magistrate Garae in this and other cases.

2.1 Barigne's evidence

Tiosa Eson is the head of the family in whose name the claim was registered. His younger brother Enoch, however, was put in charge of presenting the family's history even though he was a younger man. Tiosa himself was away at the date of the hearing because he said he had to be at the congress of the Presbyterian Church on the island of

Santo. The evidence supporting the claim was originally presented in a hand-written letter to the court before the first hearing. The letter was divided in three sections: 'statement', 'history' and 'reasons for which Bakatel belongs to us'. A year later, the evidence was not substantially changed but it was now typed and included all the statements by their witnesses, which indicates considerable efforts for the preparation of the case as the manuscripts had to be brought or sent to town to be typed.

Their argument proceeded as follows: (1) they belong to a *nasara* called Barigne. (2) This *nasara* is identified by a customary tree of the *nangai* species (*canarium indicum*), an edible nut tree of which a large specimen can be seen from far away at sea and is said to be the largest tree on Avox. The text did not add that *nangai* is the literal meaning of Barigne. (3) They insisted that the antiquity of their *nasara* was attested by all the old people and that the great-grandmother of the other party came from Barigne. (4) They have no stones because the one they had was removed to be used in the foundations of the church. (5) Although as Barigne they only claimed a small part of Avox Island, the Esron family also claimed the ownership of another *nasara*, Barxumau ('Barhumau'), on the other side of the islet (fig 48), to which they claimed Bakatel belonged as well. Barxumau, they said, is extinct but they descend from the last surviving woman of that *nasara*, Limanxot, who was their great-grandmother (Fa Fa Mo). Limanxot and her Barigne husband moved to the mainland and performed a ceremony by which they allowed a man called Matlau Singavie to stay, who they said was from Barbaxul, the *nasara* of the plaintiff. The ceremony was marked by the erection of a stone, still visible. Later, the brother of Matlau Singavie, Tom, sold Bakatel to a European. These points were followed by a section called 'History' which is a genealogy in full sentences. A last section in the original document summarised the reasons for which they claimed Bakatel: it was on their side of Avox, their father planted coconuts there,

Tom (who was in charge of Barxumau) sold Bakatel and the chiefly court of Maskelyne recognised their right.

The document was illustrated by a bird's eye view map (or rather a canoe view) representing Avox and Bakatel as they would be seen by arriving travellers such as the court's staff (cf. figs 41 and 47). It shows the islets of Bakatel and Avox. Opposite Bakatel on Avox is Barxumau that appears as the largest land area on Avox, particularly if one adds Bakatel. The stones, the material evidence of the claim, are drawn. The legend reads: 'The *nasara* of the family of Limanxot, the mother of the grandfather of the family of Tiosa Eson. All the members of the family are dead but the female line continues with Tiosa Eson'. In the middle of the island is the *nangai* tree after which the Barigne *nasara* is named and at the other end is the *nasara* of their opponents, Barbaxul (family Jesiah and family Matlau Singavie).

2.2 Barbaxul: the plaintiff's case

The evidence presented in support of the Jesiah family, or Barbaxul, relied more on a series of histories linked to specific places and families, than on a single unified narrative. The documents repeat many times their fundamental claims to be the *only* landowners in Avox and that all other families came from elsewhere. In order to do so they showed knowledge of places all over the islet (extended to other islets and to the nearest part of the main island) and provided alternative stories relating the foreign origin of their opponents.

Most of the information is directly linked to the two maps presented to the courts and their detailed explanation (figs 49 and 50). The first map depicts the whole of Malakula, whose contours must have been drawn after a school room map of the island. The map

locates various Avox families on the main island occupying most of the isthmus south of Lamap peninsula. The land owning units are defined as 'limits of the *nasara* that have protective spirits (*devel*)': Barbaxul, of their own family, Jesiah Esau (01). The map renames their opponents, family Tiosa (Esron) or *nasara* Barigne, as Bravo (06), located near Lamap, from where they moved to Imie (instead of moving from Avox to Imie as in Barigne's version). The map added two families: family Sem or *nasara* Laweu, who do not claim land in Avox and are shown to come from the bottom of the bay of Port Sandwich; most importantly, the map added a *nasara* called Lihaihor from where Matlau Singavie is said to originate. In the version of the Esron family, this man, Matlau Singavie, was said to be the brother of the man who sold Bakatel, and both men were said to belong to Barbaxul. It might have surprised the court, therefore, that Barbaxul people do not claim land through Matlau Singavie and even attribute him a large territory far away from Avox. This apparent mystery hides a dispute between the descendants of Matlau and Barbaxul, one of the disputes dividing Avox people that were not explained to the court.

The second map zooms into the area immediately around Avox (fig 50): the Lamap peninsula, Port Sandwich and the Maskelyne Islands.¹⁰¹ It illustrates what the claimants presented as the migrations of their rivals through various territories, as well as many places of historical significance in and around Avox. The map itself carries a lot of information, completed by two pages of comments: the ancestors of Barigne moved to Avox under the protection of Barbaxul; Barigne has no right to Imie as they killed nearly everyone from that place; Barigne is not a genuine land-owning group anywhere but barely 'a collection of people'. Most of the information connects the Barbaxul

¹⁰¹ The proportions are not really close to those of a European type map but it remains very legible thanks to the location of reefs, pools and *kukrif* (reefs not connected to an island – from the name of Captain Cook given to such a reef between Epi and Efate).

family to the land and guarantees their ownership rights: a stone for dancing, another for circumcision; a couple of graves; coconut plantations; places linked to their management rights to the reef; and the place where the grandfather of a witness killed a pig to obtain the right to stay on Avox from their own grandfather. The map also presents customary names for many of these places and alternative names and etymologies for all the islets. The claim covers the islets on both side of Avox, Bakatel and Avox no.2, and also the adjacent mainland forming one coherent territory from the first line of hills to the end of the reef of Bakatel. Through the strategic claim to various locations within these limits, their claim encompasses all other claims. It undermines opponents' histories by providing alternative histories for them, linking them to greater territories on the mainland than these opponents claim on Avox. But it also undermines some of their rivals' claims outside Avox, in particular, Barigne's claims to Imie. Barigne are accused of having killed most of the people of that place although some of these people are said to have survived and have transmitted their rights to people who are living now in the Maskelynes. This extended knowledge contributes to build an impressive case and prepares for further disputes by anticipating claims to areas situated further afield. The document further lists the size of the family (sixty-three people), the largest in Avox, in support of their claims, assuming that a large family size reflects a continuous presence and also making sense of the name of Avox, which they say is really Nevox, meaning *plenty* or *many*. This etymology is linked to their resentment as landowners of an overcrowded island. Another document presents their genealogy comprising several branches and connecting to other families through women.

2.3 The decision

The court proceeded methodically, hearing the case of the plaintiff, then moving to cross-examination. After the plaintiff came the turn of the witnesses, each one of them

successively cross-examined. Later, the defendant's case proceeded in a similar way. Then, the court, claimants and members of the public toured Avox and Bakatel to view the places of evidence. The session must have taken several days, as is usual in the hearings of land disputes since evidence and cross-examination are left open both in the type of information submitted and the time it takes to expose it. Before leaving, the magistrate consulted his customary advisors about the conformity of the evidence with standards of recognised custom. Back in his office, the magistrate summed up the evidence of the parties, following their arguments carefully in order to present them more methodically, drawing neat genealogies out of the narratives and numbering the arguments.

Most of the five witnesses of the plaintiff supported the claim unequivocally while adding more information, i.e. that the family spirit was active and recently impregnated a woman; that the ancestors of the rival family performed a ceremony to be allowed to stay. Another witness certified that his grandfather had performed such a ceremony to the plaintiff's family. The most important witness was Elder Kaltanak from Peskarus village, Maskelyne, whose paternal grandmother was the sister of the great-grandmother of the plaintiff. His statement was one of the longest and mentioned several old people who showed him a sacred place or mentioned the ownership of a particular plot. We will see the importance of his intervention, as he drew conclusions from the Avox case to the situation in his own islet.

In his relation of the evidence for the plaintiff, the tone of the magistrate is rather positive. In his conclusion he notes that it is coherent and convincing ('these words corroborate the evidence of (the plaintiff) and some of the other witnesses according to which the defendant comes from the mainland'). On the contrary, the presentation of the

defendant's case is sprinkled with critical comments regarding the credibility and the poor performance of the various witnesses in cross-examination. The defendant's witnesses are blamed for their brevity, their repetitions and their inability to answer the challenges of their opponents:

He does not know who established the Barxumau nasara.
When the other party cross-examined these witnesses their answer to nearly every question was 'I don't know'.

The magistrate ignored that most of these inconsistencies were due to dimensions of the case that he did not investigate: a multiplicity of interests oppose these Avox families to each other and to both the 'plaintiffs' and 'claimants'. The court could have discovered this if they had investigated more deeply Barigne's claim that they had allowed a man from the Barbaxul family, Matlau Singavie, to occupy Bakatel. The descendants of that man, the Sande family, were present at the hearing and gave evidence in support of Barigne against the other members of the Barbaxul family. In fact, the plaintiffs, the Joses family, not only claimed that, as Barbaxul, they were the only original owners of Avox, but they also claimed that the Sande family were not genuine members of Barbaxul, but originated from the mainland as all the other inhabitants of Avox. The support the Sande family gave to Barigne failed to convince the court because on some points they did not align themselves entirely with them – they were still keen on insisting on the supremacy of Barbaxul over Barigne, which obscured the significance of their evidence. Undisclosed disagreements with another of their witnesses further weakened their evidence. Jaitok Zetkiah, my host in Avox, belongs to a family called Barigne Aiöm, which claims to be an independent family but which Barigne people say is a subordinate branch of their own family. As a result, Jaitok did not support some evidence that would have emphasized Barigne's supremacy. The fact that Barigne was

supported by a majority of the other families of Avox thus paradoxically weakened their case in the eyes of the court.

The evidence of the plaintiff impressed the court because it converged with spreading ideas about customary ownership. The constitutional guarantee of customary ownership has led people in various areas to theorize the relevant custom. The organization of the Island Court supports this process as the Magistrate wins experience throughout an island and is assisted by Justices from different areas. One of the main themes in Malakula is the importance of stones, of which the plaintiff could show several. However, stones are far less frequent and monumental in South Malakula than in other areas of the island. The link between stones and *nasara* was plainly denied by the main authority on history in Farun, Mansip; there are indeed few raised stones in the interior of Farun (cf. Galipaud and Kolmas 1983) and few in Axamb and Maskelyne. The court's appreciation of the evidence was strengthened by the concurring opinion of the Justices advising the magistrate on the relevant custom.

The chief advised me that many people own land because their ancestors were the first people to occupy a particular plot.

In Malakula, indeed, unlike on the magistrate's home island of Ambae (cf Rodman 1987: 43), ownership by right of origin is by far the dominant principle. The Justices also refused to believe in the existence of many *nasara* located so near to one another, ten metres in one case and ninety metres in another, because they were supposed to be constantly at war. This inference contradicted the position of the defendant and his witnesses who affirmed there were several such *nasara* even in such compact a place as Avox. According to strict customary orthodoxy, claims to land following a female ancestor are weaker than claims in the male line. The claim of the family Tiosa to own

Bakatel through their female ancestor from the Barxumau *nasara* did not really convince the court because it was opposed to a claim by origin in direct male line. For these reasons, the court declared the plaintiff the owner of Avox and Bakatel. Following yet another principle, however, the defendants were allowed to remain since their ancestors must have acquired the rights of residence through appropriate rituals. The main limitation set by the court to the defendant's rights was that they had to ask the owner's permission for access to some cash-generating resources.

The plaintiff's case was closer to generally accepted principles whereas arguments that might have supported the case for the defendant could not be expressed with a similar strength because they do not resonate as much with dominant discourses. The arguments in favour of Barbaxul fit into a handful of categories. First, a forceful, if repetitive, series of affirmation of exclusive origin: 'First people to stay on this island.' 'First and original (*stamba*) *nasara*.' 'First people to live and work on Avox.' Second, they provided abundant information on customary rituals, places, their function and names, mostly in connection with their family and their rights to manage the reef or to receive pigs in ritual payment. Finally, they listed a series of places that demonstrated their continuous and ancient engagement with the land: graves, plantations, completed by a story of a dispute with the trader about his occupation of the land. Their information suggested a long history of the family based in a large and coherent territory delimited by all the customary places they could name, while the duration of their presence was confirmed by a relatively long and extended genealogy.

The Barigne case did not fit this model as convincingly. From the point of view of the tribunal, their central piece of evidence was the *nangai* tree after which the family is named (which the court apparently did not know). The existence of an old nut tree did

not visibly impress the court as presumably it could be found in any old village. They claimed to own a stone but it was removed, having been used in the foundation of the church, but the court was not ready to ponder the potential symbolic significance of the destruction of that particular stone to mark the transition of Avox to Christianity. Like the plaintiff they claim that their grandfather planted coconuts on Bakatel, but that is not considered to be a proof of ownership. In this light, the decision of the Maskelyne council of chiefs in favour of Barigne appeared itself weak because it did not consider that kind of customary evidence. Instead, a potential strength of the Barigne case resided in their multiple relations with other families, through marriages and various other transactions:

They said that this place (Barigne) just formed up recently. But in a very old history the women from this family came out of here and went to Maskelyne and even their ancestors (of the plaintiff) come out of here. (...) When the natives judged they knew, they never judged that this was not a true *nasara* because they, too, came out of it. (Elder Tiosa Esron, 1999 interview)

It seems that these connections are much more important in the eyes of local chiefs than for the courts, which tend to favour material evidence. The Barigne also relied on evidence of past sales of land between Avox families and to a trader. Courts, however, are wary of basing their findings on those kinds of materials because they contradict the ideological basis for the abolition of colonial ownership of land in the Constitution. It was advanced that all transactions by which Europeans had bought land were null and void because they went against custom: either people did not know what it meant to sell their land, or they had no idea of the exact limits of the claims, or they may have 'sold' what did not belong to them (Sope 1974: 7; Van Trease 1987: 12, 235ff; cf. Mutu 1992).

If representatives of a majority of Avox's families presented evidence in favour of Barigne, most of the witnesses for the Barbaxul case were members of that single family, the sons of three brothers. Their main outside support came from Elder Kaltanak from the village of Peskarus in Maskelyne who later became himself involved in a similar dispute claiming sole ownership of his village and perhaps of the whole island. The dispute between the two families is an instance of a wider conflict between two widely held visions of ancient Malakulan society. According to one of these views, ancient villages being constantly at war were situated at a distance from each other, unless refugees from other areas formed hamlets near a host village. According to the other view, conflict was prevalent even among neighbours living within earshot of each other and the territory was parcelled in a mosaic of small land owning units. In Avox then, there were three groups of families: some who do not claim original rights and preserve a narrative of their migration, a majority of families who claim original ownership rights to small territories and a last group that claim all the land surrounding them. The latter could never win in a village court whose members share the dominant opinion and interests of their fellow parishioners. Magistrates and Justices from other areas, puzzled by Avox's small size and the great number of resident families, interpreted it as the result of successive migrations and thought likely that only a single family could be the original owners.

The decision in favour of Barbaxul but leaving rights of residence to Barigne was not unique: a survey of the decisions of the Island Court of Malakula shows many attempts at conciliation, often dividing the land rather than favouring one party exclusively. Sometimes the courts find it difficult to determine the truth of the claims, but the hands of the courts are generally bound because people depend on their land for their living. In the Avox case the court probably felt more free to issue a clear decision because of the

seemingly low stakes: Avox and Bakatel are tiny islets supporting very few gardens so that it was obvious that neither party drew much of their resources from these places.

3 The regionalisation of custom and the vocabulary of land claims

An important aspect of the development of a dominant understanding of history in the courts is the use of a set of concepts representing a fusion between English legalese and vernacular words from various languages of Vanuatu. As we saw earlier, Bislama has become the only language used in land disputes to the detriment of English, French and vernacular languages. This common ground includes a terminology of land disputes generally understood by all actors. Villagers have become familiar with a core of English legal words relating to the work of the courts and incorporated them into Bislama as *klem*, *raet*, *kot oda*, *plentif*, *witnes*, *ona* and *onasip*. On the other hand, in the case we considered no customary concept used by the parties required particular explanation or translation for the benefit of the court, apart from the etymology of place names. Beyond the facility of use of these concepts there are, however, some discrepancies. The most important concerns the identity of the parties. Although administratively the dispute was between two men, a plaintiff (Morsen Joses) and a defendant (Tiosa Esron) representing the interest of their families (*famle* Jesiah and *famle* Esron respectively). *Famle* is a fleeting concept, closer to a notion of nuclear family: Morsen uses the first name of his father Joses as a family name whereas Jesiah in whose name the case is recorded was the younger brother of Joses.

From the onset the case was expressed as a conflict between *nasara*.

(The family Jesiah) claim because they are the first people to stay on this island. They have a *nasara* called Barbaxul. This *nasara* is the first and original (*stamba*) *nasara* on the island of Avox.

Avox and Bakatel belong to them (family Eson) because the owners of these two islands were their ancestors who were from the *nasara* Barigne.

In the summing up of the case, it is clear again that *nasara* is the key concept:

In the plaintiff's case, the court sees the *nasara* and accepts that it is a true and original *nasara* in Avox because it has many stones with customary plants around them.

The location of Barigne, if it is a true *nasara*, lays about ten meters away from the Barbaxul *nasara*. The question arises now how it could be possible that in Malakula in ancient times two big fires could be situated side by side.

The definition of *nasara* as used by the court determined the type of information that led to the victory of Barbaxul. Before all, the existence of a 'true and original *nasara*' is proven by tangible customary evidence, stones and, to a lesser extent, plants, favoured by the court above oral testimony. The second principle applied by the court in the recognition of *nasara*, is the size of the territory, which must be large and coherent, so that there would be a safe distance from enemy territory. In fact territory is an essential attribute of *nasara*, so much so that the two become nearly synonymous.

(They say that) Bakatel belongs to them because it lies near the territory (*bandri*) of their *nasara*.

Nasara is thus closely connected to family (*famle*) and territory (*bandri*) but its most frequent meaning is that of a place. As such it is used in the Avox case as a synonym of 'big fire'. The latter concept is not frequently used in South Malakula and in court records from other areas, but it was easily grasped by the court, being similar to 'sacred fire' (*tabu faea*), referring to the separate cooking fires of the men of high rank in the grade hierarchies. This concept, although absent from the original submissions, must have been used during cross-examinations and then adopted by the court. The



Table 2 Naur/Nasara

depositions of Barbaxul refer to a 'first fire' commanding a series of six numbered 'fires', spread over the territory and associated with specific functions: eating, performing grade ceremonies, worship and dance, but which for the other families correspond to genuine original family hamlets. The range of meanings given to 'fire' by Barbaxul corresponds approximately to the vernacular word *naxemar*, a word that in court Bislama is translated as *nasara*. The range of meanings of these words partially overlaps (see table 2), as appeared in multiple interviews during which I tried to get the vernacular equivalents to Bislama words used to talk about history and land claims. A difficulty is that such Bislama words as *nasara* are now frequently used in the local languages.¹⁰²

Tiosa: *Naxemar* has many meanings: men's house, the place where the boys are circumcised, *nasara*, that is the sacred place of a family (...).

JdL: When you go to court, do you use the word *naxemar*?

Tiosa: No, you only say *nasara*.

The vernacular word *Naxemar* corresponds to all the places formerly occupied or used for ceremonies, what one could label 'heritage' places. The Bislama word *nasara* originates from another vernacular language somewhere in north central Vanuatu; people told me that it only appeared after independence.¹⁰³ The recent origin of this word is confirmed by its absence in Joan Larcom's 1980 thesis based on her research in south west Malakula that focussed explicitly on the unity of kin group and place of origin that is today embodied in the concept of *nasara*. Larcom in fact deals with a problem that already puzzled Deacon, the absence of a specific term in the South West Bay area of Malakula for 'clan' or 'lineage'. Larcom proposed to replace these two

¹⁰² Many examples can be given of the use of words of English origin in discussions about history or village courts: *na histri* limlimbong ('untrue history' -Maskelyne); *evi kastom* tilim xan aut a Uluveu ('this is the true custom of Uluveu'); *jif nasara i pansim* a B ('the nasara chief punishes B' -Farun).

¹⁰³ For early published uses of the word *nasara*, see Malvatumauri 1983, where it appears along two synonyms and Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta 1984. In chapter 5 we saw the word used on a grave built in 1986.

terms with the concept of *ples*, the Bislama word for 'place', which she said was used in South West Bay with the sense of a group of people descending from an ancestor originating in a given place (1980: 64f, 73). Similarly, Bonnemaïson, who completed his field research in 1981, makes much of the Bislama expression *manples*, literally a 'local person', to which he confers a symbolic value expressing the roots of people in a place (1996: 7, 169, 434). Reading both of these authors today may be surprising, as words such as *ples* and *manples* today express essentially the 'local' but do not seem to have the dimensions lent to them twenty years ago anymore (cf. Crowley 1995's dictionary).¹⁰⁴ Some of the former meanings of these words in the context of *kastom* have been taken over by words such as *nasara*. However, if *nasara* cannot exactly be translated in the local languages, the concept of *ples*, as described by Larcom and Bonnemaïson, translates fairly well the word *naur* that exists in several languages of South Malakula. The first meaning of *naur* is 'village', but it can be used to translate *nasara*: *naur a Barbaxul rav naur a Barigne arovivitux* 'The *nasara* of Barbaxul and Barigne are in dispute' (Ps Mark, Raniemb). The word *naur* appears often in composite words expressing varying nuances of a relation to a place, for example, *nauraimberax* 'village – place of permanent residence' or its synonym *barxemarberax* 'stem (*bar*) – old place (*na-xemar*) – place of permanent residence (*berax*)'. Both terms tend to be replaced by *nasara* (Ades, Farun), which refers specifically to a group of relatives and to their place of origin on which they often do not reside (cf. Curtis 1999: 60).¹⁰⁵

Nasara is a concept that allows people to preserve or recover their customary identity many generations after leaving their place of origin. In a way they never leave it,

¹⁰⁴ 'Man ples (n): local person 2. Melanesian (as against European), also black man 3. Indigenous person'. 'Ples (n): place' (Crowley 1995).

¹⁰⁵ Curtis (1999), in a paper based on his fieldwork in south west Malakula, first commented on the range of meaning of *nasara*. However, he does not question the use of a Bislama word as a fundamental historical concept and tends to project some of its current meaning into the past.

because *nasara* refers to the people as a group of relatives wherever they live. The place people have left has become the *amil*, which originally meant 'men's house', but now refers to all villages outside of the context of land claims (cf. Chapter 4). Modern villages can be called *naur*, *stesen* or *vilej*. These terms describe the identity of people in place in a similar way as the words 'village', 'home' and 'house' in English can mean people and territory as well as buildings. These terms however became more ambiguous when, as a result of migrations and conversions, the unity of the place of origin and the place of residence only apply to a minority of people. The adoption of new concepts allows a negotiation of the past in terms adapted to the reality of the present and minimizing the rupture caused by the 'coming down'. Conversion and migrations broke the unity of place of origin, place of residence and kinship group expressed by *naur*. With the rise in number and intensity of land disputes after Independence, the word *nasara* was adopted very quickly as it allowed origin to be distinguished from residence. The range of meanings of *nasara* – an old village site, a sacred place, a group of agnates – largely overlaps with that of *naur* and *naxemar* but it fits the current context better. The similarly open meanings of these two words become confusing as the social fabric has changed and they tend to be replaced by *nasara* as well as *amil*, *ples*, *stesen*, or *vilej* according to context.

In other areas of Vanuatu, such as the Longana community in Ambae studied by Margaret Rodman, near the village from which Magistrate Garae originates, families are not so central to historical traditions and land claims. Land in Longana can be transmitted either from father to son (following 'blood'), or following the matriline (1987: 43), but in the period around colonial conquest or pacification in 1930s, powerful leaders seized land from those who needed their protection against other leaders (1983a; 1987: 81,89). The disputes arising from the territorial expansion of these leaders

provided Rodman with her best sources on the events of that early period. There is indeed a major difference in land tenure between Longana and South Malakula which completely alters the people's vision of history and particularly the role of the original land owning families. In matrilineal Longana, most land is nevertheless transmitted outside the lineage from father to son and even to distant classificatory sons and brothers, all belonging to different lineages (1987: 68f). In South Malakulan land tenure theory on the contrary, rights to land must always go back to the original owners defined strictly by male descent; the descendants of women should only inherit if there is no heir in the male line. Nevertheless, in practice various relatives are allowed access to land.

The adoption of the word *nasara* does reflect the transformation of the historical relationship between people and place. Its use in the courts further contributed to developments in local historical thinking, strengthening the links between place of origin, customary ceremonies, residence and people. Article 72 of the constitution stipulates that only the custom of the place should determine the nature of this evidence. However, as we saw above, the organization of the court leads the court personnel, lacking the background knowledge of chiefs and local family historians, to attempt to match their own historical concepts with the local evidence. They distrust oral narratives and archival material, privileging instead physical markers allowing them to consider long-term historical continuity – or we might say timeless custom. The preference for stones as a marker for ownership certainly reflects the caution of the court, as such markers can be less easily manipulated than genealogies for example, but it also reflects the experience of the court in land cases in north and east Malakula. Indeed, since its inception in 1984 the Malakula Island Court practically only heard land cases from these areas, also the most populous and most easily accessible from the

island headquarters.¹⁰⁶ The necessary link between stones and *nasara* stressed by the court reflects very well the developed megalithic cultures from the northern areas (cf. Layard 1942), but perhaps less so in the South. As it appears from the Avox judgment, the significance of stones can be debated and contested; many stones are said to have been erected at the occasion of pig killing ceremonies and therefore give no evidence as to land rights or places of origin. Similarly, the court was of the opinion that *nasara* of limited territory could not have existed, because the permanent status of war required a coherent territory and a minimum distance between *nasara*. This opinion actually contradicts the description of traditional territories and histories from Farun and Axamb, on the mainland as well as on the islets, while these notions are the object of dispute in several islands near Avox, as we will see below. Some of the differences of course may be due to genuine local variation as, for example, the contrast between the importance of the myth of origin in land disputes in Axamb and their absence in Avox. The court was misled by the many meanings of 'fire', not realizing that the word never meant 'village': whatever the status of the historical sites presented as evidence – club houses, places of origin or other ritual areas, these were never thought to be residence of warring factions.

It is probably inevitable that a court must attempt to build a framework of reference from the experience of its members. Such attempts are part of a wider process encouraging the adoption of common words and categories through regions and the country as a whole, for example, in documents published by Malvatumauri, the National Council of Chiefs (Malvatumauri 1983) and its equivalent on Malakula, Malmetenvanu.

¹⁰⁶ See Appendix 6: The repartition of land cases in South Malakula.

4 Developments

The decision did not resolve the conflict. Barbaxul did not gain much immediate advantage other than the control of Bakatel and the perspective of income from rent if the bungalow project comes into being which, so far as I know, it has not yet done. Their victory did not improve their access to garden or plantation land. Their frustration led the dispute to its most divisive turn, the verbal abuse between the two parties that was represented in the play relating the circumstances of the creation of the new village of Raniemb that I described at the beginning of this chapter.

They swore at us. When they were drunk they had to shout at us: 'you are not custom owners here, out!'

As the situation deteriorated some people began to move out of Avox, nearer their gardens on the mainland, but in reprisal forbade Barbaxul from accessing their own gardens on the mainland and forcing them to stay on the islets where they had won their claim. At the same time, Barbaxul people wrote a letter dated 8.8.95, a year after the decision, to the Island Court asking for a court order threatening some people living within the limits of their claim on the nearby island known as 'Avox no.2' and on the mainland. Indeed, their submission to the court endeavoured to draft an historical map that included large areas of the mainland – putting in place the histories of their neighbours and rivals as well as their own claim to all the land between Avox and the first line of hills. Understandably, they thought that their court victory would confer them title over that territory, but it was not so as the court decision was limited by its instruction to the parties which limited the claim to the islets of Avox and Bakatel. The clerk, consulting with the magistrate, refused their request for a court order.

The situation, being extremely tense, was brought to the attention of Elder Jimmy

Anson, from Ambrym, who was on tour on Malakula preaching, rooting out witchcraft and encouraging people to confess their sins and express their wishes for a better life. Visiting Avox in 1996, Jimmy Anson proposed a compromise aiming at preserving the unity of the community. Everybody would be free to go to their gardens and plantations; Barbaxul would not attempt to stop other people settling on the mainland (the elder liked the place so much he called it 'Paradise'); but all the original Avox inhabitants would keep a house on the islet to which they could return for community celebrations. This compromise also did not last for long: the opening of a church in Raniemb consecrated the existence of a separate community and the inhabitants of the new village have dismantled their houses in Avox to recycle their construction materials.

4.1 Divisions

The people who were the first to move out of Avox and who blockaded Barbaxul on the islet were not from Barigne, as might have been expected, but the Sande family, Barigne's witnesses expelled from Barbaxul. The Barigne people on the contrary, although they are the official losers of the case, are still living on the islet of Avox alongside the winning Barbaxul. Although the Sande family was not part of the court case, its members were those most involved in the verbal violence that followed.¹⁰⁷ They decided to accept their expulsion from Barbaxul, but not the alternative history proposed by the winning side. Instead, they settled right next to Avox on land that is still claimed by the remaining Barbaxul. They are engaged in a historical research for their true origins which, they confided to me, was progressing through the help of some of their maternal relatives.

¹⁰⁷ Actually, if the appeal delays have lapsed for other families to contest the Island Court decision, the Sande family could perhaps still contest their expulsion from Barbaxul, by requesting the court to clarify the question of their membership on the grounds of Barbaxul ownership of Avox.

The court was not aware of the ramifications of the original disputes, but such ramifications can be a matter of surprise even for local residents, as claims and counter claims spring up in different places and families may be directed to change their major claims. The land Barbaxul attributed to Sande's ancestor Matlau Singavie towards the bottom of Port Sandwich was the object of a dispute that was won by a Lamap family who soon settled there. That was probably the reason why the descendant of Matlau Singavie did not try to endorse that version of their history. Nearer Avox, several families from Maskelyne are potential claimants to several areas; one in particular could contest the land of Imie to Barigne, with the support of Barbaxul. But if they do so they would also be expected to update their claim in the major land dispute in the village of Peskarus where they are challenged by Elder Kaltanak, Barbaxul's key witness.

4.2 Trends in historical thinking

A conjunction of factors is leading families in the entire area to reconsider their histories – sometimes for practical reasons such as tensions linked to demographic pressure or expatriate investments. But these practical reasons are not separable from the legacy of disputes brought by overlapping histories and land claims. Historical links between families, like memories of ancient matrimonial alliances, also offer a line of defence against a more combative approach making use of a new type of argument. An emerging consensus at regional and national levels determines which type of evidence is predominant.

The courts have introduced a new deductive approach to history. In the aftermath of the Avox decision, several disputes in Lamap, Peskarus and Vulai (a deserted island claimed by Avox and Maskelyne residents) have tested some of the principles established by the Island Court's decision in local courts. These cases place people who

claim large areas in opposition to others who claim smaller plots of land, according to a vision of history in which several *nasara* cohabited near one another. Interestingly, in Peskarus the man bringing forth an extensive claim is Elder Kaltanak who gave evidence in support of Barbaxul. As a result, he challenges all the other families of his village and wants to bring his case to the Island Court – for which chief Nakel of Barbaxul is going to give evidence in his support. In Axamb the Merirau people suspect that hostility towards them is motivated by their ownership of many plots of land throughout the small island, rather than confined to one area (cf. chapter 1). Some of the new large claims seem to be based on the type of evidence that was considered by the Island Court, allowing local people to do archaeological history by reinterpreting the meaning of physical evidence. The concept of *nasara*, as it implies an unbreakable unity of place and people, encourages claims based on distant genealogical connections. Places such as islets have often taken on refugees whose origins could progressively be forgotten and several myths relate people's distant origins in other islands. People now try to deduce these by archaeological method. Once the idea is admitted the courts consider the evidence differently and begin to look for forgetful refugees.

The new approach to history goes hand in hand with a reflection on the nature of customary rights, in particular ideas about what makes a true *nasara*. Another general concern is the relationship between original landowners and later settlers. Some people stress the inalienability of land and the right of the original owners to take back land that was given earlier, while others, especially among recent converts such as Mansip of Farun, say that what their ancestors have given cannot be taken back. There is no unity of view either among the people who think that land could be reclaimed as to the conditions enabling the owners to take the land back, and as to the duties of settlers towards the owners. Other issues on which disagreements occur concern the procedure

for adoption or for giving, selling or receiving land.

In Avox the discussions I had about such issues all seemed to be developments of the ideas underlying the court's decision; there were no real discussions about the possibility of land transfer or restitution but the focus of people's theoretical interests remained the proof of ownership. Chief Nakel, from Barbaxul, elaborated on the importance of a large and coherent territory:

We don't work (make gardens) here and there. When you stay on Avox, you look around (follow your eye), when you see another man, it's over, we don't go there beyond this place. We only work in one place.

Nakel introduced here a new pair of concepts: 'to work in one place' and 'follow your eye', that is the land covered in one gaze from Avox. The first concept underlies the economic unity as well as a vision of historical continuity. Nakel here claims that his family find all the necessary resources within the territory they claim and that they did not have to ask other families for land which would have led them to 'work here and there'. This is of course a question of scale and perspective because the people who disagree with Barbaxul and live and work within the area this family claims would rather see them as working in separate locations around the land used by other families. The principle of the unity of a territory covered in one gaze makes sense for some inhabitants of the small islands, for whom the coast of Malakula appears as a vast scenery where one can follow various steps of agricultural work, movement of people and micro-variations in the weather. Nakel claims that from his home base he can see all the land claimed by his family, which supposes that he does not 'see' the people who are still working within these limits – some of whom are adopting similar arguments justifying the coherence of their claims because they 'work in one place'.

Elder Tiosa Esron, on his side, continues to cogitate on the reasons that led to his family losing the court case. He has begun his own research in response to the defeat of his family. In the evidence they submitted to the court the Barigne spoke of the movements of their ancestors between Avox and the mainland but they did not provide any reason for this movement. As Tiosa cogitates about the reasons for his family's defeat, he is now engaged in further historical research about the link of his family to the mainland. It is possible that his family could belong to the family of Imie, of which the Barbaxul said that they were nearly exterminated by the Barigne. He was also pondering why Barigne as such does not have a protective spirit, which is often considered as one of the key elements that can allow identifying a genuine *nasara* – although the court did not appear to have based their decision on that issue. One of the maps submitted to the court by Barbaxul included a definition of land owning groups as those protected by a spirit ('limits of the *nasara* that have *devel*'). These spirits, *devel* in Bislama, are usually protective but sometimes a nuisance for the family (some are said to have intercourse with women who give birth to albinos) or simply announce, by a sign, an imminent death or misfortune in the family. Tiosa found that if their family did not 'benefit' from the manifestations of a *devel*, they were however connected to those of Imie and other families to which they are related:

The signs come to us from other *nasara*, from the female side like the one on Siov (part of a nearby islet). We see it when one of us is in trouble. In Siov it is a shark but not like an ordinary shark, it has a cross on its skin. It only follows its relatives, like some from Siov who went to Pentecost.

These examples show how people update their conceptions on history and customs, by elaborating and integrating lessons from the court case as well as more general social changes. In a sense the basic information remains the same but it is submitted to

renewed interrogations and fit into new models. These issues are related to the important body of academic work on *kastom* and the invention of tradition in the Pacific (MacClancy 1983, Keesing and Tonkinson 1982, Jolly and Thomas 1992, Babadzan 1999). Even among some of the actors of this process it is recognised that things change. Magistrate Garae who presided the Island Court in Avox told me when I met him later that he does think that custom is changing. On the island some people like Mansip of Farun would occasionally contrast past and present customary practices.

5 Conclusion: from myth to archaeology

In the beginning of this chapter we saw the Avox dispute re-enacted in a ceremony marking the foundation of Raniemb, the new village on the mainland, as an independent parish. The land dispute has become an object of history equivalent to origin myths and histories of migration and conversion. The parallel is even more suggestive in that the play narrating the foundation of the new village was full of biblical references. Indeed, this chapter tried to show the emergence of new forms of historical thinking, with history, myths and legal thinking each influencing the others in unexpected ways.

I focused on the rich material analyzed by the court and expanded it to reveal aspects that remained obscure – such as the complex cross-cutting of the interests of the witnesses. This approach mirrors the one followed in chapter 1 in which I showed that a minor dispute on Axamb could not be understood without a grasp of the whole mythological and genealogical charter of the island's original families. At the same time the court case brings together in dramatic fashion the themes of origin and migration dealt with in the first two chapters. It also presents a new development in the history of South Malakula: the undoing of the Christian communities in which survivors gathered and built a new society (chapter 4).

The composition of chiefly courts and Island Courts alike supports emerging orthodox conceptions of history, transcending the multiple perspectives transmitted within each family that were the object of earlier chapters. Chiefs tend to be chosen nearly by chance among able minded male villagers and are usually conservative in their decisions, supporting the status quo. For these reasons, local chiefly courts endorse a vision of a long history of cohabitation, in a small territory, between many families with close-knit relationships with each other through marriage and other exchanges. Some ambitious leaders will claim to be the sole original owners and adopt a model of history according to which their neighbours were granted residence rights a long time ago and gradually forgot their outside origins. More than other local histories, the latter type are more and more structured by the use of Bislama concepts that do not translate exactly vernacular ones. The Island Court, being composed of a professional magistrate from another island assisted by three local Justices chosen from neighbouring areas, operates naturally with those Bislama concepts, which it does not see the need to criticize because local people have already adopted them. Along with these concepts, the court operates with a set of principles that emerges from the combined experience of the magistrate in other cases and that of the local Justices in their respective areas. This more theoretical position can lead the court, as in the Avox case, to favour the parties that use similar concepts – which contributes to their further spread. The courts also influence the very formulation of the evidence: first, in their requirement for written submissions, but more importantly through their scepticism towards conflicting histories which leads them to consider material evidence as a more reliable source of information. This kind of material, in this case stones and the respective locations of the historical sites, could possibly outdate the depth of historical memory and its recognition by the court encourages people to attempt to fill historical gaps by way of

archaeological reasoning.

It is not the object of this study to say whether the court was right, or even to propose an alternative model such as Epstein's (1969: 191ff) historical interpretation of land disputes in Matupit (East New Britain, Papua New Guinea). From a series of cases in which original land owners said that rival claimants had originally received the land as in-laws, Epstein deduced a long-term adaptive process by which declining aboriginal families progressively forget their genealogical knowledge and in-coming families are eventually able to claim local origins. A similar process seems to have taken place in several parts of South Malakula but local historians instead of simply arguing about the status of a specific family now envisage the whole process, which leads them to challenge *en bloc* the status quo of an entire village. We saw in chapters 3 and 4 that the new Christian society was based on a community of nuclear families. The policy of returning land to customary owners and the new possibilities offered by the official court lead to challenges of the historical reasons for the presence of each family in a village, as only the right of origin gives full entitlement. The renewed importance of historical links between people and places leads to the use of new concepts such as *nasara* better adapted to the present context as people live far away from their origin places. Older concepts did not separate people from place. The new concepts, by projecting the present situation into the past, reduce the distance between the pre-Christian past and the present.

Conclusion

The first objective of the thesis was to write a history focused on the people of South Malakula through the oral traditions of several families, as an alternative to European archives and publications. This aim is reflected in the chronological ordering of the chapters which cover a range of events from origin times to local developments of post-Independence policies. Far from being limited to an understanding of South Malakula alone or even Vanuatu, the thesis shows how to make sense of dense historical traditions which can puzzle anthropologists as well as magistrates. The second objective was to write an ethnography of history analyzing how successive events have shaped people's vision of history. It leads to theoretical discussions on the way the society of South Malakula changed through time, reacting to European contact and being reinvented as a Christian society. The analysis should also help those concerned with concrete applications of history. In particular, it should inspire a method to understand and perhaps resolve land disputes.

The stories in each chapter are concerned with the status of the narrators and their families – usually the direct descendants of the main characters of the historical narratives. They do not represent the whole past but are only fragments or 'relics' (cf. Denning 1991: 354). Taken together the histories constitute the foundations of contemporary society. They allow for the presentation of a larger picture than is originally the aim of family historians and for an analysis of the foundations of contemporary society.

The thesis was originally planned as a case study in legal anthropology. In chapter 6, I explained how most anthropological studies of law lack historical depth and fail to

account for the density of social relationships in village societies, because they focus on a series of short studies of civil cases in a single community. Understanding the network of relationships requires knowledge of the debates about the nature of past relationships between individuals and between families. In order to investigate such contested histories it is necessary to break with the traditional identification of the anthropologist in fieldwork with a single community and family. Then one can do 'multi-sided ethnography' – following the term coined by James Weiner (2003) by reference to Marcus's (1998: part 1) 'multi-sited ethnography', without the latter's global ambition but with a view to expand the time-depth of ethnographic analysis and its coverage of a dense nexus of a relationships. This multi-sidedness is developed into a theory of encompassment that is applied to the interaction between families over the long term as well as between missionaries and converts in the past. The theory is inspired by Sahlins's vision of culture contact (2000: chapters 13 and 14) which implies mutual unintelligibility and denial of each other's agency between persons belonging to different cultures. This model reflects the rivalry of Malakulan historians who are often closed to rival versions while their own histories strengthen their families' position (chapter 2).

Sahlins (1981) brought to anthropology the revaluation of events initiated by historians; he anticipated its extension to the history of wars, treaties and kings (e.g. Schama's 2000 *History of Britain*). The present thesis keeps Sahlins's model for the analysis of particular episodes but links these episodes in a general sequence of events from ancient times to the present. Unlike Sahlins's it also focuses on the relation of the histories to the present of the narration – an approach pioneered in anthropology by Richard Price (1983).

In several chapters I have drawn on the example of historians and anthropological historians. In chapter 3, I was inspired by Bronwen Douglas's (1998) approach to colonial sources and by Price's (1990) multi-vocal history alternating quotations from colonial texts and recent oral narratives. Divergences between sources reveal the particular significance of some events emphasized or forgotten in the oral tradition, such as the reluctance of early converts to abandon pig exchanges, or which escaped the missionaries such as the significance of cooking in the process of conversion. Oral histories inform us better on the transformations of society but they ignore the ultimate European responsibility for what they interpret as purely local events, diseases being understood as witchcraft, for example. In indigenous narratives local concerns eclipse the presence of Europeans and their actions (cf. Harrison 1993: chapter 3). In the account of the conversion of Axamb, the Presbyterian missionary is not named and only has a transitory role (chapter 3), while in other histories involving fighting with guns, Europeans are not even mentioned (chapter 2). The traditional view that history begins with the arrival of literate explorers or conquerors makes no sense when writing a history of South Malakula, since Europeans have left so few traces in the oral narratives. In local historiography discovery was non-event.

As we saw in the Introduction, the only contemporary institutions of Vanuatu that had earlier been studied as historical processes are the John Frum millenarian movement on Tanna and the rise of a public discourse on *kastom*. This perspective is extended here to people's understanding of the history of their families and communities – mainly narratives of ancestors' origins, of feuds and alliances between families, of migrations, of conversions and finally of the division of the Christian communities. Complementing oral narratives and missionary accounts, analyses of funerary inscriptions and of a court case are indicative of the social transformations brought by some aspects of conversion

such as literacy and allow to compare recent accounts to documents.

The chronological organization of the chapters outlines a totalizing narrative from the times of origin to the present. Each chapter analyzes a historical event central to the understanding of contemporary society. Origin myths and ancient stories are the ultimate reference of all other histories and form the legal charter of the communities, determining land ownership and rights of residence. Chapter 1 considers the histories of Axamb's original families as an ideal case study of the stable relationship of people to their place of origin. Among the original owners, however, live many migrants or descendants of migrants, sometimes the majority of the population (chapters 2 and 4). Their histories are no less complex but markedly different from those of the original inhabitants. The relationship between the original families of Axamb can be represented as a genealogical tree going back to the marriage of the ancestral twins with two sisters from the mainland. Migrants' histories follow a very different model as they are less concerned with the subdivisions of their families than with past matrimonial alliances with their hosts – from which derive their residence rights. These concerns extend to their relationship with other migrants, often their former hosts in an early stage of their migrations before they all move to Axamb. After Axamb became a Christian island, migration in search for a safe haven implied also conversion to the hosts' religion.

After the origin of the ancestors, conversion is the main event that concerns the whole population of South Malakula (chapters 3 and 4). By contrast, the arrival of the first Europeans or the introduction of new diseases are non-events in the local histories. With the exception of Lamap, conversion itself is presented as a local event dominated by early religious leaders such as Ailongbel or Dick Wilson and their struggle with pagans and reported witches – the latter often Christian leaders themselves. The blind

destruction of human life of which these men were suspected led some of the sufferers to give up all hope and die 'like dogs', while others reacted by embarking on enthusiastic quests for personal salvation and education. The responsibility of Christian witches in the period of conversion explains why witchcraft accusations can rise again and be directed at respectable Christians in modern villages, not necessarily for any apparent motives. It was a feature of pre-Christian society that witchcraft was associated with powerful old men, which remains a tendency of contemporary witchcraft accusations. Other features of traditional society have been recreated in modern Christian institutions such as their hierarchical classification of religious organizations, offering possibilities for women and men to promote themselves. Various ceremonies have also been integrated into Christian life, such as the annual celebration of the first harvest of yams, or kept as complements to Christian rituals, such as ceremonial gift exchanges at weddings. The rupture of social activities brought about by conversion was expressed mostly as a change in eating and cooking patterns. The segregation of cooking fires according to ritual status had been a backbone of pre-Christian society; its abandonment led people to focus their daily lives on the nuclear family and on the community of kin and neighbours sharing food in regular communal gatherings. Life in Christian communities also changed people's daily relationship to time, as will be further commented below (chapters 4 and 5).

The comparison of oral narratives in chapters 1 and 2 does not aim at reconstituting a sequence of events but analyzes instead the relationship between the narrators' families. Although 'life history' is a well-established genre in anthropology, in presenting the parallel lives of three converts in chapter 4, I was inspired by Davis's (1995) parallel biographies of three seventeenth-century women – a tradition dating back to Plutarch. The comparison of the attitudes of converts and their parents towards death and *skul*

complements the analysis of the transformation of society and reveals parallels between Christian and pre-Christian institutions. Life histories also offer an alternative to statistical accounts for the demographic catastrophe that ended towards the middle of the twentieth century.

In studying funerary inscriptions I found little guidance in existing anthropological work, apart from studies on secondary burials (Hertz 1928, Bloch 1970, 1981). The delay between death and the building of the grave, the permanence of the monuments and the celebration of prestigious men connect contemporary concrete graves to the monuments erected at the end of a long funerary cycle in pre-Christian times. Both types of monuments could be instances of the practice of secondary burial found throughout the Austronesian-speaking world. The parallels are also striking between the graves of South Malakula and the Papua New Guinean cemetery described by Fischer (2002). However, the work of Woolf on the romanization of Gaul and Scodel on early modern English epitaphs was more suggestive, showing how funerary inscriptions reveal individual reactions and lasting consequences of social upheavals. An example of this in South Malakula is a new relationship to time with a week structured around mandatory rest and religious service on Sunday, as well as precise time observance for religious services and other scheduled events of modern life. This strict division of time distinguished early Christians from their unconverted relatives in life and also in death –through hospitals' records of exact times of birth and death and the writing of various dates on the graves. The inscriptions also reflect the development of family and community values, the replacement of traditional hierarchies with new types of careers, and the growing literacy in Bislama rather than in vernacular languages, French or English.

More than anthropologists, historians frequently use records of court cases (Le Roy Ladurie 1975, Ginzburg 1976, Davis 1983, Macfarlane 1999). The study of the Avox court case in chapter 6 differs from most of these works (with the exception of Macfarlane's study of witchcraft) in considering the court hearing itself as an historical event. The chapter also conjoins two distinct traditions within the practice of anthropology: the study of court cases by legal anthropologists and the participation of anthropologists as expert witnesses in land cases involving indigenous people (Weiner 1995, Deckker (ed.) 1995, cf. Krech 1997). The events related in the case, although they concern the smallest village in South Malakula, reflect widespread social transformations. The conflict between Avox families correspond to a general trend of division of the Christian communities constituted during the era of depopulation. Communities in the refuge areas split because of pressure on resources following rapid population growth, but also because some community members leave an established church to join one of the fast growing religions. In Avox, instead of a progressive emigration, a new village was created after a land dispute awakened by a development project initiated by an expatriate investor. The number of land disputes is itself linked to the constitutional guarantee for customary land ownership and the rise of *kastom* as a national ideology.

Origin, migrations and conversion and the understanding of history

Historians often prefer a narrative style leaving theory implicit (e.g. Davis 1995 – cf. chapter 4). In chapter 1, I have followed this convention because of the complexity of the connections between the histories and of their importance as a social charter for the whole population of Axamb. That chapter, however, shows the importance of the Christian perspective of local historians in their debates on the credibility of origin myths and other ancient histories. Those who live on the land from which their

ancestors originated are surrounded by places mentioned in their histories, some of which are inhabited by family spirits. Gaps in knowledge transmission and the denial of one's history in court both lead to a subordinate position from which the only issue is to rediscover a powerful history through the help of relatives and historical reflection more generally. For the descendants of migrants the meaningful landscape is spread along the migration route of their ancestors, but chances are that they have not visited the most remote of those places (chapter 2). For them a visit to the place of origin requires an expedition under the direction of an old man, or perhaps of a relative living nearer the place who can show them their land. People have different perceptions of their origins. For some, the history of their family is complete and presents no break since the emergence of the first ancestor down to the present. In the minds of others, ancient events are more remote and possibly challenged on biblical or rational grounds (chapter 1).

Conversion is similarly perceived differently whether it was a personal choice or if it occurred two or three generations ago. The descendants of the first Christians have long had better access to education and tend to look down upon communities of more recent converts. Christianity is seen as a new era whose beginning is more or less remote according to the number of generations since conversion. The age at which converts came down also influences their position in *kastom* and in *skul* (cf. chapter 4).

Conversion is thus a generational event. The recognition of the role of one's ancestors in the conversion process and the development of Christian institutions has also become important as a source of prestige and as evidence of land ownership. This appears for example in Jack Sakran's funerary inscription rewritten sixty years after his death, referring to his movements back and forth between the mission and his nearby village, which reminds that he was both a landowner and a founding member of the Christian

community. Some people in Axamb explain the controversy regarding the status of the Merirau family by the intervention of an historian of an old Axamb family allied to Merirau, who wished to guarantee Merirau's land rights because of the importance of their ancestor Ailongbel, the apostle of Axamb (chapters 1, 3 and 5).

Seen from the town, the islands are places of tradition – or *kastom* as it is known in Vanuatu. This view eclipses the complex history of modern villages. The contradiction between the theory of rural conservatism and the reality is lived locally as a dilemma between the cohesion of the Christian community and the division in the ownership of land, which, according to the constitution, must follow customary rules. The principle of customary ownership considers implicitly that villagers maintain a traditional relationship to the land and ignores the demographic revolution and the joined effect of migrations and conversion to Christianity.

The analysis of the Avox court case shows the emergence of new historical thinking stimulated by court litigation, originally motivated by demographic pressure and the official revaluation of *kastom* linked to the policy of returning land to customary owners. The existence of a dual court system leads to rival interpretations of the nature of land ownership and of the migration process. Chiefly courts tend to favour the status quo, as their personnel are usually related to the parties. The official courts on the other hand have no prior knowledge of the cases and are open to 'archaeological' arguments using material evidence to go beyond historical memory. On the other hand, chiefly courts have no official powers, which allows losing parties to stick to their version of history. The stronger power of the official courts means that a losing party may need to rediscover an alternative territory and history. The growing reliance on principles and standardized evidence reflects a quest for true *kastom*, complementing and sometimes

displacing narrative history. The idea of prehistory is rising in South Malakula and will continue to be the source of heated debates. New terms are adopted as ideas about customary ownership circulate. *Nasara* is now a central concept in histories of origin, although it is a recently introduced Bislama word derived from a language elsewhere in Vanuatu, with no exact vernacular equivalent in South Malakula. The word, as used in South Malakula, has two main dimensions: that of a historical place and that of a group of people who stem from this place. *Nasara* complements the local word *naur* ('village') which expressed the community of residence of people who share the same origin. But as a result of migrations and conversions residence and origins no longer coincide for most people in South Malakula. The widely adopted word *nasara* defines the shared land rights of people away from their original places, asserting the unity of people and place and denying the ruptures caused by migrations.

Appendix 1: The Origins of Axamb according to Wase and Wilson (Rotavu)

This island is not born out of anything from the shore, a thing from the sea gave birth to it. We came out of a shell like a very very large clamshell that lays on the coral on the sand – *naxemb*. We don't find one like that today anymore. Before, our grandfathers (*bubu*) were forbidden (*tabu*) to eat that shell but today we eat it. Gospel came making that we don't retain (the tradition). Our grandfathers were already Christians (*skul*) but they did not eat it, later Gospel got stronger and they ate it before they died. We came out of that thing. When that thing was laying straight on our reef passage over there, the people of Oxai – above in the hills – could see that thing projecting a sign like a torch light. They saw that every night. They asked: -- What is that thing that makes sign near the small island over there? They sent their spirit the jackass to see. It went to see and when it came back it told them: -- A large clamshell grew large, very large. The men answered: -- That thing now makes that small island doesn't have men, we should rather kill it. Then, they cut a stick, a strong stick – *naxaibwilangk*. They cut it short but sharp. – You will hold that stick in your beak and you will drop it straight on the flesh of the clamshell. Alright, after that thing fell on the clamshell it pierced it deadly. When the shell died two men came out of it. Their body was not strong, were they babies? I don't know. They came out and went to lay on the beach. The sun warmed their bodies and they became stronger. About their food now, I cannot tell straight, what were they eating? They began talking: -- What then? We will try walking around, I'll walk on this side, you will walk on the other side. The one who walked on this side, his name was Rörngal, the one who walked on the other side, his name was Rörmbang, sometimes they say Vetbong. Alright, they walked until they met again in Penbaxur: -- We'll just stay here. Alright, they stayed, they stayed, they stayed until they got the idea of making fire. Alright, they were making fire. Alright, like there was a man on the mainland, they

were following their pigs, they came to sleep on the point over there at Lemas, that place where the old Aisen lives. They were following the track of the pig, they came to sleep over there – he with his wife and his two daughters. They were seeing that fire raising every morning in Penbaxur. The two girls came to tell: -- Daddy, this fire raises every morning, perhaps a man is making that fire. The father of the girls: -- But what do you want to see these two men for? – No, we don't want to see these two men to make anything, we just want to try to go and see. What should we make so that we can go? Alright, her father said: -- Alright, I'll try to make up something. Alright, he went to fetch a kind of wild banana (...), *giju*. He cut it and took off the skin which he sawed to make a boat. Alright, the two girls tried to climb on top of it and saw that it was straight. Alright, they paddle away now. When they paddled on the banana skin they came straight to the two men in Penbaxur. When they arrived on the beach, the two women stood up to pull the raft ashore. The two men, Rörngal and Rörnbang, saw them and got scared, scared, but really scared because they saw the shape of their body was different because they had breasts. Because the two men were like Adam and Eve, they didn't know sin, they were not hiding (their private parts). But the two girls were hiding their private parts, just their breasts were like that. It made the two boys afraid of them. The girls tried to talk to them but they were frightened and went inside their house, they didn't want to look at these two women. They insisted until they got ashamed and paddled back. They went to tell their father: -- Papa, we went to see these two men, we like them, if only they would take us but they are so much afraid of us. Papa, perhaps sometime you should go. Try to go look these two men. Alright, their old man said: -- It's good, we will go together. Alright, one day he took that same thing (the raft) and went to see the two men. They saw that he was like them, just that he was putting a penis sheath. They got scared but not too much, they could see the balls hanging, just that the wrapping made it look different. They began to talk, the old man talked, they

understood and they asked: -- Who came last time? -- My two children. -- But we saw that they were not like us. -- That's woman. -- What is woman? Because they didn't know the word. The old man made a long story explaining the idea of these two girls: -- They came here, they saw you, they want to stay with you. -- No way, we looked at them, we saw they were not straight like us, we don't want them. But the old man insisted: -- I have got one like that. Alright, the mind of the two girls was fixed on these two men, perhaps because their ring was large? Alright, it made that they kept trying their father: -- Papa, we want to go to the small island to stay with these two men. The father agreed: -- It is good, we'll try to see them again. He got the idea of making them a demonstration. Alright, one day they planned their programme, he took the two girls with their mother. He told Rörngal and Rörnbang: -- We'll come back to see you on that day, me with my wife and my two children, all of us. The father went to talk with the men, they didn't want to look good at the two girls. -- No, no, you shouldn't be afraid, you must stay with them. He talked with them for a long time but they were strong, they didn't want to look at the women. The old man went to talk to his old woman to inspire the two men so that they wouldn't be afraid anymore (...) They asked many questions, they talked about it a long time: -- But that job so that you stay with a woman, how is that job? Then now, the old man with the old woman showed them the way, like a man is married with a woman, the job is like this. After, looking at them he saw that sin had come strongly to their mind, their things stood up, they were ready to stay with women. Now they agreed, it was all over, they were married to the two girls on the day. The old father with the old woman went back.

Their story is like that, they were making children now until they got six of them, one three, the other three, but I don't know if there were some girls as well. They didn't say. They were many now in Penbaxur. -- Perhaps it's better if we separate. Rörngal told

Rörnbang: -- You leave this place, you go stay on Marvar over there. I will leave this place and I'll stay on the *nasara* they call Rörmlang.

Appendix 2: The Merirau version: letter to the minister of lands

Dear Sir,

I have land problems with two groups of people here. I have had talks with two people concern but they don't believe me and even told me that I am not of this island. I am from Aulua they said.

Here is the history upon which I stand a man place.

Our history began sea clum shell. A huge clum shell had two sons namely Rorongal and Vetbong. When theses grew up they decided to go round the island exploring it. They did not go together, they went in opsite directions. They met each other again at place called Benbakor, and stationed for some time.

On the mainland there lived a man at LOKOROGELAU with his wife. They had a pig which went missing one day, they searched for it around house but couldn't find it. The pig had a bunch of navibong (he hard seed box of a tree use when dancing to make noise) tied around its leg so that it would be recongonised wherever it went. During the search they came to village and asked whether if they had seen or heard the pig. Yes, it went passed there. The family followed the pig until they found it. They also found that the pig had five little piglets. They could not take them home because they were too young to walk. They built a shelter with leaves and named the place GELAU. They built a house with perment matterial from the bush and lived for the rest of their lives. The man and his wife had two daughters one of whom was Vintanamas by name. [Apparently, the school teacher made a mistake as the story was corrected on this point: the Tanamas woman was the wife of the man.] They went shellfishing one day when

they saw the smoke of the fire on Akamb island. When they arrived the first born daughter said to her sister wait here, I'll go and find out whether they are human being or the devil. If I am not back please sail home and tell our parents about what happened. When she came to Benakor she found that they men and spent some time with them. The men asked if they are willing to stay and became their wives. They agreed but wanted to go and tell their parents. The parents agreed and the wedding ceremony took place.

RORONGAL married to one of the girls and they six children, three boys and three girls. As they were the very first people of this island, one of RORONGAL's son got married to VETBANG's daughter. They had a son named HARKARBAL. [On this point as well the Merirau people said there was a mistake, Haribal was the son of Rörngal].

Appendix 3: The Life of Longman

At the margin between legendary events and personal memory, some stories refer to the heroic exploits of the narrator's father or grandfather. Europeans have disappeared from these stories although their heroes use guns, to pay for which they probably went to work in plantations. In the case of the story of Longman, who died in the early 1940s, Christianity is not mentioned either, whereas the coming down of his cousins had already begun. Diseases are not mentioned and witchcraft is only marginally present, although the population must already have been declining steadily (cf. Deacon 1934). Instead the decline is denied; what is presented is a numerous population with a high level of violence.

Longman, Tamaki's father

The most elaborate of these stories was told by Tamaki, a retired teacher now living in Axamb but born in the hills. It is the story of his father, who died shortly after Tamaki himself was born.

The story immediately emphasises violence: 'My father's name was Longman; he shot three men. His story is strong [i.e. hard, violent, terrible]'. Tamaki normally refers to his father by his name instead of 'my father', perhaps because he has little or no direct memory of him. An effect of this is to project Longman's story further away from us. The distance is increased by the magic held by Longman: 'bullets could not reach him; he had his *kastom* causing the bullets to melt.'

An effect of remoteness is also produced by the absence of specific geographical locations or personal names, although I asked him for this information. It contrasts with the story of his own life, for which he provided these details spontaneously. No village or *nasara* are named in this story, and only one of Longman's adversaries, because his identification and the discovery of his death are a key event of the episode. Another contrast between this story and Tamaki's own story is the description of past customs and daily life, such as paying murder compensation with food, eating and dancing through the night (first episode), the drum rhythms announcing the death of Bongtaur

(episode two), the technique of bird catching (episode three) and the planting of nangaria for a peace ceremony (episode four). These elements of local colour contribute to the exotic character of the story as well as educating the listener/anthropologist.

The state of violence is presented as general and intermittent: 'He shot the first one when he was still a young man'; 'he worked with kastom, he was better than everybody. Many men wanted to shoot him'; 'these men had poisoned my father's father'. The entire story is built around four violent encounters: the vengeance killing of his father's murderer; the chance killing of one of the men who ambushed him; the careful killing of an unsuspecting enemy; a final apotheosis when he escapes his enemies and forces them to make peace. These encounters however seem to be short episodes separated by long periods of sociable relations between the actors. In the first episode Longman discovers by chance at a dance that the people who poisoned his father plan to trick him into a symbolic peace gesture: '"You will give him a piece of *laplap* [pudding]. He should eat as if his life depended on it"'. Longman understands that if he eats he will accept the food as a payment for his father's murder, so he refuses all food and stays apart from the others, crying on his own until dawn. When he was sure that everybody was asleep he shot the old man. No vengeance was undertaken against him as people were impressed by his courage.

In the second episode, the failed ambush, no attempt is made by either party to take any (immediate) action after a single shooting. People's interest now focuses on the appropriate rhythm to be played on the drums, to announce (or correct) the identity of the victim: 'The other people [who staged the ambush] went back and counted themselves and found that one was missing, his name was Bongtaur. They went to see the place and they found Bongtaur, his body was already stiff. They came back to change the drum rhythm again.'

For the third episode, no context is provided, neither why the person was targeted by Longman, neither whether there was any attempt at a vengeance. The last episode is more instructive; the people who want to kill Longman this time are his neighbours, living in a village at voice range down hill from his own village: 'They were staying in

two villages, one up, one down. He knew the people down planned to kill him', 'He stood on top of the hill and called them'. The confrontation lasts for one morning only and is followed by a renewed peace.

The context of these episodes suggest that the actual violence was followed by long periods of armed peace, during which people lived near each other and could meet on the occasion of dances. They could even go (or at least send emissaries) to the village of the people they had just ambushed. The only direct moral evaluation of Longman's story is somewhat ambiguous: it is qualified as 'strong', implying both admiration and fear for that time of feuds. In Vanuatu today the ownership of guns is fairly strictly controlled and the feeling of awe for this type of violence can be explained as it now belongs to the past. The story tells us practically nothing of the causes and consequences of the killings, apart from the first vengeful killing of the murderer of Longman's father and the eventual peace planting of nangaria. Longman's prowess is admired but the actions of his adversaries are not condemned, they just fail. Each episode centres on a cunning plot to kill by surprise or to enforce peace. There is obviously no place for a concept of treason, as the first story makes clear: Longman who has been mourning all night, in the middle of his unsuspecting enemies, manages to kill and escape before people recover from their sleep. He is not criticised for killing an enemy sound asleep but he is admired for escaping safely from the village. In the second episode Longman survives an ambush, in the third he carefully executes another. Eventually in the fourth episode, his numerous enemies trick him (or maybe challenge him) to plant a nangaria in their midst, while they are ready to shoot him, but he eventually outperforms them and they are constrained to make peace. Longman's fighting prowess is further enhanced by his wit, which is prominent in each episode. At the end of the first episode, he manages to frighten and ridicule his adversaries by declaring: 'If they are men, I am waiting for them here. If they are women, they won't come look me'. After his second killing, when asked if he had shot somebody, he replied: 'I didn't see, but if instead of a gun, I had used a bow, I'd feel as if I had caught a large fish.' When he observed the third victim climbing the tree, he thought: 'It would be a pity if I shot him up there, he would break down (his body would break apart falling from the tree), I'd spoil him'. Eventually, he warns scornfully three times the men who are ready to shoot him: 'He you, if you want

to shoot me, clean your eyes well for I'm coming'. 'Are you ready? Don't waste your ammo'. 'OK then Longman leaves his house, I don't want you to miss me because you are many'. There is some progression in Longman's wit: in the first story it has a defensive value, to discourage his enemies and make himself appear formidable. In the second and third story it is more squarely 'witty', underlining his luck or his self-control. In all three occasions the comments are made after the event but in the last one his mocking warnings contribute to his final glory.

Appendix 4 The funeral of Apwil Naandu (after Deacon 1934: 520-33)

People began to gather in the village of the old man when they realised he would die soon. Immediately after the death, began the wailing, extremely loud and demonstrative: 'all those present burst into paroxysms of wailing' (520). Meanwhile, the rhythms corresponding to the ranks reached by the old man in the two graded societies were played on the gongs and, inside the house, his sons and sisters sons decorated him, again according to his ranks. After these preparations, a bier was prepared in the men's house on which the corpse was to be exposed to decay. Again, this was made according to the place he had reached in the hierarchies. Then, men who had reached the *imbalmal* grade of the Nalawan hierarchy moved in pairs playing a rhythm by striking together two pieces of bamboo, going from the men's house to Apwil Naandu's house and finally to the gongs on the dancing ground (521). Once the corpse had been brought to the dancing ground, new gong rhythms announced the time for a distribution of the pigs of the deceased (522). Men continued to work on the decoration of the corpse and the bier, while the smoke of a fire hastened the decomposition process (523). For five days the widows fasted and kept wailing without interruption. At night some initiates, male relatives of Apwil Naandu, went along garden paths destroying his property: uprooting his coconut trees, plants and bushes and leaving them behind to obstruct the paths; the wreckage was presented to women and children as being the work of spirits (524). The death feast was held after five days although the length of that period could vary. The feast was the occasion for special arrangements and displays in and around the dancing ground, described carefully by Deacon, i.e. the types, colours and sizes of plants and poles and their connection to specific grades (525f); there was a careful distribution of pork and vegetable food between representatives of all villages (527f), whereas fellow members of the *ni-mangki*

society simply helped themselves to some of the pigs of the deceased (529). The ninth day saw exchanges of 'puddings' (*laplap* in Bislama) prepared and eaten separately by women and men; in the evening the spirit of the dead man was formally expelled and other grade related ceremonies took place (529f). On the tenth day the spirit was said to depart and the head was removed from the decaying corpse for the preparation of the *rambaramb* (531). The final ceremony took place fifteen days after the death, concluding the mourning, in particular for the widow(s), who came out of seclusion on that day to be severed from the community of the dead husband by the presentation of two pigs paid by the woman's brother to the dead husband's son (532).

Appendix 5 Funerary inscriptions

1

1939 -- April. 2 Sunday -- Lyus Liklk die -- on Monday -- we buried him [her](Avox)

1940 -- 5 day babe he was daid -- July 15 -- Kety ye was day [?] (Farun)

1943 Sep -- tember -- 18 wint [Wednesday]-- die -- 1944 -- memoriam (Farun)

1946 -- December -- 27 Friday -- Matakon -- die on 27 (Ravuxen)

Chief- James begin to reign in- December 25=12=38 And he die in- November 6 ten months old 1239 he die- James (Pelongk)

Emle imat lan thursday January 12. 9. 1952 [Emle/Emily died on Thursday] (Pelongk)

2

This is the memory of- the chiefis wiew [the chief's wife] her- name.- Susanna- She was dies on 18/ pm- She buried on- 19th/am- on 9/19/52- about 60- day making grave (...) (Pelongk).

29/11/1956- we come to made this grave on 31,- Chief Saphat- he died on- December in 1955.13. This- day bertt [buried] on 14- Wednesday he- was in here when he began to work in (...) - at 8... years- old (Oxai)

Lody she was- dei bering on- Monday in 1959- Th May 19 tusday- making lie- grave again

3

CHARLIE HAILUM – IN MEMORY OF OUR GRANPA – FATHER IN LAW BROTHER IN – LAW, UNCLE AND NEPHEW (...)

The text then proceeds from his birth in Ravuxen in 1952 to his primary education in Axamb and then to the Lamap French school from which he returned to be appointed a chief of Oxai and later to be elected to the Malekula Local Government Council, then deacon and finally a member of the finance committee of Oxai Presbyterian Church. The duration of his disease, the place and time of his death, the number of his children and his wife are the last information on the grave before the date of the erection of the monument (29/10/97).

The biography of Japiu, as usual for a church leader, is essentially a succession of dates: born in 1934, at school in 1952, married in 1960, chief from 1968 to 1975, committee member of the school, of the coop and finally deacon from 1975 to 1995. The inscription innovates with a celebration from the other deacons and elders of the congregation:

The congregation of Axamb session, in particular Farun church, is happy of the work Deacon Japiu made to lead people Through darkness to come through the light of Master Jesus Christ. 17 Sept. 1997. (Farun)

4

Rechi Manevhal

She was born in March 1952 in the village of Farun. She was a woman of limited education but she was a good Christian who always attended church services and was dedicated to church activities in the village until 13.9.96 when God called her. This stone was made by her grandparents, uncles, brothers and all her relatives to always

remember her. Built on 3.9.97. (Farun)

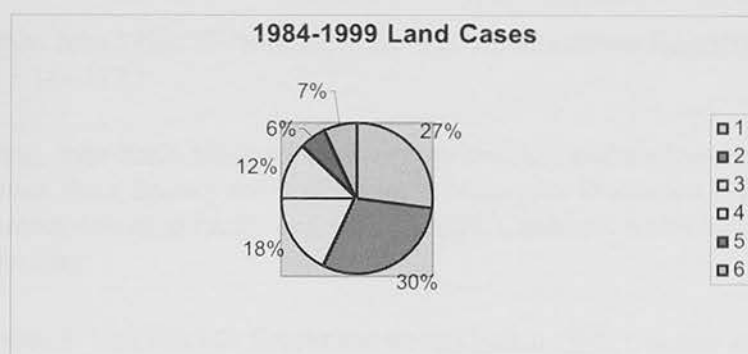
Haileah Kersom

He was born on May 28th 1966 and he was 32 years old. He was married and left behind two young sons. God summoned him to stay with him up there and he left behind his wife with his two children on February 22. 1998. He was the Christian worker in the community of Farun since 1998 – and on just the same year he left that work and he was one who would welcome the man coming to his house [through his door]. His love is always an example for his family [*famle* in Bislama]. (Farun)

Appendix 6

Land disputes in the Malakula Island Court 1984-1999

	NW	NE/C	E/SE	S/SW	W	others/ unknown
1984/85	4	17	3	0	1	5
1988- 1994	11	5	5	8	2	0
1995- 1999	6	3	5	2	2	1
1984- 1999	23	25	15	10	5	6



Legend:

1. North west
2. North east
3. East and south east
4. South and south west
5. West
6. Others / unknown (not including 24 missing cases for 1985)

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